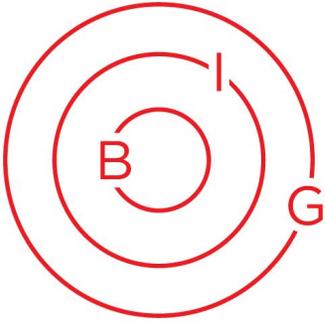




BORDERS IN GLOBALIZATION





Borders in Globalization Research Project 92

**Beyond Being a Borderlands Author:
Thomas King's Artistic Activism**

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Borders are multifaceted and meaning is attributed and inscribed by different actors. Borders can be seen in their restrictive function, yet also remain a reassuring or grounding presence for many people in times of great transitions in society and the world at large regarding security, migration, and climatic conditions. Against this backdrop, it is worthwhile to closely look at the representation of various borders and borderlands in Canadian and Native author Thomas King's recent works and to compare pertinent aspects with his earlier novel *Truth & Bright Water* and his border-related emblematic short story "Borders." Both recent publications *The Back of the Turtle* and *The Inconvenient Indian* are critically acclaimed and underline once again King's role as one of the leading literary voices in Canada. King's CBC Massey Lectures given as the first Native person are another significant contribution to Canadian literature and the discussion on Native cultures, including storytelling and the arts.

This chapter analyzes the aforementioned select works by King regarding diverse cultural expressions, border representations and identity negotiations in a figurative borderlands setting. Concrete border crossings described in King's fiction are scrutinized regarding the "porosity and selectivity of borders to flows of goods, people and ideas" (BIG Thematic Template: Culture). Particular attention is paid to the notion of motion and fluidity, practices of artistic activism, subversion, resistance and survival, in Gerald Vizenor's terms "survivance" (xxx), and finally to liminality (Turner) as a space of opportunity oscillating between on the one hand complexity and multiplicity versus identity and belonging on the other hand.

King's historical and political narrative *The Inconvenient Indian* as a work of creative non-fiction epitomizes an artistic activist stance. He himself practices in real life what his main characters endorse as invented representatives in fictional realms. King the writer and writings by King are two sides of the same coin, as he walks the talk in terms of writing with a message. Artistic activism comprises "writing back" (xxx), undermining expectations, reimagining circumstances and characters. Such an activism in an indigenous context is linked to resistance, resilience and survival, in short to "survivance" (Vizenor). Vizenor defines "survivance" as an active resistance (xxx) and presence (xxx). This active attitude and practice can merge into a more programmatic activist stance. Artistic expression in its manifold forms, this chapter focusing on painting and music, i.e. singing and drumming, can be an activist means for righting the wrongs of the past, seizing the present and in so doing creating hope and a new vision for the future. This type of "artivism" (xxx) builds bridges

between the past and the future beyond the present conditions and divisions. A beacon of hope emerges, mirroring the beach tower build in King's *The Back of the Turtle* (xx).

Juxtaposing King's fiction and non-fiction is revelatory and highlights King's twin strands of narrative art. King could be described as a borderlands author, straddling the line between writing and righting the wrongs of the past in an activist stance, but he does not stop there. Beyond being a borderlands author in terms of his biography (American and Canadian, Greek and Cherokee roots) and oftentimes his oeuvre's setting in the borderlands between countries, cultures and mixed characters, King is also a professor, literary critic and an intellectual, reflecting on a range of issues from storytelling to stereotyping. Reading King's *The Inconvenient Indian* in this context, it becomes even more apparent that addressing the lingering issues of land, culture, identity, belonging, social injustice, colonial history and oppression, discrimination, and institutionalized racism (xxx) is paramount in a North American setting. In Canada, the urgent issues are the elusive notion of social justice regarding the missing and murdered indigenous women, residential schools, the taking and misuse of Native lands (King, *Inconvenient*), health and mental health and prospects for indigenous youth. Multicultural Canada increasingly tries to assume its responsibility as the official apology by the Prime Minister (xxx) has shown. However, as King posits in *The Inconvenient Indian*, a lot remains to be done and he is often sceptical (xxx). As *The Inconvenient Indian* and *The Back of the Turtle* were almost published back to back and are of equal powerful narration, these award-winning writings can fruitfully be read as two sides of the same coin, that is overt and covert artistic activism in the realm of literature and narration.

This artistic expression starts with the imagination, knowledge, and the mind and appeals to the readers' more noble instincts by employing humor, fact, and fiction. An author also straddles a line in "writing back," because an activist author needs to keep the writing a top priority in order to reach his or her readers. A border needs to be maintained and only at times to be blurred, that is between authoring a story and trying to right wrongs in an activist mode. King successfully negotiates that line and as a reader one primarily follows King the author, while more or less subtly also experiencing King the artistic activist.

In a border-related analysis and reflection on King's work, this chapter addresses King's life and works in the light of multiple border crossings and focuses on geopolitical, ethnic/cultural and utopian borders as depicted in his writing.

1 King's Storytelling in "Borders": Geopolitical Boundaries versus a Native Presence

Thomas King himself is a border crosser. He is of mixed heritage and has lived in both the United States and Canada. King's oeuvre comprises a number of works dealing directly or indirectly with geopolitical and cultural borders as well as the liminal space between them.

In "Borders," King contrasts the fluid type of a seemingly natural geopolitical border with a land border enforced by border guards on both the U.S. as well as the Canadian sides. Here, the prospective border crosser is forced to imbue meaning on her nationality despite self-identifying tribally as Blackfoot. For the short story's Native protagonist, her Blackfoot identity supersedes any national affiliation such as Canadian or American. From her perspective the tribal identity comes first, whereas the opposite is true for the border guards. They would like her to abide by the superimposed nation-state designations, whether American or Canadian. By refusing to do so, the Native mother and her son are stuck in a liminal sphere. This space of liminality is quite literally in-between the two nation-states in a seemingly devoid of any deeper meaning no-man's land of a duty-free shop and parking lot. Only the pressure of the media can help with the border guards' reinterpretation of the geopolitical boundary and after several failed attempts, the Blackfoot mother and her son can finally cross into the United States to visit the daughter or, from the young I-narrator's perspective, sister.

