

**Weaving the Literary Quilt:
The Layering of Narrative in Thomas King's
*Truth & Bright Water***

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which Thomas King layers levels of textual and symbolic narrative in order to show that truth is a relative concept that cannot be strictly bound by conventional, essentialist beliefs.

In *Truth & Bright Water*, Helen creates a quilt that tells a continually re-interpreted version of both her, and her community's history. It is only when the reader looks closely at the details of the quilt in conjunction with the textual details of the novel that the reader is able to come to any understanding of the novel. In keeping with King's theory of associational literature, the quilt provides the reader with 'snapshots' of history; each time the reader looks at the quilt, different 'snapshots' are considered and the reader's perspective necessarily changes. Truth therefore becomes a wholly individual concept.

The ever-changing versions of truth are represented in the novel by the convergence of the novel's two communities on the banks of the Shield River. It is here that the concrete and abstract concepts of truth are brought together to create flowing, multiplicitous versions that are more analogous to First Nations traditions.

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Introduction

"There are no truths, Coyote," I says. "Only stories."

-Green Grass, Running Water

In Thomas King's *Truth & Bright Water*, Tecumseh's mother, Helen, is in the process of creating a quilt that seems to be the project of her lifetime. The quilt begins with a basic pattern and structure, including traditional quilting images, shapes, and patterns, but in time, takes on its own particular—and some might say, peculiar—form of expression. She utilizes objects from her past, including pictures, earrings, rocks, and bits of worn clothing. In time, the objects and images on the quilt come to form an abstract representation of the community of Truth and Bright Water.

The novel's narrator, Tecumseh, classifies his mother's quilt as "not the easy kind of quilt" (King, *Truth* 63) like those with traditional patterns and shapes. He is establishing this quilt as something special; it is a quilt that tells the story of the community in its pictures. Tecumseh considers Helen's quilt to be one of the "hard" kind, perhaps because she must delve so deeply into the events of her past to create an interpretation. Easy

quilts, on the other hand, are created through ritualized patterns and, often, colours; their meanings are already inscribed even though there is room, as Margaret Rogerson acknowledges in her article "Reading the Patchworks in *Alias Grace*," for the makers of these 'easy' quilts to produce a "personalized interpretation of the basic blocks" (9). Colour choice and block placement will alter the potential meaning of the quilt's design.

The picture on Helen's quilt parallels the description of the actual geography of the towns, as seen in the prologue of the novel. On the quilt, Tecumseh's mother depicts the Shield River in "diamonds and fancy stitching" (King, *Truth* 63); it cuts through the two towns just as the actual river divides them. In the overt narrative of the novel, this dissection is represented explicitly by King's naming of the main street, Division. King is implying that there is a divide between what is often considered to be the 'truth' and his idea that this 'truth' is entirely relative to each person in each particular moment of time.

Diamonds are particularly strong gems, capable of cutting through almost anything. King's use of them to represent the Shield River implies, in part, that nothing can be done about the division of the two towns, about the division between the abstract concept of truth and the

flowing multiplicity of truths that Bright Water represents. An alternative interpretation, however, is that the river itself is a flowing abstraction of Bright Water, of the multiple shifting layers of possible meaning. The water is the conduit that links the concepts of abstract, concrete and multiple truths to one another. In this context, the diamonds of Helen's quilt cut through the barrier between the two concepts; here King is implying that Helen's interpretation of community as seen on the quilt is capable of showing the interplay between the two concepts.

My thesis will look at the conflicting notions of truth that are represented by the concepts of Truth and Bright Water. There are a series of dichotomies throughout the novel that work only in conjunction with each other; each idea would not be able to function on its own. These include the idea of concrete truth versus a multiplicity of truths, the two towns that are separated from each other by a river, and concepts such as safety and danger. The merging of abstract and concrete perceptions of truth results in what I consider a new concept that allows the reader to consider a multiplicitous view of truth in which truth is no longer a definitive, singular concept, but instead a fluid form that depends on the reader's

perception. In this manner, what is considered as 'truth' evolves with each viewing; essentialist notions of truth are abandoned in favour of personally relative interpretations.

I will also investigate the function that art, represented in the case of the novel by the quilt, serves for the individual and for the community. Art is a central symbol in *Truth & Bright Water*. Each of the novel's characters either creates art or is directly affected by it.

