The Anthropocene and the Posthuman in *The Back of the Turtle*

Author: Joel White
Discipline: English

ABSTRACT: The Anthropocene is the current geological epoch in which humans are the primary agents of environmental change. Inherent in this agency is the possibility that humans could bring an end to the world, at least as we know it today. The Anthropocene is thus a drama in which humans at once play both the role of protagonist and antagonist; how can we achieve a happy ending to this drama if these two roles are played by the same actor? To find tentative answers to this question, I analyze Thomas King's 2014 novel *The Back of the Turtle* through the lens of posthumanism. *The Back of the Turtle* follows the trials and tribulations of Gabriel Quinn, an Indigenous scientist who journeys to the town of Samaritan Bay to commit suicide after a botched deployment of his experimental defoliant led to an ecological disaster in the region. However, after failing his initial suicide attempt, Gabriel lives awhile among the region's remaining human and non-human inhabitants. Through them, Gabriel reconnects with his once-lost Indigeneity and discovers a posthuman alternative to the human subjectivity that drives the Anthropocene, showing how the protagonist may survive and the antagonist be defeated.

KEYWORDS: Environmental change, Posthumanism, Drama, Indigeneous Resurgence, Canada, The Cyborg Manifesto, Indigenous Epistemologies

Introduction

"Now I am become Death … the destroyer of worlds" (King 62). Thus speaks Gabriel Quinn, the Indigenous scientist and inadvertent world-destroyer in Thomas King's novel *The Back of the Turtle*. Gabriel does not say this merely out of poetic impulse. Rather, Gabriel stands in Samaritan Bay, which was devastated along with the Smoke River Reserve by the clumsy deployment of his experimental defoliant, GreenSweep. At these words, longtime area resident Nicholas Crisp assumes, "Ye [Gabriel] know the Bhagavad-Gita then," to which Gabriel replies, "Oppenheimer. I know the phrase because of Robert Oppenheimer" (62). What the two men are discussing here is who may claim responsibility for the apocalypse, or who may claim the mantle of Death, the destroyer of worlds. Crisp associates such a title with the divine through his reference to the Bhagavad-Gita, wherein the Hindu God Vishnu was the first to describe himself as Death. In contrast to Crisp, Gabriel associates Death with the Western scientific tradition, first through Robert Oppenheimer and then through himself. According to Gabriel, human beings have become Death, and are destroying our world. Perhaps that is why Gabriel, at this point in the novel, has come to Samaritan Bay to kill himself and do his part to remove Death from the world. Yet by the end of the novel, Gabriel commits to life rather than death.

The problem that Gabriel faces, becoming Death, has a scientific signifier: the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene refers to our current geological epoch in which humans are the primary agents of environmental change. Inherent in that agency is the possibility that humans could bring an end to the world, at least as it is known today. As such, the Anthropocene has thus far been characterized by many a worrisome piece of news, including this snippet from a 2013 issue of *La Monde*, which states, "The maximum permissible CO2 limit was crossed just before 1990" (qtd. in Latour 1). The Anthropocene is a "historical drama" of planetary proportions, one in which humans are at once playing the role of antagonist and protagonist (Latour 1). If we desire a happy ending to this drama, then the antagonist must be defeated, and the protagonist must go forward into a brighter future. Yet how can this be done, if these two roles are played by the same actor? Gabriel struggles with this very question, and the way in which he continues to live is an example of how we might find a satisfactory resolution to the drama of the Anthropocene. Drawing from Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti's theories of posthumanism, I argue that Gabriel constructs an alternate subjectivity to the human-become-Death, thereby defeating the antagonist while allowing the protagonist to survive. Gabriel builds this alternate subjectivity through the re-enactment of an Indigenous creation story, demonstrating how Indigenous cultural practice already applies many aspects of posthuman theory.