From the problematization of the complexity encountered at any geopolitical border in fiction, this multiplicity of border significance depending on the beholder is further analyzed in border-related theory. Gillian Roberts and David Stirrup posit in "Culture at the 49th parallel: Nationalism, Indigeneity, and the Hemispheric" that the international boundary between Canada and the United States is "considered a site of cultural defence for Canadian identity against US hegemony" (1). They further reveal the asymmetric perception of the border by contrasting the Canadian, i.e. mostly Anglophone Canadians', perspective with the U.S. perspective on the Canada-U.S. border (5-6). However, who is Canadian and features as part of the Canadian mosaic? How important is the Canada-U.S. border for Québécois, Francophone minorities in other provinces, immigrants from all over the world as opposed to the overall Anglophone majority in Canada at large with the exception of Québec?

They posit that "[c]ultural texts continue to invoke the Canada-US border" and enumerate the border's several functions: "a protective barrier," "a site of policing bodies and identities," "a threat to Indigenous sovereignties," "a dividing line," a cultural zone, and a "contact zone" (Roberts and Stirrup 1-2). Furthermore, they describe a "tension between the arbitrariness of the line and the determinacy of what it represents [...]" (Roberts and Stirrup 5). In King's short story "Borders," the prospective Native border crossers experience just

that. The “determinacy” comes to the fore and prevents the Native mother and son from crossing the line after the Blackfoot mother refuses to provide the standard answers in the discourse of power between border guard and prospective border crosser. What is more, the border guards themselves acknowledge that there are Blackfoot people on both sides of the geopolitical boundary, hence inadvertently paying tribute to the arbitrary and artificial nature of the borderline. Roberts and Stirrup state that “[...] the Canada-US border continues to operate as a colonial imposition and contributes to attempts to impose nation-state citizenship on Indigenous communities” (6). The border bisects the indigenous community and land, thus complicating notions of belonging and identity. The Natives in King’s short story value their tribal affiliation of being Blackfoot above the designations associated with the Western nation-state, a society linked to settler-invader paradigms (xx).

Reingard M. Nischik also turns her scholarly analysis towards border narratives situated along and across the Canada-U.S. border. In her work *Comparative North American Studies: Transnational Approaches to American and Canadian Literature and Culture* she states that the Canada-US border is increasingly taken into account not only by “politicians, political scientists, and economists, but also [by] literary and cultural critics” (61). Nischik postulates that short stories are “particularly suited to border narratives, especially when it comes to stories dealing with the crossing of the border as such” (64). In her understanding, there is a contrast between the functioning of the short story as compared to the novel. Other short story scholars attest to this (short story reader, Achilles xxx). Nischik describes the short story as characterized by “the significant moment, of initiation, transition, being on the threshold, liminality, indeed of crossing the border between two “states” (here applicable in more than one sense of this word)” (64). Nischik claims that “crossing the border of political states is often paralleled with metaphysical, metaphorical, or mental states” (74). She alludes to “a threshold situation” (74) echoing Victor Turner’s thesis on liminality and thresholds (Turner xxx). Nischik also coins or states the label “memory space of the border” (82). Nischik quotes Herb Wylie’s words regarding King’s short story “Borders” in terms of “these border narratives are a ‘literalization of liminality (1999, 120)’.” Short fiction as a type of text falls somewhere in-between novel and poem and if focusing on a border-crossing topic and being set in the borderlands or at a geopolitical boundary line, then indeed such a border story represents in and of itself liminality.

King’s “Borders” is such a story that highlights the crucial instance of crossing “states,” nation-states, states of identity, and states of affiliation and of embracing liminality. The Native mother and her son want to cross into the United States to visit Laetitia, the Native

mother's daughter living in Salt Lake City, Utah. The border crossing moment is delayed and in turn the transformative experience happens while waiting at the parking lot of the duty-free store in the liminal space between Canada and the United States. Mother and son are stuck there, neither allowed to cross back into Canada nor to continue their journey into the United States due to the Native mother's refusal to self-identify as expected by the border guards. She states her citizenship as Blackfoot. "Blackfoot side, she said" (King, "Borders" xxx).

However, the border guards on both sides of the international boundary want to force her to comply with the official definitions of nationhood, meaning self-identifying as either Canadian or American. Nischik adds both a national and gender perspective in this regard, thus underscoring the underlying complexity of the short story. She focuses beyond the indigenous protagonists by examining the role of the border guards. Nischik argues that King "characterizes them contrastively according to national stereotypes: the female Canadian border patrol is much nicer, more polite, and more communicative with the traveling Natives than the American border guards, who, with their weapons, their swagger, and their eventually rather rough treatment of the Natives remind the youthful narrator of American cowboys" (Nischik 90). The clichés are perpetuated in King's text. Nischik further alludes to "the catalyzing behavior of the often identity-challenging 'border guards' (91)." It is at the border, that one needs to decide and name one's true colours in terms of identity and nationhood. The boundary is inscribed with state power and mechanisms of control.

After her analysis based on a number of texts, Nischik does not see the idea of "North America" emerging (91). She can only subscribe to "transnational-nationalism" (91) based on Laura Moss. In contrast to that, in King's *The Inconvenient Indian*, already the second half of the book's title *A Curious Account of Native People in North America* signals King's broader understanding of North America in terms of a Native presence transcending the geopolitical and colonial boundary between Canada and the United States. The appropriate use of terminology is often contested and differences lie in the eye of the beholder. Transnational American studies or North American studies, for instance, are sometimes used interchangeably (xx). King uses North American in the non-NAFTA sense of the word, comprising only Canada and the United States of America. He concedes that "someone will wonder why [he] decided to take on both Canada and the United States at the same time, when choosing one or the other would have made for a less involved and more focused conversation" (King, *Inconvenient* xv-xvi). King's explanation for choosing both Canada and the United States is that "While the line that divides the two countries is a political reality, and while the border affects bands and tribes in a variety of ways, [he] would have found it

impossible to talk about the one without talking about the other” (xvi). For King, the tribal presence needs to be seen as one despite the border’s consequences on the lived realities of Native peoples in both nation-states. King claims that “[f]or most aboriginal people, that line doesn’t exist. It’s a figment of someone else’s imagination” (xvi). He contrasts how people such as himself might be stopped at the border, “but stories go wherever they please” (xvi). This underlines the transcending power of storytelling and ultimately contributes to a shared experience and humanity beyond border binaries.