In addition to Helen, the quilt's creator, there are numerous artists in the novel: Lucy Rabbit, the Marilyn Monroe look-alike, Elvin, the carver of wooden animal souvenirs, Franklin, who re-enacts the buffalo hunt for tourists, and Monroe Swimmer, the painter. King's concern about the relationship between Native and non-Native art and culture becomes apparent in his juxtaposition of traditional Native and non-Native images and icons. For example, Lucy Rabbit wants to look like movie icon Marilyn Monroe, even though she can never attain the same shade of platinum blonde hair. The image of Lucy Rabbit as Marilyn Monroe brings to mind artist Shelley Niro's masquerade art—a self-portrait in which she is dressed as Marilyn Monroe's character in the movie *Seven Year Itch*. In this

photograph, Niro shows the props that made this scene possible; here "the artist plays with mainstream conventions of glamour and beauty with serious purpose, contrasting idealized notions of (White) femininity with familial images of Native reality" (Ryan 77). In the novel, Lucy carries a laminated picture of Marilyn Monroe in her purse: "In the photograph, Marilyn is standing with her dress blowing up around her legs" (King 20). The fact that Lucy carries a picture of Marilyn Monroe in her purse, and alters her appearance in an attempt to look more like the actress is comparable to Niro's parody of a Native Marilyn Monroe. Lucy's version of Marilyn Monroe is parodic precisely because she consciously strives to emulate the actress, who Lucy can never really look like, but her attempts destabilize Marilyn Monroe's 'icon' status.

Tecumseh's father, Elvin, creates works of art in the form of tourist souvenirs; his is a commodity-based vision of art. He carves small wooden coyotes by the dozen because "Everybody's going crazy over traditional Indian stuff. I figure I can sell these for fifty bucks as fast as I can make them" (King, *Truth* 33). Tecumseh picks up a carving and notes that "there isn't much to it. Just wood and two tiny black stones for the eyes. On the bottom of

the coyote, my father has signed his name. 'You got to do that,' he says, 'so they know it's authentic'" (King, *Truth* 33). Elvin recognizes the profit potential of giving tourists so-called 'authentic' Native art.

Elvin's wooden animals become the curios that many tourists expect from First Nations cultures. Graeme Chalmers, in his article "European Ways of Talking about the Art of the Northwest Coast First Nations," writes about this phenomenon as a historically-based tradition. This process commodified First Nations art; it "could not be valuable because curios were expected, and are still expected, to be inexpensive" (Chalmers 115). Based on this theory, Elvin's art will never be valued as 'real' art because he is merely churning out the figurines that will be sold inexpensively to tourists. He is using authenticity as a product.

Even Franklin, Tecumseh's uncle, is an artist. Much like Elvin, he focuses on the tourist trade. Franklin's art, like Lucy Rabbit's Monroe impersonation, is a piece of performance, not a concrete rendering. For Indian Days, Franklin brings in motorcycles with sidecars that the tourists can use to chase down buffalo and shoot them with paint guns. This activity is meant to recapture the feeling of historic Native hunting rituals (albeit with

certain technological advancements), and "provid[e] opportunities for tourists to take pictures and revel in the thrill of such confrontations" (Davidson et al. 188). Franklin's role in Indian Days becomes a piece of performance art that, on one level commodifies Native culture, but on another reframes the tourist trade on Native terms. Whether Franklin knows it or not, he is subverting traditional assumptions about First Nations culture. As an artist, Franklin is subversively challenging preconceived notions that some tourists might have about Native cultures, namely that all Natives are warriors who hunt buffalo, even to this current time. As Allen J. Ryan argues:

in the same way that Native authors use ironic strategies to contest oppressive hegemonic ideologies...visual artists employ trickster tactics to undermine institutional practice and expectation, breaking from formula and breaking out of program in ways both familiar and radically unknown. (92)

Franklin is playing up stereotypes of Native history as a comment (at least on King's part) on the "cultural tourism" (Ryan 161) in which many of the visitors to Indian Days partake.