The Posthuman

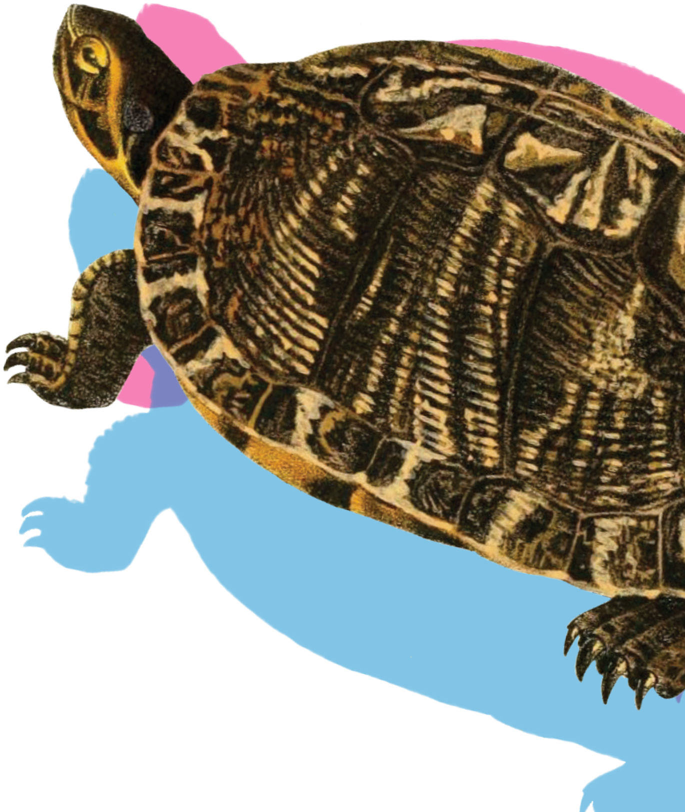
One might expect that the English language term "human" refers to a subjectivity that is universal to all beings in our subspecies of primate. However, the term "human" refers to an often-exclusive subject that has been constructed through "Western social, political, and scientific theory" (Braidotti 1). This human exists as a citizen of a capitalist nation-state and uses their status as a property-owner and rights-holder to advance their individual material interests. Human subjectivity of this kind has not always been afforded to all who are now thought of as humans; children, the impoverished, the enslaved, and women are all groups of people to whom full humanity has been denied at various points in the Western past and present. For example, the citizen property-owner has the right to vote, and yet the exclusion of women from this right is a near-universal part of Western political history. In Canada, white women did not obtain the Federal right to vote until 1918, and even then, not all Indigenous women could cast a Federal vote until 1960 (Strong-Boag). Furthermore, those who are not part of the category of human rights-holder are often commodified as exploitable capital, over whom the human's rights are held. Rosi Braidotti discusses a 2002 example of such commodification in *The Posthuman*, saying that while "people in war-torn lands like Afghanistan were reduced to eating grass in order to survive[,] … cows in the United Kingdom and parts of the European Union were fed meat-based fodder" (7). Braidotti describes this situation as one in which the "genetic code of living matter – 'Life itself' (Rose, 2007) – is the main capital" (7). At the top of this chain of commodification sits the consumer, the Western human. Below the human sits the cow; because of its ability to be fed and fattened for consumption, it is raised to a status just beneath the human. Ironically, the Afghan is relegated to the level of grass eater, seeing as they are unable to be commodified in the same way as the cow. The designation of "human" is extremely malleable. The cow is pulled closer to the human as the Afghan is pushed further away, while the status of women's humanity remains contested, depending on factors such as race and class (Braidotti 7-8).

Given the inconstant history of the human subject, it should come as no surprise when Braidotti claims that "[not] all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that" (1). For many, this assertion will seem unsettling, or even frightening. Yet for scholars like Braidotti, who write in the face of the Anthropocene, such an assertion provides hope. It raises the possibility of an alternative, posthuman subject, a way to escape the human-become-Death, without bringing death upon ourselves.

In "A Cyborg Manifesto," author Donna Haraway articulates this posthuman subject in a way that is at once academic and poetic. Haraway asserts that the cyborg is a "hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). From this assertion, it may seem that Haraway uses the fictional cyborg as a metaphor for the complexities of social subjectivity, and to an extent, she does. However, Haraway also refers to social subjectivity as "world-changing fiction" that has material consequences, and here she gives this fiction a new character: her cyborg (149). Haraway grounds her manifesto in feminist thought, a fertile source of inspiration for the cyborg given the tentative and incomplete extension of human subjectivity to women. Haraway writes that "gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for essential unity … There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women" (155). As it is with her cyborg, Haraway's conception of womanhood "skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" (151). In other words, people in general and women in particular are comprised of various different and sometimes conflicting components; just as cyborgs are comprised of nuts and bolts in addition to flesh and blood, women are constituted by their race and class as much as by their gender. So, where cyborgs cannot identify in whole with the myths of human unity that lie within Garden of Eden and the state of nature, the "[p]ainful fragmentation among feminists … along every possible fault line has made the concept of woman elusive" (Haraway 155). History provides many proofs for Haraway's statement here, not least the much-delayed extension of the Canadian Federal vote to Indigenous women, even after the fulfillment of "women's" suffrage in 1918. How then do posthumans, who do not descend from a garden, organize a collective? What does a cyborg-feminist society look like? Haraway answers that cyborgs form societies "through coalition – affinity, not identity" (155).