Additionally, this highlights indigenous persons’ experiences at the crossroads or rather in the borderlands or liminal space of being Native, yet also as seen from the respective political entities as being either Canadian or American, all of the above or none. Tribal homelands, such as the Blackfoot area, were bisected by the superimposition of the international boundary line, in this case along the forty-ninth parallel. Another case along the Canada-U.S. border is Akwesasne on the St. Lawrence river. The Canada-U.S. border means different things to different border crossers or borderlands dwellers depending on, for instance, ethnicity, nationality, mother tongue, or the economic situation. Sometimes the border functions as a marker of identity and at other times it demarcates economic or legal differences. Historically, this has been the case for African Americans on the Underground Railroad, the Vietnam War resisters or for people fleeing legal prosecution (xxx). For Native Peoples, the Canada-U.S. border used to be the “Medicine Line” due to the legal differences between the two nation-states such as in the times of Sitting Bull. The Canada-U.S. border needs to be seen from multiple perspectives, i.e. Anglophone Canadian, Francophone Canadian, First Nations / Native, U.S. American, or Native American, to fully comprehend its significance and its treatment or lack of treatment in literature and culture.

Borders are often mobile themselves, but can also restrict the mobility of prospective border crossers. Mobility studies as well as border and transnational American and transnational Canadian studies focus on borders. Indigenous studies cannot ignore the international boundary, even though many Natives choose not to vote in nation-state elections, have special Jay Treaty border crossing rights or, such as the Mohawks, hold their own passport, however not recognized as has been experienced in the Lacrosse incident (xxx).

In *The Inconvenient Indian*, King postulates that there are three types of Natives: there is the “bloodthirsty savage,” the “noble savage,” and the “dying savage” (King, *Inconvenient* 34). He contrasts these stereotypical types of Natives in “North American popular culture” (King, *Inconvenient* 53), with seemingly “Dead Indians, Live Indians, and Legal Indians” (King, *Inconvenient* 53). In terms of terminology, King posits that for him “[...] ‘Indian,’ as a

general designation, remains for [him], at least the North American default” (King, *Inconvenient* xiii). Nonetheless, he maintains that there is value in the Canadian version “First Nations” and the U.S. version of “Native Americans” (xiii). He also mentions the Inuit and Métis as the two other groups comprising the three major indigenous groups in Canada (xiii). He uses “Whites” (xiv), but also discusses “Native – non-Native relations” (xv). For him, “[t]erminology is always a rascal” (xiii). Furthermore, King contrasts Native and non-Native differing perspectives on the current situation of Native peoples in North America:

For Native people, the distinction between Dead Indians and Live Indians is almost impossible to maintain. But North America doesn’t have this problem. All it has to do is hold the two Indians up to the light. Dead Indians are dignified, noble, silent, suitably garbed. And dead. Live Indians are invisible, unruly, disappointing. And breathing. One is a romantic reminder of a heroic but fictional past. The other is simply an unpleasant, contemporary surprise. (King, *Inconvenient* 66)

After this excursion to the borderlands between King’s authorship and humanity read in conjunction with his fictional realms, it is enlightening to return to King’s main characters in “Borders.” The Native mother epitomizes a “live Indian,” as she refuses to play along with the expectation of behaving more like a “dead Indian” in the sense of King’s description thereof. Eventually, after sharing creation stories on trickster figure coyote with her son in the parking lot, gazing at the stars, and media attention, the mother and her son are allowed to enter the U.S. even though she continues to describe herself as solely Blackfoot. This is an instance of the power of storytelling (Mayer, *Liminality and the Short Story...*) and embodies Gerald Vizenor’s notion of “survivance” (xxx). Survivance comes to the fore in King’s oeuvre and becomes a leitmotif. Several of his main characters exhibit survivance explicitly, such as Monroe Swimmer in *Truth & Bright Water*.

2 Beyond Reserves: The Art/s of Survivance in King's Recent Fiction and Non-Fiction

King's last two novels, *The Back of the Turtle* (2014) and *Truth & Bright Water* (1999) can be read through the lens of King's non-fiction text *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012). The border between the White and Native worlds is negotiated and the tension between the economy and ecology is analyzed by focusing on repercussions on Native people, livelihoods, and land. Traces of the colonial legacy persist often as glaring examples of social injustice. Instead of victimization a stance of "survivance" (Vizenor) is espoused.

King's recent oeuvre is united by the trope of water and a focus on artistic expression, "survivance" and the environment. Both rivers depicted in his last two novels, the Shield in *Truth & Bright Water* and the Smoke in *The Back of the Turtle* signal by their very naming a protective quality or a quality of hiding. Both a shield and smoke can cover you and make contrasts disappear. The rivers' names are symbolic of important tropes in the two novels. King's earlier novel includes a strong element of shielding, trying to shield Lum from his violent father, shielding Tecumseh from the repercussions of his parents' failed marriage and ultimately shielding the Native community from social injustice and disintegration. "Artist" Monroe Swimmer invites the locals to his giveaway and thus unites the community. In King's novel *The Back of the Turtle*, smoke and fog are evoked to create a twilight atmosphere with a liminal quality. Transience is stressed as is the ephemeral and cyclical nature of life. Such as the mythological phoenix rises from the ashes, so does the tribal community in Samaritan Bay. The Smoke river is filled anew with life as can be observed in the ocean. The sea turtles and marine life return. Like burned land can flourish again and even better than before, after the ecological disaster life continues and resumes its rightful place in the circle of renewal and death.