This shared interest in artistry is one of the threads that bind the communities of Truth and Bright Water together. The artists in the novel are all seeking to bring out the truth in the world around them, whether on an individual or communal basis. Helen tells her life story, which also becomes the community's story; Elvin tries to make a living from his art, using the tourists' naïveté to sell his curios, thus showing that he is aware of what he is doing; and Franklin also uses the tourists to make money, in essence making the joke on them. On a literary level, King is using the written word, in the form of this novel, to illustrate how truth is, at times, an elusive and shifting concept.

In his essay "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," King discusses the fluid nature of what is considered 'truth,' as he strives to create new theories that are potentially better able to describe the multiplicity of truths that are often seen in First Nations literature. He develops four new categories with which to discuss Native literature: tribal, interfusional, polemical, and associational. In order to demonstrate the necessity of these new categories, it is essential to first discuss some of the many reasons behind the construction of Western-based philosophical traditions. These Western traditions inform much of

Western academic scholarship and it is important to note that cultural relativism complicates Post-Colonial theory.

Cultural relativism necessarily implies that what is valued as 'truth' depends on cultural perspective. Absolute truth is therefore deemed impossible and truth then becomes an individual belief which, though based on what one has internalized from one's cultural origin and ideologies, is further governed by personal interpretation. For many in academia, the basis for interpretation lies firmly in the Western tradition. Classical Western philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle have seen art, including literature, as a means of imitating nature in an objective, material form, in an attempt to discover the essential qualities and values of human life. Plato desired certainty; he was searching for "a reality that was absolute, fixed and perfect" (Strauch 10). In what he saw as the "absolute reality" (Strauch 11) of his ideal world of forms, Plato found his absolute order, but it could not be translated to the real world of human earth; the ideal realm became yet another abstraction of value.

Aristotle believed that poetry could present universal truths that would touch the reader in some way (Strauch 10). Of course, what touches us, or what we believe to be truth can be a culturally relative concept. Jan Vansina

notes that "historical truth is ...a notion that is culturally specific" (129); in the Native tradition a belief in the multiplicity of truths that can shift around and through each other is predominant. Emma LaRocque, in her essay "Teaching Aboriginal Literature," notes that Aboriginal writers are:

'pushing margins,' crossing boundaries and cultures, disciplines and genres, and we do not fit the standard patterns of both western and nativist pressures. But just because we are on the cutting-edge of cultures and boundaries does not mean we are abandoning our Native-specific heritage with its substantial and particular worldview(s) and knowledge base(s). (227)

In these traditions, truths and values are passed on from the mouths of ancestors in the form of oral storytelling; the multiplicity inherent in First Nations cultural and literary traditions creates space to showcase the many differences both between First Nations tribal groups and between First Nations groups and other cultures. In this manner, the listener is then able to glean wisdom from the many stories in First Nations traditions that subsequently become valuable on an individual, personal level.

In a fashion, in *Truth & Bright Water*, Thomas King subscribes to the idea that fiction can lead the reader to a greater comprehension of the world. Though the novel is not concerned with presenting a single archetypal moral, culturally relative moral codes can be accessed indirectly through the artistry of the quilt's images. As author, King touches his reader with the minutiae of daily life; he makes the reader grapple with the significance of his or her own daily life.

The problem with the concept of universal meaning lies in the simple fact that no meaning can be universal; truth varies from culture to culture and person to person. Through the principles of cultural relativism, new avenues of thought opened up, creating space for a multiplicity of potential truths. Post-structural theorists unsettled fixed concepts of truth in Western academia, and Post-colonial theorists applied those unsettlings to constructions of culture, race, and ethnicity. The term Post-Colonial itself is a broad term that covers "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft et al. 2). This is, at best, a problematic definition. It requires that a particular group of cultures, such as those of the First Nations, be defined in opposition to another; as a group,

they are therefore always labeled as 'Other'. In his article "Sounds of Change: Dissonance, History, and Cultural Listening," Ajay Heble considers how:

subordinated social groups have struggled to achieve control over the ways in which their histories, identities, and epistemologies have been constructed, framed, and (mis)interpreted by dominant representations in the public sphere.

(27)

In order to take themselves out of the category of 'Other,' in which they have been placed historically, First Nations people must reframe the context of their position in the global community. Artists such as Thomas King try to redefine the parameters of First Nations culture in terms that cast Native peoples in roles that take into account their culture and knowledge base apart from the restrictions of colonial power and oppression.

