



Diffracted Reality in *Waterland*: Variations of Space and Time in Matter, of Matter and by Matter

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Abstract

Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) suggests itself as an antecedent to Karen Barad's philosophical framework, particularly her pioneering notion of spacetime-mattering. Swift's narrative intricacies and thematic explorations, set in the Fenland region and its evolving history, align with Barad's ideas concerning the inseparability of space, time, and matter. This paper is a critical investigation into how *Waterland* forecasts and embraces key components of Barad's spacetime-mattering, as well as how Swift's literary narrative anticipates Barad's later theorization of the dynamic interplay of entities, temporalities, and landscapes. As I navigate the narrative complexity of *Waterland*, I engage with an imaginative literary journey that predates and parallels Barad's vital findings, examining how Swift's work serves as a fascinating platform for contemplating the interwoven existence of reality in the framework of spacetime-mattering.

Keywords: diffraction, entanglement, narrative, spacetime-matterings

Reflections on Spacetime and *Spacetime-mattering*

In classical physics, space and time were regarded as separate, absolute, and independent concepts. Space was envisioned as a three-dimensional continuum in which things exist, move, and interact, but time was viewed as a distinct and absolute characteristic driving the emergence of physical systems. This conceptual divide has its origins in the writings of philosophers and scientists like Newton and

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Descartes, who saw the cosmos as a mechanical in nature, deterministic in operation, similar to clockwork. In contrast, the formulation of Einstein's special and later general theory of relativity in the early twentieth century marked a significant shift in our understanding of space and time; Einstein propounded the idea of spacetime. Special relativity initially defined spacetime as a unified four-dimensional manifold that incorporated temporal and spatial dimensions into one. It revealed that spacetime is not an absolute backdrop, but rather, is relative and dynamic, curving and stretching in due to the presence of mass and energy. This relativistic paradigm was a deviation from previous classical dualism, implying a dependency between space and time, and simultaneously presaging the concept of spacetime mattering. The quantum shift, which occurred concurrently with relativity, drastically altered the notion of spacetime. Quantum physics questioned classical determinism and the concept of a clearly established spacetime at minuscule scales. In another sense, the anomalies of quantum physics revealed an entirely novel feature of spacetime, one that is linked to the probabilistic character of quantum processes. Quantum physics, therefore, not only challenged traditional notions of space and time, but it required new ontological investigations into the underlying fabric of reality. However, when the physicists progressed into the quantum domain, the classical unity of spacetime suffered further disruptions. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle in quantum field theory rendered spacetime intrinsically uncertain, as it positioned a fundamental indeterminacy into the very foundation of reality. Quantum gravity theories, like string theory and loop quantum gravity, have proceeded on this path, presenting spacetime as a fluctuating quantum entity with emergent features, essentially overcoming classical space-time duality. Concurrently, Karen Barad's notion of spacetime mattering shows an extensive resonance with present-day physics. Their work addresses the divide between philosophy and quantum physics, providing a new perspective that integrates human action and materiality into the spacetime continuum. Barad's proposal of an intertwined, performative spacetime goes beyond an ordinary perception of reality, prompting a radical reconfiguration of the conceptual framework around the categories of time and reality.

Narrative and History-telling in *Waterland*

Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), widely regarded as an acclaimed postmodernist writing in addition to being recently referred to as a "late twentieth-century regional novel," recounts the narrative of the marginal Fenlands employing an intricate negotiation of natural, geographical, colonial, and interpersonal accounts and histories (*The Future* 88). Tom Crick, the novel's narrator, protagonist and a school history teacher, begins sharing his own life-accounts instead of imparting history lessons to his pupils. Upon being pressed by his student, Price, regarding his teaching capabilities, and by the school's headmaster, Lewis Scott, concerning the likely future of his career and livelihood, Tom disregards the conventional method of teaching history in favour of storytelling. Tom begins to narrate past lives of his friends and families, as well as the history of the British empire and the regional Fenlands. His retrospective intimate and distinct tales, which go forward and backward, inside and outside regardless of time and location, weave together the wider narratives of the "French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, British imperialism, Thatcherite neo-conservatism, and capitalist modernity" (Pokhrel 77). His accounts are looping and recurrent as they mirror an ongoing sequence rooted in ecology and natural history, which is exemplified by the novel's narrative framework, which centres around the timeless spatio-temporal metaphor, land reclamation. The visual representation of the watery, marshy Fens' terrain demonstrates how it is perpetually altered and reconfigured, comparable to the diffractive dynamic narrative itself, while showing how shifts in the natural environment have an immediate influence on social life of the Fenlanders. These Fenlands also serve as a conduit for history's ever-shifting binaries, conundrums and indeterminacies. Swift's narrative approach to *Waterland* parallels Barad's commitment to entanglement. The dynamic design disturbs traditional chronological sequencing, demonstrating the way time as well as space do not constitute distinct concepts but are inescapably interconnected. The narrator, Tom Crick, traverses between the distant past and the present time, emphasising the performative conduct of memory and the continuing production of reality using narrative behaviour. This