His last novel before publishing *The Back of the Turtle*, *Truth & Bright Water* is very enlightening. The dog Soldier, as an anthropomorphous companion to the conflicted protagonists - both to Lum and Tecumseh in *Truth & Bright Water* and to Gabriel in *The Back of the Turtle* - is a clear linkage between these novels. In *Truth and Bright Water*, "survivance" is practiced on multiple levels. One practitioner is trickster-like character Monroe Swimmer, a Native artist coming home from his arts-related journeys in the world at large. He uses multiple media to express his artistic identity and in a survivance-like, active as well as activist stance, undo the colonial past with its lingering repercussions in the presence. Practices include repainting the Native presence into Western landscape paintings, making the church building as a reminder of the church's implication in the colonial project blend in with

the surrounding landscape and hence disappear, reintroducing artificial buffalo in the prairie environment to make the Native livelihood re-emerge and even repatriating Native remains taken from Western anthropological museums. He is an explicit activist by artistic means, one who could truly be called “artist.” Instead of explicit activism as a means of “survance” drawing an audience, there is also a more personal form of “survance” using artistic expressions. Helen in *Truth & Bright Water* practices life quilting in analogy to life writing. The quilt she creates represents places and events of her life. Including unusual objects such as razor blades (62) and porcupine quills (61), she quilts back as a means of “survance” exhibiting resistance, survival and artistic as well as enigmatic presence in the face of adversity.

In both novels artistic practice and by extension artistic activism play a crucial role. In fact, activism is linked to artistic expression instead of big political revolutionary actions. The forms of art range from quilting, painting, sculpture, performance art to acting or storytelling and musical forms such as singing and drumming. Kinship ties and a sense of community in addition to personal connections between the characters are at the fore. King does so using irony, sarcasm and above all humor. In an interview published in the back of *The Inconvenient Indian*, King underlines that humor is “the only way to deal with tragedy” (284). In a subversive stance, he claims that “sometimes a little satire goes a long way. Sometimes looking at a tragic moment through a particular angle provides a bit of humour and deepens the tragedy at the same time. Makes it more powerful” (King 285). For King, comedy and tragedy are interrelated and can be employed effectively to create a memorable reading experience and ideally provide a more lasting effect on the reader. King wants to engage in a dialogue with and not against or about the reader. He posits that “[...] you have to work with your reader, and not just brutalize them with facts, even if the facts are legitimate concerns” (285). King himself, like the arts-oriented characters in his books, engages in powerful storytelling in order to ultimately get his message across, a message of Native “survance.”

Borders are usually in flux and meaning is attributed to them by social practices, political processes and a seeming need for them on the part of citizens on both sides of a geopolitical boundary. The attributed meaning and ensuing functions can vary depending on the cultural group, place, times, stakeholders involved and overarching aims. Sometimes the gate keeping function is emphasized, at other times it is more the commonalities between the people residing in the borderlands. The fluid nature of the border and its concomitant significance are subject to change and are socially constructed. King highlights such fluidity and mobility of the border in choosing for instance a border river, the river Styx, in *Truth &*

Bright Water. This river does not stay in place, but floods and thus blurs the fluvial line. Nonetheless, this border river has also become a burial ground for repatriated Native remains taken by Monroe Swimmer from anthropological museums and a means to make money, by depositing toxic and hazardous waste in the water. In this novel, King, in his storytelling, shows how the fictional characters are often forced to choose the economic ends over the ecological dimensions and needs of future generations. The landfill waste washes up and is even actively dumped into the river (Mayer book + article xx wasteful). Yet again in *The Back of the Turtle*, the economic interests, here not aiming at making ends meet and sustaining a livelihood, but greed and profit by huge corporations, surpass ecological and health issues. In the novel, the defoliant Greensweep is supposed to be deposited illegally. The spectre of the ship called “Anguis”, echoing the in this context ominous word anguish, haunts the narration of King’s novel and represents the danger and social injustice that Native tribes may face in terms of mining, landfills, and the like. The natural environment, whether maritime or on land, is sacrificed for profit maximization by corporations. As in the contemporary world, the land has become a commodity (King interview or book).

The borders depicted in *The Back of the Turtle* differ. These borders are less geopolitically explicit and transcend the Canada-U.S. dichotomy. King places a greater emphasis on the divisions and overlap between the White and Native worlds and worldviews as well as the urban – rural continuum. Geographic, ethnic, and cultural borders come to the fore. The Native protagonist is scientist Gabriel Quinn. He embodies the belief in science and is pitted against a more community-oriented approach to life: “His life was a world of facts, of equations, of numbers. His family’s world was made up of connections and emotions” (King, *Back* 184). For Quinn “Stories were stories. They were not laws of the universe” (King, *Back* 185). At the beginning of the novel Quinn wants to commit suicide by letting himself be drowned by the tide, but instead he saves people from the sea and ultimately himself. This is an inexplicable event for him as a scientist, distanced from his family and Native community and made to function in a capitalist corporation based in the big city. So from the first pages of the novel, the contrast or rather mysterious narrative presence quite literally emerges from the depths of the sea.

The seashore and the beach also become a liminal space. It is there that community is practiced like toward the end of the novel with the joint effort dealing with the washed-up ship (xx). The Ruin, according to Mara, “[s]ounds monumental [...]. Biblical even” (King, *Back* 248). Mara seems to have a negative impression of the Bible – God being a violent, vengeful, strict presence. She stereotypically equates the adjective “biblical” with Old

Testament, brimstone and fire. King plays with these preconceived notions of the Bible and ultimately a philosophical or metaphysical worldview by contrasting Edenic settings with Anthropocene disasters. The protagonists must negotiate that tension and the borders: between for instance Native and Western creation stories and between traditional and seemingly more progressive, yet disastrous – both in terms of community and ecology - ways of living. King’s critique of so-called Western progress and economic greed becomes apparent.