Native cultures are, in the Western literary tradition, often situated in the role of exotic other; they are subjugated to the beliefs and values of Western, non-Native cultures, or seen in opposition to Western cultural constructions. However, post-colonial theorist John McLeod notes in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism*, that "the act of reading in postcolonial contexts is by no means a

neutral activity. *How we read is just as important as what we read*" (33). Awareness of possible constructions of difference can allow the reader to move beyond them.

Thomas King counters the positioning of First Nations peoples as 'Other' with his four vantage points from which to approach First Nations literature. In his article "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," King coins four new terms to describe the literature of the First Nations peoples that he hopes more accurately describe the differing ways in which First Nations authors write. With the advent of these theoretical terms, it is now possible to understand how First Nations writers employ methods that convey their traditions. Most importantly, these terms also position Native literature so that it can no longer merely be labeled as the writings of the 'Other' by Post-Colonial theorists.

The literatures of Post-Colonial nations, including those of the Canadian First Nations, often speak out against the experience of colonization. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin note in their book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* note, some Native works of literature:

emerged in their present form out of the
experience of colonization and asserted

themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. (2)

These differences between cultures imply the existence of multiple truths; in these works of literature, the arena of discourse has been modified to foreground the realities of Native cultures. Truth changes according to the forums in which the author and reader operate and depends upon which particular details are the focus of discussion; truth is "what counts as true within a system of rules for a particular discourse" (Ashcroft et al. 167). As the discourse is modified, a multitude of "truths" are layered on each other, just as Tecumseh's mother, Helen, creates the many layers of the quilt's narrative.

In his article "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," Thomas King speaks to the idea that in working from a site of free expression, such as from one of the four categories King posits for Native literature, indigenous writers can craft artistic works that are created with the freedom to represent their own cultural traditions, values, and beliefs. These new voices would place them distinctly in a new forum, one in which their voices more accurately reflect the many traditions and values of their own

cultures. He also confronts the assumptions that the term "Post-colonial" makes about First Nations people and literature. King points out that the term Post-Colonial: assumes that the starting point for that discussion [about the oppressed-oppressor relationship] is the advent of Europeans in North America. . . it also assumes that the struggle between guardian and ward is the catalyst for contemporary Native literature, providing those of us who write with method and topic. And, worst of all, the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization, and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression. (King, "Godzilla" 12)

King's argument here is persuasive, and he, as a Native writer, cannot find a place for himself within traditional Post-Colonial parameters. As previously mentioned, King proposes four new terms to describe the First Nations literary tradition: "tribal," "interfusalional," "polemical," and "associational." These terms allow for a variety of meaning, a multiplicity of truths, and perhaps a more

fitting way to describe the cultural literatures of First Nations peoples. These new labels are not intended to be permanent; they are merely "vantage points from which we can see a particular literary landscape" (King, "Godzilla" 12). Unlike the labels of colonial and post-colonial literature, these new terms allow room for the existence of both common ground and difference in literature.

Debra Dudek notes in her article "Begin With the Text: Aboriginal Literatures and Postcolonial Theories," that Post-Colonialism is a "fluid and contentious term" (91) and I believe that the same statement could be made of King's new literary categories. Just as Post-Colonialism is a label that attempts to place each text in a neat little box, so too do King's four categories. His terms focus specifically on Native literatures, and although he does acknowledge the potential for some blurring of the lines, his are exclusionary and arbitrary categories as well. Dudek argues that the best way to begin to move beyond rigorous and exclusionary lines is to:

continually attempt to complicate postcolonial discussions, to introduce concerns that many Indigenous writers have with the term *postcolonial*, to give postcolonial contexts while simultaneously attempting to teach, for example,

Cree literatures, to trouble categories such as Canadian literature and Native literatures, to be open to those unguarded pedagogical moments, to see the possibility of theory as both arising from and responding to a text, then students will more fully understand that any singular approach to reading a text, and specifically a text written by an Indigenous writer, is not the only way to hear stories being told. (103-4)

King's four categories provide new ways to examine First Nations literature; they insist that the reader recognize cultural differences and inherent gaps of comprehension between cultures. Thus, King's terms create spaces in which First Nations culture and literature can be examined within their own contexts.