narrative style echoes Barad's plea for an increasingly intra-active notion of temporality, requiring readers to negotiate the story's intertwined and diffractive strands. "The 'thickness' of *spacetime-matterings* cannot be consigned to a past that is done and gone. Time's matterings continue to proliferate spatially" (Gannon and Taylor 1167). The intertwining of historical events and human experiences in *Waterland* resembles Barad's idea of spacetime-mattering. Another important component of Barad's conceptualisation is the notion of reality, constituted as a continual phenomenon of intra-action between time, space and matter, in which entities emerge only after their interactions with one another. It becomes apparent when Swift examines the consequences of World War 2 on the Fens, demonstrating the way history and its forces alter personal perceptions of time. The characters manage their lives within the larger framework of historical occurrences, and the story implies that subjective temporality is a dynamic intra-action with historical and natural events, contradicting the idea of a straight and discrete temporal order. The novel's multifaceted narratives, encompassing artificial and natural histories, as well as environmental and social variables, in addition skilfully integrate numerous narratives with of recorded past and experiences of a regional geographical community, and also bind the intimate to the local, and the local to the national and international. The text communicates an even deeper awareness of a space and its past, wherein history is both a sequence of events and fairytales. History is depicted as a series of progressions and regressions, continuation and interruption, retreat and recurrence, rather than a march towards a totalising epistemic practice. History, or a narrative of the past, is "an absent cause" since it is only available for us in the written form (*The Political Unconscious* 82). *Waterland's* narrative, while eschewing the conceptions of a linear chronology and "unified communal consciousness," centers on the socio-historical reality of regional populations and the processes of change that affect them. *Waterland*, like the majority of Swift's oeuvre, remains reliant on historical engagement, particularly in revealing obscured histories and disenfranchised subjects and their concerns in history to light. The protagonist, Tom's narrative excavates several past events and memories as he attempts to comprehend his present reality by "only look[ing] backwards" (*Waterland* 126). He discusses a personal and

the historical overview of his hometown, as well as ancestral tales and histories, illustrating “history to be a form of storytelling” (Landow 197).

In the first case, Tom’s personal account invokes an impression of space, time, and memory as the foundation for history and storytelling. It does this by focusing on the East Anglian Fens’ spatial marginality and evolutionary histories. His tale, involving history, serves as “an inquest” “[t]o uncover the mysteries of cause and effect” and offers an avenue for reconciliation with the past and relating it to present day (*Waterland* 107). Tom portrays the Fens as an unusual but actual topographical phenomenon on the outskirts of modern England in a realistic narrative approach. The unstable Fens landscape, as well as the region’s watery reality and history, are shaped and reshaped by natural siltation and water flow processes. This is in the same vein as Barad’s views on ever-changing matter, “As the rings of trees mark the sedimented history of their intra-actions within and as part of the world, so matter carries within itself the sedimented historicities of the practices through which it is produced as part of its ongoing becoming—it is ingrained and enriched in its becoming.” (180). Furthermore, the novel’s recourse away from conventionalized narrative structures, accompanied by myriad of timelines, is reminiscent of nineteenth-century realist traditions; its conventional storytelling emphasises material-historical reality of peripheral English towns by interweaving Fens historiography and geography history with dispersed national and universal perspectives. In the subsequent scenario, Tom’s conviction towards space demonstrates that the Fens, like every other region, have an exclusive story and history. Through his inventive creation of spaces, the narrative depicts the Fenlands as “[a] fairy-tale land,” with the ability to transmogrify an elusive land and environment into a lively location, and therefore, by association an imagined community (*Waterland* 3). Tom’s narration implies a constitution of materiality via iterative entanglement within the Fenlands’ geography through retelling(s) of a personal story and reconstructing both his individual and the collective pasts. The outlying region of the Fens is “a topos” or figural creation, as opposed to a mere factual concept (Dainotto 19). As Swift informs us, the Fens exist beyond a metaphor; they evocatively reflect “a process of history, human