In King’s works there are several characters that embody the characteristics, i.e. motion, resistance, and liminality, all at once. This holds true for trickster-like sort of shape-shifting Native artist Monroe Swimmer in *Truth & Bright Water*. From a border studies and theoretical viewpoint, Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe discuss cultural production. They posit that “[p]eople engaged in cultural production can negotiate borders by providing new visions of what they may be, or even of what borders should not or cannot be” (JBS 25:1, 2010). The border scholars further highlight the subversive potential: “Their cultural and aesthetic practices can disrupt expectations of what borders are, through the creation of imagined and imaginary borderlands” (JBS 25:1, 2010). This creative potential based on the imagination comes to the fore in King’s works through his fictional characters. They can transcend preconceived notions and the world can be imagined and in writing represented as it could or even should be. Aside from the aforementioned character of trickster-like artist Monroe Swimmer, in King’s most recent work of fiction *The Back of the Turtle* there are a number of cultural practices that overcome borders between the White and Native worlds or worldviews.

The Back of the Turtle echoes “Turtle Island” (xx in Hele), the Native expression regarding North America. King also uses a border-crossing notion of North America, meaning Canada and the United States. In the transcription of King’s CBC Massey Lectures, King being the first Massey lecturer of Native descent (xxx), he focuses in his eponymous *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (2003) on Native storytelling. He begins with the words: “There is a story I know. It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes” (King, Truth 1). Indeed, King practices exactly that approach, since each chapter starts with about a page-length variation of this basic story - just the person from the audience interacting with the storyteller being different. After this prelude, as of the second page of each chapter, the narrative evolves. All the chapters are interwoven. In the first chapter King shares the creation story about “Charm,” the “Woman Who Fell from the Sky” (King, Truth 21). She is

pregnant and is put “on the back of the turtle” (King, Truth 16). The woman has her babies and the twins are: “A boy and a girl. One light, one dark. One right-handed, one left-handed” (King, Truth 18). Surprisingly enough, despite King’s criticism of “dichotomy, the elemental structure of Western society” (King, Truth 25), this creation story also shares a duality such as good and evil.

One theme, according to King is “the return of the Native” (Truth 116). This also holds true for both *Truth & Bright Water* as well as *The Back of the Turtle*. Monroe Swimmer returns, the great Native artist in the first novel, and in the second novel, Mara returns as does Gabriel (xxx) and previously Gabriel’s mother and sister. This motif thus also plays out in King’s own fiction. He further posits that “[t]hese returns often precipitate a quest or a discovery or a journey” (117). Not only human characters return in King’s novel, but also animals, the highly symbolic sea turtles, and with them, most important of all, hope.

Additionally, these two works share a number of other factors such as the concern for the environment, Native land and indigenous livelihoods. An overarching theme are the bordered and often fractured relations between the White and Native worlds. Reserves or reservations (a note on terminology, see King *Inconvenient Indian* – Whites and reserves, etc.). Bright Water is the reserve in *Truth & Bright Water*, whereas Smoke River is the reserve in *The Back of the Turtle*. Once again, King sticks with his water imagery (see Mayer Diss./book). A sea turtle can also live on the land and in the water. One sea turtle was also at Domidion Headquarters in Toronto and then suddenly disappeared. CEO Dorian remembers that the animal had “a strange indentation in its shell, as though it had spent its life bearing a heavy load” (King, Back 22). This heavy load can be understood as the colonial legacy which Natives still have to carry and suffer from in its multifaceted consequences.

The water imagery underlines the fluidity of borders whether a border river between two nation-states in *Truth & Bright Water* or the name of a reserve, a reserve being conceptualized as a “containment area” (def. xxx). Water and bodies of water blur the lines. In *The Back of the Turtle* the ocean plays a fundamental role. The surf on the beach as well as tides are liminal spaces between the solid and the fluid, between land and water. This in-between space is symbolically charged. Such as the river Shield in *Truth & Bright Water* can be read as a Stygian space, the ocean almost becomes a fluid grave for Gabriel Quinn in *The Back of the Turtle*. He wants to commit suicide by drowning, but then a rock becomes symbolically his “rock of salvation” (Bible, Psalms or hymn). These rocks are called “The Apostles” by King (*Back of the Turtle* 33). Despite being very critical of organized religion and the colonial past, as becomes for example evident in *The Inconvenient Indian*, King

nonetheless presupposes the reader's familiarity with the tropes and symbolism of Christianity. Only having a biblical background knowledge lets the reader comprehend the full extent of King's satire, critique and sarcasm or irony regarding religion. King, in the *Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, contrasts Christian and Native stories: "So here are our choices: a world in which creation is a solitary, individual act or a world in which creation is a shared activity; a world that begins in harmony and slides towards chaos or a world that begins in chaos and moves toward harmony; a world marked by competition or a world determined by co-operation" (King, *Truth* 25).

The very naming of places, Samaritan Bay (King, *The Back of the Turtle* 30) and character Sonny referring to Jesus the Son and the Father as in God Father testify to King's subversive stance towards Christianity and Scripture as well as so-called Christianity's role in colonialism and colonization. King also uses the phrase: "In the beginning was the salvage" (*Back of the Turtle* 28) clearly echoing "in the beginning was the word" (Bible). Salvage and salvation have the same word roots and share the etymology (xxx). Here, salvage is found at the beach and thus underscores the biblical words "seek and find" (xxx) as well as he was lost and then he was found (xxx).

The lost son in King's novel is Gabriel Quinn. He goes to the U.S. and leaves his family, Canada, and his Native roots behind. Furthermore, he also gets lost in fog on the reserve and lost in life as his suicide attempts attest to. Literally however, Gabriel calls the dog Soldier "the prodigal son" (King, *Back* 309). Of course, in *Truth & Bright Water*, Soldier vanishes into the void or rather the river Shield with Lum. Therefore, Soldier does indeed exhibit a quality of the lost son returning home to Native land. Gabriel reunites himself with his Native roots and Native community. His negative deeds in terms of the ecological tragedy are eventually redeemed by the power of storytelling, love, and emerging forgiveness. The "ecocide" (King, *Inconvenient*) links King's narration to the overarching theme of globalization, capitalism, and industrialization. The tension between the economy and ecology is illustrated by the ecological disaster destroying the reserve and making the turtles vanish. The depiction of "ecocide" also comes in a long list in King's *The Back of the Turtle* as it does in *The Inconvenient Indian*. In his novel, Dorian Asher, the Toronto-based CEO, reflects on Green Sweep in the context of thinking about the difference regarding the Vietnam-era defoliant Agent Orange (King, *Back* 320). Moreover, Gabriel writes disaster lists on walls (xxx). King also writes that "we dam(n) rivers" (King, *Truth* 27).