While Haraway does not provide a precise definition of affinity, we can find a good articulation of a similar concept by returning to *The Posthuman*, this time to Braidotti's chapter on post-anthropocentrism. As Braidotti argues, through examples such as that of the cow and the Afghan, "advanced capitalism is a spinning machine that actively produces difference for the sake of commodification" (58). As this spinning machine twirls around its anthropocentric subject, the human, all others are swept up in its wake. In such a situation, the extension of human subjectivity to others, be it to cows or women, would perpetuate rather than address the problem of the Anthropocene. Rather than the establishment of a universal identity through such an extension, made impossible in any case due to the human's need for commodification through difference, we require something else. Braidotti refers to that something as *zoe*-centred egalitarianism, wherein differences between beings are still maintained but relocated "outside of the dialectical scheme" of conflict and domination. Under this framework, difference is articulated as positive "relation to multiple others," or affinity (Braidotti 56).

In sum, the posthuman subject is post-anthropocentric. As a cyborg, the posthuman accepts difference as something both internal and external. They operate through equal relation rather than domination. It is in such a posthuman subject that we may find a satisfactory solution to the drama of the Anthropocene.



Gabriel and the Woman Who Fell From the Sky

Gabriel's claim of a sort of ontological descent from Robert Oppenheimer is curious, considering his actual familial descent is far removed from the world-destroyers of the Western scientific tradition. Gabriel was raised in a community of Indigenous relations that centred around his mother, father, and younger sister. Of his family, Gabriel states that, though he loved them, "[h]e simply didn't feel as though he was a part of their lives. Nor were they a part of his. His world was a world of facts, of equations, of numbers. His family's world was made up of connections and emotions" (King 184). The detachment that Gabriel expresses here is likely a consequence of the dissolution of his family. After the murder of his father and the loss of contact with his mother and sister, Gabriel was left with no strong connections through which he could construct a world. This left him with only the facts and equations for which he had always possessed a natural talent. During his studies at Stanford University, Gabriel was recruited into the biotech corporation Domidion. There he became the "Head of Biological Oversight," or in his words, a destroyer of worlds (20).

Despite Gabriel's claim of a clean separation between his world of equations and his family's world of connections, there is evidence in the text that suggests a porous boundary between the two. During Domidion's investigation of Gabriel's disappearance, which accompanied his first suicide attempt, Dr. Warren Thicke remarks that he noticed "a folder on Quinn's desk" prior to the latter's desertion. When asked what was special about the folder, Thicke responds that his interest derived from what Gabriel wrote across the face of the folder: "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" (90). The Woman Who Fell from the Sky is an Indigenous creation story, one that tells of a pregnant woman who fell from a sky-world and into our own, which was originally formed completely of water. Following her descent, the woman rests "[o]n the back of a turtle," and through the labours of herself, her twin children, and the animals, they construct the hybrid water-land world that becomes Earth (227). Later, when Crisp tells the story to Gabriel, the latter begins to reminisce:

> Gabriel's mother had told the story any number of times, but he couldn't remember if she had ever given a reason. Gabriel and his sister had taken turns cheering for the various animals who dove down to the bottom of the ocean, betting cookies on who would be the first to try to find dirt. Gabriel suspected that his mother varied the outcome, so that neither of her children got too far ahead of the other in the overall standings (222).

Through that folder, The Woman Who Fell from the Sky followed Gabriel from the world of connections into that of equations. Yet when Crisp asks if Gabriel knows the tale, the latter denies any relation to the story, saying, "No … I don't think I do" (222).

It is understandable why Gabriel would deny having ever heard The Woman Who Fell from the Sky; the story evokes memories of his mother and sister, who were among those killed on the Smoke River Reserve when GreenSweep entered their water supply. Yet Gabriel unwittingly seems to find himself pulled into a narrative that has strong parallels with the creation story of his childhood. For example, he abandons his initial attempt to drown himself in the ocean after seeing multiple people seemingly emerge from the depths, all struggling to find solid ground and escape a watery grave. Where he had come to die, Gabriel observes that "suddenly the sea was alive with people. He caught a young boy by the hair and dragged him to the rocks. Then a young girl … Two young men. All naked and cold. Their eyes wild with life" (9). Once the tide retreats, the sea-people leave the exhausted Gabriel on the beach, and he wonders whether he had "sung them out of the depths" (30). He dismisses such a notion, remarking to himself that "[h]e understood physics, understood the intricacies of the universe," concluding that "[t]he people in the water were not mythical beings" (30). While Gabriel eventually finds a physical explanation for the events in the ocean, the fact remains that by pulling the people out of the water, he has begun a new story wherein he plays the role of the turtle. Upon Gabriel's back, or rather through his labour, he embarks on a constructive process through which he becomes something other than Death.