endeavour, an elemental struggle, preserving the land against water and flooding” (“An Interview” 640). By emphasising the latent components of storytelling and history, especially the symbolic depiction of the Fens, the text reveals its underlying plot and its narrative logic, as well as the incorporation of the metaphor of land reclamation and differing ecological images and conventions to demonstrate how nonhuman agents are linked to Fenlanders’ identity and evolution, on one end of the spectrum, and to cultural, societal, and political phenomena, on the other. The uncertain, amphibious temperament of Fenlanders, who dwell on the periphery of English society as well as larger historical events and metanarratives, perfectly portrays their fragility and indeterminacy or in-betweenness in both the social and environmental realms. In other words, the act of storytelling becomes a performative intra-action within memory and reality. Swift’s actors intentionally build their own histories through storytelling, emphasising a performative element of personal perception and narration. This aligns with Barad’s assertion that reality is an ongoing process of entanglement, where subjectivity plays a crucial role in shaping the fabric of spacetime-mattering.

Diffraction Natureculture: Human and Nonhuman Times

Natureculture — the intricate interconnections or disputations that are present between natural and artificial history, as well as cultural and ecological phenomena—is essential to the novel’s differential materiality. Land reclamation processes which birth the Fens are compared with the anthropocentric idea of progress land reclamation; this instantiates a demonstration of how nature and social realities are inextricably linked. The landscape or more appropriately the waterscape of the Fens is a result of both nature and culture since it is built by nonhuman natural phenomena, human endeavours such as water drainage and diversion, narrative, memory, and folklore. The agential swampy landscape responds in both predictable and unforeseen ways to each of these aforementioned modes of becoming. Swift’s theory of reality is intra-active, and allows us to comprehend Fenlanders’ existence across time(s) by investigating the mutually reinforcing relationship of a peripheral English community and its surrounding ecosystem. The development of Tom’s purportedly fragmentary narrative is founded

in the materiality of the past (that is being re-written) and underpins a readily traceable logical progression that corresponds to a forward (and backward) trajectory of history, and corresponds to mutual emergence of temporality with(in) and outside space. Swift's material-discursive account "reminds us that place matters as much as time, geography as much as history, being as much as becoming, permanence as much as change" (Coupe 6). Environment and geography, as much as culture and history, influence the Fenlanders' cultural (and biological) identity and subjectivity. The Fens are neither merely presented as the novel's main setting, nor does a spatial metaphor of reclamation of land serve solely as a literary technique. Instead, the narrative depicts how human beings alongside nonhumans intra-act to shape the material and tangible reality of these marshes in complex fashions. The Fens and Fenlanders' livelihoods are shaped by a variety of natural components, including silt, eels, vegetation, water, fertile soil, sludge, and river systems. Additionally, the Fens have evolved through perpetual ecological processes and continuing human efforts involving dredging of mud, construction of embankments and sluices, and water drainage. In this regard, one might observe similarities with another one of Lawrence Buell's ideas for *Waterland*: "[t]he nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device, but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (*The Environmental Imagination* 7). The Fens present a miniature model of the reality and universe, composed of a diverse range of living and non-living entities, and the history of mankind is intertwined with the evolution of nature. They comprise a "water-logged land"—"a network of swamps and brackish lagoons," whose challenge "has always been the problem of drainage" (*Waterland* 68, 9). The Fens have developed amidst a simultaneous accretion and erosion of "[s]ilt: which shapes and undermines continents; which demolishes as it builds . . . neither progress nor decay" (8-9). Siltation, "the slow and arduous process, the interminable and ambiguous process," is allied with "the process of human siltation—of land reclamation" (10). As siltation "obstructs as it builds; unmakes as it makes," the interminable and abstruse natural phenomena and the geologic foundations of the Fenland illustrate the mutability of natural existence, and piercing distinction across the conventional perception of nature as an inert entity (11).