The turtles that are gone are reminiscent of the vanishing buffaloes and by extension the stereotype of the vanishing Indian (see King, *Inconvenient* – his three types). However,

the Indians are no longer vanishing. There is hope. The sea turtles return eventually and so does a Native community (xxx). Resilience and “survivance” (Vizenor) are a leitmotif in King’s novel. Furthermore, not only in fiction, but also beyond, there is a renaissance in Native culture. Despite ongoing struggles such as land claims and the missing and murdered indigenous women, lack of opportunity, the higher percentage of Natives in Canadian prisons (King, *Inconvenient* xxx), there is some progress. King singles out the creation of Nunavut for Native peoples, particularly the Inuit, in Canada (xx).

In his fictional writing King employs powerful symbolism and tropes, the turtle being one of them. In addition to being reference in the book title, being part of a creation story, being part of the indigenous name for North America “Turtle Island” (xxx), and the actual sea turtles featuring in King’s latest work of fiction, the sea turtles are depicted as a sign of hope and of home, when they return having been gone following the ecological disaster in Samaritan Bay. Furthermore, turtles can be seen as a nod to having a home. In the light of an imminent border crossing between Lethbridge, Canada and Minneapolis, U.S. (King, *Back* 259) Gabriel’s sister Little gives her brother “a laminated picture of a turtle” (King, *Back* 259). She describes Gabriel as a “turtle.” For her, “[t]urtles carry their houses on their back [...]. Everything they need, they carry with them” (King, *Back* 259). King interrupts the telling of the departure of father and son several times. “Minneapolis had been a world away from Lethbridge” (King, *Back* 309). The contrast between Canada and the U.S. becomes apparent to Gabriel. These settings are also part of King’s own biography. He moved between Canada and the U.S. and has taught at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta (King, *Inconvenient* see i.e. interview in the back and/or King’s inversions Davidson, Andrews).

What is home and where is it? This question is repeatedly addressed by King in his novel. Protagonist Gabriel sees home as a non-place (see footnote on theory of non-lieu?): “Home wasn’t a place. At best, it was a shifting illusion, a fiction you created to mask the fact that, in the end, you were alone in the world” (King, *Back* 311). There are flashbacks to Minneapolis, when he was mistaken for being white (King, *Back* 314). Gabriel thinks back about his sister Little (King, *Back* 312) and his nephew as well as Samaritan Bay and the Smoke River Reserve (King, *Back* 314). His father Joe was “from Leech Lake in Minnesota” (King, *Back* 314). In the story, there are negative father figures, it seems such as Sonny’s absent so-called Dad/God. Gabriel’s mother was from Canada and his father from the U.S., both Natives. The family was divided, as Gabriel and his father are in the U.S. after his father moved back there for his officer job and his mother and sister remained in Canada, first in

Lethbridge than in Smoke River (King, *Back* 315). Gabriel's father passed away and his mother did not want to come to the funeral (King, *Back* 316).

It seems like the U.S. is portrayed more stereotypically with negativity, as the father returns to his homeland for a job against the wishes of his Canadian wife. This is reminiscent of King's short story "Borders," where the family is also split, though the mother and son go to Utah to visit the daughter Laetitia. In *Truth & Bright Water*, the town of Truth is in the U.S. and Bright Water, yet again a water-related reserve name, is on the Canadian side (xxx Mayer). The predominant stereotypes of the U.S. being profit-oriented and domineering also seem to come to the fore in a seemingly Americanized Toronto, not only a stand-in in movies, a hotbed of industry, business and capitalism is the location of Domidion. In King's novel, Domidion, reminiscent of dominion, is situated on "Tecumseh Plaza" (King, *Back* 14). Dorian, the CEO, inquires about the meaning or story of Tecumseh. His personal assistant Lee Winter tells him. He finds the naming of the plaza, given Tecumseh's biography, "ironic" (King, *Back* 16). In King's witty sarcasm, Winter responds: "There's a peace prize named after Alfred Nobel" (16). Tecumseh is also the name of the protagonist in *Truth & Bright Water*. King ostensibly likes to use names from history for contemporary people or places to highlight a tension or create irony. His narrative technique of multiple storylines that are all entangled, in the end turn out to be a coherent woven fabric seen from above. It all comes together. In his theoretical piece "Godzilla," King talks about "relational" literature (xxx) in the sense of community.

Back to the storyline in *The Back of the Turtle*. The geopolitical boundary was not the problem, but Gabriel's mother's lack of forgiveness and unwillingness - for whatever legitimate or not so legitimate reasons - to follow her husband south to the U.S. and a life together. Gabriel's mother also adopted her maiden name of Sampson as Gabriel reveals in the moment of revelation with Mara (King, *Back* 357). The final revelation: "You're Lilly's brother?" (King, *Back* 358). Gabriel's nickname was "Riel" (King, *Back* 359) like the Métis revolutionary in Canada. Gabriel's nephew was named after him, according to Mara: "Lilly named him after you" (King, *Back* 359). Mara and Lilly were best friends (King, *Back* 357). Gabriel was angry: "Angry that his father had been killed. Angry that his mother had stayed in Alberta" (King, *Back* 360). Early on in the novel, Mara has an inkling or an echo of the name Gabriel: "That was the name Lilly's mother had used when she told the story 'The Woman Who Fell from the Sky.'" (King, *Back* 49). This foreshadows the later moment of revelation, when Mara realizes who Gabriel really is. Additionally, Mara remembers that most likely "Gabriel had been the left-handed twin, the one who had brought chaos to the world that his

twin had created. So that there would be balance” (King, *Back* 49). She does not fully remember the whole story as Lilly’s mother used to tell it. This renders the story more enigmatic and the reader follows along with Mara to unravel the past. Nicholas Crisp tells about “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” (King, *Back* 222). This happens during his give-away or potlatch-like birthday celebration at the hot springs, which are in an Edenic location. Mara wonders “if this is what Eden was like” (King, *Back* 224). In this context the book’s title is echoed “On the back of a turtle” (King, *Back* 227).