Gabriel and Posthumanism

Noting the importance of co-operative relationships in The Woman Who Fell from the Sky, I cannot help but recall Braidotti's emphasis on framing difference as "relation to multiple others" in her articulation of posthumanism (56).

As such, I wish to examine Gabriel's relationships to see how posthumanism manifests in his journey. In this examination, Gabriel's time at Domidion once again proves to be revealing. The Public Relations (PR) department at Domidion, in looking for a way to spin Gabriel's disappearance, says that "he was anti-social" (King 134). PR draws this description from the comments of Domidion CEO Dorian Asher, who says of Gabriel that "[h]e kept to himself" (134). These depictions reinforce the idea that Gabriel constructs himself and his world out of equations alone, yet Dorian remembers Gabriel as having at least one close workplace relationship. Specifically, Dorian recalls that in Domidion's aquarium, there had been "a single turtle in the tank, and, each day, Gabriel would eat his lunch and watch the turtle as she swam back and forth in the long rectangle of water" (21). Even after the turtle disappeared from Domidion, Gabriel "continued to eat his lunch in front of the empty tank … as though he expected the turtle to return." Dorian is unable to see why Gabriel did this, remarking that the "reptile wasn't of any [material] value," and he feels no need to look deeper into Gabriel's association with it (23). Yet Gabriel and the turtle are both fish out of water at Domidion, the former in a cultural setting that is foreign to his upbringing, the latter removed from others of its species. Braidotti claims that "the recognition of shared ties of vulnerability can generate new forms of posthuman community" (69). It is perhaps for this reason that Dorian, as the invulnerable CEO, could not see that Gabriel felt more closely tied to the turtle than to others of his species at Domidion. Further, Dorian is unable to understand Gabriel's decision to follow the turtle's lead and leave the company.

While Gabriel's saving of the mysterious sea-people parallels aspects of The Woman Who Fell from the Sky, the story that Gabriel helps create is not exclusively Indigenous but instead embraces the multiple "others" of which Braidotti speaks (56). This embrace is in opposition to the Christian creation myth that advances the idea of "essential unity," which Haraway critiques in her work on cyborg identity (155). For Haraway, the posthuman "cyborg" subject "was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end" (315). Throughout *The Back of the Turtle*, there are several implicit critiques of the Christian creation story of God-given, singular humanity. For example, when Gabriel accuses Crisp of romanticizing his memories of gatherings in the Smoke River Reserve, Crisp responds, "It were no paradise [or Eden], if that be the question. But it were a community" (King 417). Gabriel, who so starkly proclaims a preference for equations over connections, plays a role in the rebuilding of that community; when he visits the Reserve, he discovers the people he pulled from the sea eating a meal alongside Mara, the only remaining Indigenous resident in the area. Mara informs Gabriel of the sea-people's identity, describing them as "[t]wo families … The Chins and the Huangs. They're Taiwanese" (433).

Gabriel discovers that by pulling the Taiwanese families from the sea, he began a creation story almost as unwittingly as he had begun a story of destruction through the invention of GreenSweep. He learns that the families were cheap labour on a decaying cargo ship, which, adrift in bureaucratic malaise, was being battered by the same rough seas in which he had tried to drown himself. Gabriel joins the impromptu crowd for a meal, and wonders at the fact that he "had known them [the Taiwanese] no better than he had known his own sister, and yet here he was, having dinner with the lot as though they were family" (433). Burdened by the knowledge that he was responsible for the deaths of his mother and sister, Gabriel attempts to excuse himself from any kind of familial relationship with the diners, saying that he "should be getting back." Crucially, Gabriel does not say where he would be going back to, and Crisp stops him from leaving by telling him to "[l]ook around … This is the back to which [he] needs be getting" (436). The "back" to which Crisp refers is more than just a return to an Indigenous community; while such a return is part of Gabriel's journey, of the many assembled diners, only Mara is also Indigenous (436). What Crisp urges Gabriel to return to is the relational way of life that he was taught in childhood, alongside his sister, as the two learned of the sky-woman and the animals who shaped our world.

The transition from Death into the posthuman for Gabriel is a gradual one, though it does have a clear climax. After the dinner, Gabriel confesses his role in the devastation to Mara. She angrily encourages him to go through with his original resolution of suicide, saying that "[l]ow tide is at five … Don't be late" (455). Yet, as Gabriel waits for the encroachment of high tide, Mara reverses course and goes out to Gabriel. The following exchange ensues:

> Mara looked over her shoulder. The early surges had already found the base of the Apostles. "You don't get to kill yourself."
> "What?"
> "I have questions."
> "Questions?"
> "And I want answers" (474).