Even though Tom's storytelling shifts across time and space, yet his Fenland situated tale never lets go of the perspective of the Fens' peculiar atmosphere. Consider the novel's first chapter, "About the Fens," which not only includes detailed geographical and historical information, but also emphasises the trajectory of the Fens' industrial progression. This chapter illustrates that the Fens "are a low-lying region of eastern England, over 1,200 square miles in area, bounded to the west by the limestone hills of the Midlands, to the south and east by the chalk hills of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk. To the north, the Fens advance, on a twelve-mile front, to meet the North Sea at the Wash" (8). The region is notable for its fertile soil, which was formed by the accumulation of silt, marshy plants like poplars, and other flora. The Fens, which were formerly a watery marshland, have been partially restored but never absolutely reclaimed since the territories of land and water are constantly shifting, invading across each other and indeterminate. Human labours prove significant "in humanizing the natural world," and yet "this process of humanization, of rendering the natural meaningful, succeeds only partially and, indeed, confounds itself insofar as such labour becomes an object" (Decoste 389, 390). So, it may be interpreted that the dynamic materiality of the land and water within spacetime-matter is inscribed in Fenlanders' consciousness.

Histories and Memories

Barad maintains that "past matters and so does the future, but the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming" (181). And seen in a different light, *Waterland* echoes this alternative understanding of temporality by weaving flexible and conflicting ideas about both reality and past into its multifaceted narrative. Tom's examination through narrative relies on his recollections and imaginations of a marginalised place that is frequently ignored by mainstream Western narratives. While the natural world presents phenomena as they truly are, human history has certain ideological and political inclinations (Brewer and Tillyard 50-1). Tom's place-based anecdotes and histories about two families—the Cricks and the Atkinsons—and their efforts to recover

land from waters are important to a material-discursive understanding of spacetime-matter. The Cricks, as recounted by Tom, emerged from water, whereas the Atkinsons emerged from beer; as a consequence, “[w]hile the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns” (*Waterland* 17). The Cricks were “water people,” who trapped eels, but later they became “land people” (13). Their land upholding labours all the same “did not cease [them] to be water people. Perhaps they became amphibians” (13). Tom, who now resides and works in Greenwich, represents his native soil, the Fens, and its adjacent region, in tandem. While attempting to do so, he emphasises the local historiography, historic topography, and the ecological history of the Fens, this he terms “an empty wilderness” (3). As Eric Berlatsky posits, *Waterland’s* “narrative is a dialectic between reproduction and representation” (255–56). The text, while replicating material-discursive realities “has subtracted from our sense of the past as accessible and ‘present’ to us, not merely via discourses and narrative but materially as well, in the form of the referent” (256).

Tom reimagines the community around him combining storytelling with an intense curiosity in local myths and histories to illustrate the intricate interaction of social as well as ecological forces. His episodic approach offers a complementary narrative framework for decentring and critiquing a unified English discourse on the nation at large and its distinctive cultural makeup. Tom’s narrative is simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal, serving as an instrument of reconciling with the past. He envisions himself as a “historian-dredger,” whose task is to “keep scooping, scooping up from the depths this remorseless stuff that time leaves behind” (346). But history, Tom suspects, “is a thin garment, easily punctured by a knife blade called Now” (36). The narrator’s multifaceted narrative inquiry envisions a space connected by “a multitude of fibres,” and human civilization a consequence of a complex system of “primordial connections with others (both plants and animals, living and nonliving)” (McGinnis 2). To this effect, the novel demonstrates strong associations between nature and human thought rather than just adhering to conventional realism, which reinforces “reader expectations of referentiality” or fiction “about life in the world rather than the life of the mind” (Murphy 49). Tom’s retelling of the