After the ecological disaster all the animals disappeared, but as a sign of hope the river water is no longer poisonous: “Still, the Smoke was running clean again, and you could reach into the water and draw your hand back without incident” (King, *Back* 47). Mara’s house is somewhat of an in-between space “on the edge of town” and she considered her rented home “[a] rest stop. A middle ground. A temporary shelter” (King, *Back* 47). Moreover, she mentions that it is neither here nor there: “Not the reserve and not the Bay” (47). Thus, King portrays instances of liminality in many guises as part of his story. Liminality and borders are interrelated. In this chapter, expressions of art or even artistic activism as depicted in King’s works are analyzed. These forms of art can pertain to singing and drumming, i.e. the musical, or visual expressions of art such as paintings.

Looking at the musical dimension in King’s *The Back of the Turtle*, one notices the drumming and/or singing at crucial moments in the plot. King’s novel is also dedicated to the “songs and the singers” (King). This underscores from the beginning the crucial and powerful theme of singing and the symbolic qualities. Gabriel, in contrast to his suicide attempts, in the end sings a “grass dance” (footnote): “Not a memorial song. A grass dance this time. A fierce song. A song for warriors. For now he knew these people. They were the sea people. The first people” (King, *Back* 9). The sea people join Gabriel singing (King, *Back* 9). The sea people later turn out to be “Taiwanese” (King, *Back* 433). The two families, Chin and Huang, worked on a ship (433). There was a storm and they were “trapped” on the “broken” ship (434). The first person Gabriel rescued from the water is Mei-ling (432) and she shares the turning point in their disastrous situation: “We are in the water, and we are dying, until the singing man pulls us out of the sea. Until the singing man saves us” (King, *Back* 435). Gabriel behaves like a savior and in the end this community-building attitude comes to the fore again: “the round dance had been full of rhythm and community, and Gabriel had sung it well and with conviction” (King, *Back* 244). Gabriel is transformed from doomed suicide candidate to community savior. King contrasts non-Native and Native readers in their responses to his writing, here *The Truth about Stories*. He states: “For the Native reader, these continuing

attempts of the community to right itself and the omnipresent choruses of sadness and humour, of tragedy and sarcasm, become, in the end, an honour song of sorts, a song many of us have heard before” (xxx).

Regarding the artistic expression or artistic activism of painting, the foremost practitioner in King’s latest novel is Mara. She paints back by painting her own community members. It is her perception instead of an outsider’s perspective. She reappropriates portraiture, a rather Western techniques or practice. Native woman Mara Reid (King, *Back of the Turtle* 32) paints her tribal members (Elvin such as TBW) back, who perished in the disaster (King, *Back of the Turtle* 209). Mara considers a painting “done” not “finished” (King, *Back* 189). She is convinced that “[a] painting held its own” (King, *Back* 189). The spirit or soul-like quality lingers and is always in flux. Mara is convinced about the following artistic conceptualization: “Art was fluid and continuously full of potential” (King, *Back* 189). This positive connotation with fluidity is to be observed as well in the borderlands, a space in-between that can shift, but remains a space of possibility. Mara, by painting the portraits of the deceased, in the remnants of the community “Samaritan Bay” on the edge of the former reserve, now a “ghost town,” links both places. Indeed, she becomes a good Samaritan (Bible xx), not turning her back on the reserve and local community after the Ruin, but instead staying put and more. She does not embrace a stance of victimization, but instead uses her means to express herself and stay connected to the tribal past and in so doing tribal present and future. She does so with a spirit of courage and daring as she uses a “palette knife” for “a bolder effect” (King, *Back* 247).

Using her “memory” (King, *Back* 248) to paint the locals, who have perished in the Ruin, she honors them and the community. Though painting “dead people” (King, *Back* 249), this “artist” (xxx) practice is first and foremost a practice of Vizenor’s concept of “survivance”. Quite literally, by painting her late fellow community members, she refuses to subscribe to the myth of the “vanishing” or “dead Indian” (see King, *Inconvenient* xxxx). She embodies the “active presence” that Vizenor postulates (xxx). Mara keeps the connection to her family, the local community, her Native traditions and artistically and vividly renders the portraits of the community members. At the same time, she almost resuscitates them. This is reminiscent of Monroe Swimmer in *Truth & Bright Water*. As does Monroe make the buffalo return or even more pertinently recreate a Native presence in 19th century landscape paintings, Mara recreates a presence for her deceased community members and thus reunites herself with her past and present. She reroots herself claiming her Native identity and belonging. For

her “[people are] part of a larger organism” (King, *Back* 189). She feels “diminished” (King 189) after the passing of her mother and grandmother.

Monroe Swimmer paints the Native presence back into landscape paintings (xxx) as Natives “bleed” through (xxx). He undoes the colonial legacy of the past not only by painting, but also using buffalo sculptures to recreate the former presence of the Native livelihood strongly connected to buffaloes (xx). Monroe Swimmer reduces the lingering traces of White colonialism and replaces them with a tribal presence, so he lets the church, here a symbol inscribed with colonial meaning, disappear using a tromp-l’oeil painting technique.