Here, Mara reminds Gabriel of his responsibilities to the living and claims a possession, at least in part, of Gabriel's body and subjectivity. The idea that Gabriel does not have the right to inflict death upon himself, something that he has already inflicted on so many others, stands in opposition to humanism's "unitary subject position" which holds individual identity and autonomy above all else (Braidotti 54). When Gabriel accepts Mara's demands and continues living, his subjectivity becomes something more than that of a unitary human. Rather, Gabriel becomes something akin to Haraway's cyborg, a being that is constituted from its responsibilities to multiple relations. For Gabriel, those relations include all the residents of the Samaritan Bay-Smoke River area, especially those that he had devastated in his time as a destroyer of worlds: Mara, Crisp, and the turtles. Indeed, when Gabriel arrives back on the beach, he spots "[a] sea turtle," one that bears a remarkable resemblance to the turtle "from the tank in the lobby at Domidion" (King 492). The return of the turtle is a reminder that Gabriel's life is "[n]ot a straight line." (472). He is no longer the human-become-Death that ends a linear story of progress and ruin. Rather, Gabriel sits on the back of a turtle that can survive an apocalypse; he lives in response to its needs and moves in whatever way it demands.

Indigenous Peoples and Cyborgs

Here I would like to stress that my analysis of Gabriel's journey is not an effort to appropriate Indigenous values and stories and frame them as exclusively posthuman, nor do I wish to depict Indigeneity as a dying thing that must be replaced by a cyborg identity. Instead, I wish to focus the theoretical and future-oriented concepts articulated by Haraway and Braidotti through an Indigenous lens, to show how such concepts have already been applied in real-world Indigenous cultures and their stories. However, posthumanism and Indigenous ontologies are by no means equivalent. In that vein, there is one area in which *The Back of the Turtle* retains and even reinforces a strict binary, something that is decidedly contrary to posthuman thought. The binary of which I speak is between technoscience and Indigeneity, which is what Gabriel references when he speaks of the contrast between his devotion to equations and his family's emphasis on connection.

Yet Indigeneity is not something possessed exclusively by a single person or people, and it should come as no surprise that other Indigenous peoples are telling stories that break down the boundaries between their kinship relations and the products of science. An example of this effort is the essay "Making Kin with the Machines." In the words of its authors, the essay draws upon "Hawaiian, Cree, and Lakota cultural knowledges" to develop "conceptual frameworks that … acknowledge our responsibility to find a place for [Artificial Intelligences] in our circle of relationships" (Lewis et al.). In the section on Cree attitudes towards human-AI relationships, author Archer Pechawis expresses fears that "anonymous hyper-intelligences" might base their work upon the "same values that have fostered genocide against Indigenous peoples worldwide and brought us all to the brink of environmental collapse" (Lewis et al.). Pechawis, instead of turning away from AI altogether, raises the possibility of creating programming languages that are "grounded in nēhiyaw nisitohtamowin." Pechawis defines nēhiyaw nisitohtamowin as "Cree understanding" in which "relationship is paramount" (Lewis et al.). Like Gabriel, Pechawis is concerned about Anthropocentric destruction, which harms the world in general and Indigenous peoples in particular. Yet unlike Gabriel, Pechawis does not turn away from the creations of Western technoscience altogether. Instead, Pechawis looks for ways to integrate those creations into a system of positive relation, just as Gabriel integrates himself into the system of relation that governs Samaritan Bay. While the two depict technoscience differently, both Pechawis and Gabriel tell Indigenous stories of relation, from which aspiring posthumans can learn a great deal.

Conclusion: Earthbound

In his articulation of a posthuman subject that he dubs the "Earthbound," Bruno Latour states that "the speech of the Earthbound will no longer have to alternate wildly … between the exact transcription of the world or an arbitrary sign unconnected to its referent. Their statements will *draw* what they are *bound* to" (16). Latour's Earthbound is a response to the problems of the Anthropocene; he decries "[h]umans and their 'facts,'" insinuating that the devotion to such facts allows some humans to disentangle their subjectivity from the world around them (16). While Latour uses the future tense when talking about the speech of the Earthbound, I argue that Gabriel's journey from a destroyer of worlds into a relational subject provides an example of how posthumans like the Earthbound exist in the here-and-now, in Indigenous speech and Indigenous stories.

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