Fens' narrative in the here and now, which may be referred to as "narrative reinhabitation," reconsiders the Fenland population in a variety of ways, recognising ethical, philosophical, and political commitments to a region and a wider and more comprehensive world (Iovino 106). From one perspective, Tom's narrative reinhabitation shows history as a phenomenon that truly occurred in times past, rather than "make-believe," and criticises history's fabled nature (108). Tom refers to Fenland myths and histories as "these fantastic-but-true, believe-it-or-not-but-it-happened Tales of the Fens" (42). A second perspective prompts, Tom's narrative reinhabitation and demonstrates that history is unable to disregard dreams and fairy tales. History, according to Tom, is storytelling mixed with excavation of an unresolved question, and explanation is required "to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment" (62). This investigative approach seldom fails to yield solutions to history's unresolved puzzles. Therefore, "History: the Grand Narrative" attains the status of "the filler of vacuums" (62). It "goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It detours" (135). History traverses a circular path and replicates itself. Tom's account of history is a tale. Relating tales provides a vital means of conceptualising and recreating a local community's past, as well as exploring the community's wider, more meaningful links with the outside world. Tom emphasises the importance of narratives in our daily lives since man "is the storytelling animal" (62). The family's experience and history offer context for his personal life, past and present, much as natural history does for the evolution of humanity. Tom begins his own narrative at the age of 53, describing his family's experience. His family "lived in a fairy-tale place. In a lock-keeper's cottage, by a river, in the middle of the Fens. Far away from the wide world" (1). This sentence and the first page serve as a metonym for the entirety of the narrative, combining a space-based identity with an ancestral background of the Cricks, the enigmatic Fens, and navigable rivers. Tom constantly informs the reader that the Cricks resided in "a lock-keeper's cottage beside the Leem River, a tributary (a fictional one imagined by Swift) of the Great Ouse, and that the Fenlands are a fairy-tale place" (Pokhrel 96). Tom conjures up the tales of this region, which are etched in his memory, during the times of crucial private crises. Tom uses both first and third-person

narration, past and present tense, and anecdotes from his own life as well as those from of his family, friends, and region. Narrating events from his wife's perspective, Tom utilises "temporal and narrative distancing to narrate his and her past like a fairy tale in the present traumatic moment of his broken married life"—"Once upon a time there was a history teacher's wife who, for quite specific and historical reasons, couldn't have a child . . . and his wife was not a woman to resort to make-believe" (*Waterland* 127; Pokhrel 96). When he intermixes his personal memory with social and historical narratives, it transforms into a historical memory.

Narrativising Becoming

The dynamism of organic and artificial narrative processes undermines the distinction between abstract imaginations and tangible material realities, implying the cyclical nature of time, reality, and history, which is related to flexible nature of the concepts of selfhood and identity, as preferred by Barad. The Fenlands, formed by the constant crossing of water and silt, are represented as possessing "a slow, sly, insinuating agency," which is also attributed to the Cricks and the local population of the Fens (8). Tom instructs his pupils to say the word Ouse slowly: "Ouse, Ouse, Oooooouse," as it is "[a] sound which exudes slowness. A sound which suggests the slow, sluggish, forever oozing thing it is. A sound which invokes quiet flux . . . unmoved motion" (142). Furthermore, the Ouse flows not only to the sea, but also returns to its source. Leo Marx describes the "forever oozing" sound of the river as "the delicate interlacing of sounds that seem to unify society, landscape, and mind" (104). The symbolic representation of the Great Ouse, particularly its undisturbed flow, rhythmic impact, and circular movement, depicts the adaptability of realities that mould the Fenlanders' subjective experiences. To underscore this point, Tom corrects Heraclitus' assertion "two and a half thousand years ago... that we cannot step twice into the same river... because we are always stepping into the same river" (146). Rivers therefore represent the passage of time, unending evolution, and the connections between nature and human existence. The natural and human worlds interact and co-constitute each other "in the dance of relating" (Haraway 25).

Fictional accounts, such as *Waterland*, resist all forms of closure and consequently encourage readers to think more profoundly and imaginatively about contemporary problems by evoking empathy for marginalised others and the nonhuman. Tom's narrative emphasises space-based narratives and histories of the Cricks and Atkinsons, as well as their intimate relationships with the natural world, in order to highlight the intra-actions and entanglements between nature and culture, natural and cultural history, and humanity and nature. Their cultural identity is founded on an intense connection to the land and nature. Tom's tale, which replicates the tangible reality of the East Anglian Fens, not only integrates personal and provincial narratives, but also national and global histories. He employs storytelling to confront his history and seek a more harmonious relationship with the Fens. *Waterland*, emerges as a narrative palimpsest, and is primarily a backdrop for the disputation and arbitration of multiple meanings, paving the way towards fresh readings. As the paper explores the entangled narrative layers of *Waterland*, it becomes evident that Swift's storytelling transcends traditional narrative boundaries, echoing the later ideas of Karen Barad. Through a narrative that weaves together personal and historical timelines, intertwining human and non-human agency, and employing diffraction as a narrative technique, Swift brings to life the dynamic and entangled nature of reality. The novel becomes a site of literary exploration of *spacetime-mattering*, inviting readers to reconsider their understanding of space, time, and matter in a world where these concepts are inextricably linked and co-constitutive.

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