Together with Gabriel, Mara brings the first four portraits back to the reserve (King, *Back* 278). She also elaborates on how people came to take things from the homes on the reserve after the ecological disaster hit. Mara, in a cynical stance, relates the greed and heartlessness of a family, who “stole” Native items “looting the community centre” (King, *Back* 280). She comments: “Genuine Aboriginal ghost-town souvenirs” (King, *Back* 280). Mara nails the painting to the wall next to the door on the porch of her grandmother’s house on the reserve (King, *Back* 281). The highly symbolic gesture links her to her ancestors and helps her overcome her pain and grief at the loss of her loved ones. Gabriel compares Mara to “Martin Luther” as “[he] nailed stuff to doors, too” (King, *Back* 281). King again, likens or even replaces Christian history as a token of Western ideology with Native practice and worldviews. He transcends cultural and ideological borders, though, arguably, replacing one with another. Mara is also a revolutionary, “a pain in the ass” (King 281) like reformer Martin Luther (282).

Mara and Gabriel find the dog Soldier in a house on the reserve. It turns out to be the house of Rose and Lilly Sampson and Lilly’s son (King, *Back* 302), i.e. Gabriel’s mother, sister and nephew. He disappears. He has realized that he has found said house (King, *Back* 309). Gabriel has regrets: “Science was supposed to have been the answer. Word hunger. Disease. Energy. Security. Commerce. [...] At one time, science had been Gabriel’s answer to everything. Love. Friendship. Family” (King, *Back* 446). Truth and stories (King, *Back* 448). At a later point, Gabriel reveals his story to Mara: “I’m a scientist. I developed the defoliant called GreenSweep. GreenSweep caused The Ruin. I’m the reason your mother died, the reason your grandmother died, the reason my sister and her son died, the reason the reserve is a graveyard” (King, *Back* 454). Gabriel considers his life “Something broken” (King, *Back* 472) and wants to kill himself again after his confession to Mara. Mara comes to the rescue and inquires about the “crow hop” (474). She forces him to save her (475). Sonny renames Soldier “Salvage” (479). King lets Sonny observe in the same salvaging or savior-like

dimension: “And in the distance, out on the Apostles, Sonny catches the sight of two figures huddled together on the rocks” (479) in what seems to be a redemptive moment and turning point. Sonny is the one who wants to build a “bright tower” to “bring the turtles home” (King, *Back* 268). He thinks about a tower: “A beacon. A tower beacon. A lighthouse. More or less. A symbol of hope. A guiding light. A monument to perseverance” (King, *Back* 268). This is somewhat reminiscent of the construction and hubris of the tower of Babel “creation” (King, *Back* 293). Nonetheless, the light on the beach has a positive influence.

Additionally, at the end of the novel the sea turtles return and there is a renewal of the community: “It’s Big Red!” (King, *Back* 487). This sea turtle is mentioned earlier, but now she is “laying her eggs” (487). Furthermore, all the hope for rebirth is encapsulated in these words: “The turtles have returned. Soon the eggs will hatch. Soon the baby turtles will dash to the sea” (487). King tells it from Sonny’s perspective: “Two figures stolen from the water and carried to shore, like salvage on the incoming tide” (King, *Back* 488). From Gabriel’s perspective, he and Mara were “Fugitives. Escapees from a prison island” (490). They are welcomed by a crowd (491).

In the end the narrative strands come full circle: “A sea turtle. Dragging itself towards the water. A turtle with a depression in its shell and a blood red slash across its neck” (492). Gabriel seems to recognize the turtle “from the tank in the lobby at Domidion, the turtle with whom he had shared his lunch all those years” (492), but is not sure (493). King leaves it to the reader’s imagination. Regarding the ship with the toxic waste, this subplot also comes full circle. The broken ship returns and Mei-ling, one of the sea people rescued as the first people by Gabriel Quinn, recognizes it. It is also called “salvage” (497). It is the ship called *Anguis*. The newly emerging local community and singing together are the transformative power in preventing another ecological disaster (499). The *Anguis* is afloat on the tide (500). This means it is a narrow escape from another ruin, because the *Anguis* holds the stock of the remaining toxic *GreenSweep* as Dorian and Winter discussed. In a symbolic gesture of generosity and community, Gabriel gives Sonny his drum and jacket “Consider it today’s salvage” (502). In his latest novel, yet again King uses a young boy as one of the main characters, as he has already done in his short story “*Borders*” and his novel *Truth & Bright Water*. In the end, the novel closes with hopeful tones. It seems to come full circle such as the return of the animals, the sea turtle laying her eggs again and seeing the Pelicans, a reminder of Lilly, Gabriel’s sister and Mara’s best friend. Moreover, Gabriel will put his trailer home right next to Mara’s house (508+517). Lilly is their bond (518)

3 Utopian Borders related to Culture, Community, and Canada

At the end of King's latest novel, "survivance" unfolds as Vizenor defines it. Thanks to the community coming together, using the power of song, they can push the broken ship back to the ocean where the waves carry it away. This means that the multicultural community reverses as much as possible the "ecocide" (xxx) from the past and in so doing, prevent the repetition of "The Ruin" and thus save the emerging community of Samaritan Bay and the Smoke River reserve. There is rebirth and redemption and ultimately hope. King ends on an upbeat note as does he in *The Inconvenient Indian* by referring to Native successes in reclaiming land. In *The Back of the Turtle* they reclaim land from ecological disaster and dereliction and in *The Inconvenient Indian*, Nunavut is cited as a positive example and even a victory for Native peoples, particularly the Inuit.

The Native situation as depicted in *The Back of the Turtle* after the Ruin is initially reminiscent of an apocalyptic dystopia. Particularly singing and painting in *The Back of the Turtle*, cultural practices such as painting and art projects in *Truth & Bright Water* and storytelling in "Borders" become the forces that, in their respective liminal spaces, subvert preconceived notions and create connections to the Native past and present, in short to a continued Native community. In the case of protagonist Gabriel Quinn, Native "survivance" (Vizenor) becomes literally manifest. Thanks to artistic practice and the resilience or even "survivance," the novel ends on an optimistic and hopeful note. The dystopian realm of the ghost-town reserve is transformed by community and cultural practice into a utopian space of possibility.

Works Cited [MLA or Harvard or APA?] *will be added!!!*

Primary Works / Works by Thomas King

King, Thomas.

Secondary Works

or just Works Cited