Though I will be focusing my thesis through the lens of associational literature, a brief synopsis of King's other terms is necessary to place the discussion in its proper context. Tribal literature exists primarily within the community, and is often written in a Native language. The language barrier makes this type of literature difficult for cultural outsiders to access, and is perhaps an intentional barrier. King notes that people "in some cases—the Hopi come to mind—take great pains in limiting

access to parts of their literature only to members of their immediate community" (King, "Godzilla" 13).

Polemical literature is concerned with the clash of Native and non-Native cultures and the means of resistance that Native writers use to retain their cultural values. King defines interfusional as the blending of the oral and written traditions that uses an oral syntax that lends itself to an oral reading of the text.¹

The fourth, and—for my purposes—most significant category, associational literature, often describes daily life within a Native community, without focusing on the clash between the cultures. It also de-values the need for a protagonist, instead looking at the lives of many members of a community (King, "Godzilla" 14). Associational literature, according to King, performs a variety of tasks for both Native and non-Native peoples. It does not glamorize tribal life, nor does it hold it up to potential ridicule or scorn. Non-Native readers are allowed a limited view of the Native world, but are not encouraged to feel included in it. In the simplest terms, associational literature allows each reader to make his or her own associations according to his or her personal level of

¹ Rather than provide citations for each individual definition, I refer you to King's article "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial." *World Literature Written in English* 30(2):1990, 12-14

access to knowledge about Native culture and community life. Each reader views the literature through his or her own personal lens; culture, personal history, and his or her connection to the world at large all influence his or her reading of the text. As such, each interpretation depends upon the reader's stance from either inside or outside the cultural context of the literature.

Although King holds that First Nations literature is accessible to non-Native readers only to a limited point, the definition of associational literature by its very nature allows me to associate my own experiences with the literature. As a female, non-Native reader, I look at the literature through the lens of my own personal history, my relationship with First Nations writing and culture, and my academic experiences.

My first exposure to the writing of Thomas King came in the form of an undergraduate literary theory course in which we studied *Green Grass, Running Water*. At first, his writing style proved elusive, and I had to read the novel several times. Interpreting the novel was a frustrating process that made clear the fact that I was definitely an outsider to First Nations culture.

The many nuances and traditional stories and images were difficult to access, but I did have access to many of

the literary and biblical reference that King uses. The fact that my professor was willing to retrace her steps time and time again made my eventual comprehension of the novel easier. The fact that it was a theory course allowed us to explore the novel from a number of different angles, in particular, through discourse analysis. This allowed me to see how King was using the various institutionalized discourses to create an analytical discussion.

From this introduction to his work, I proceeded to read King's other works, both fiction and non-fiction, and when it came time to make a decision about the subject of my Master's thesis, I realized that I needed to choose a text that could hold my interest for the period of a year (well, a year and a half now). King's writing is rife with undercurrents that can only be glimpsed through lengthy engagement with the text. Even now, I am finding subtle nuances in *Truth & Bright Water*, and I expect to continue to find new nuances each time I return to the text.

As King notes, I, as a non-Native person, am not privy to the intricacies of First Nations culture and traditions and therefore many of the deeper, philosophical meanings of associational literatures remain hidden from me. As he puts it, I am allowed "to associate with that world without being encouraged to feel a part of it" ("Godzilla" 14). On

first reading, the tone of this sentence was a little off-putting to me. It seems as if King is casting me firmly into the category of 'Other'; amusingly enough, this is precisely the criticism he makes of Colonial theorists. Renée Hulan, in her article "Some Thoughts on 'Integrity and Intent' and Teaching Native Literature," writes about the importance of acknowledging one's own subject position with regard to Native literature: "Distinguishing between 'knowing' and 'appropriating' requires understanding that there is always a close relationship between 'speaking for' and 'speaking about' others" (220). In this context, King appears to want to make it clear, and rightly so, that I am as much an outsider within First Nations culture as First Nations people are within mine.

I make my own associations while standing outside First Nations culture, but that does not mean that I cannot gain insight from First Nations literature or that I do not have anything to share with First Nations peoples. I might not have access to specific lived experiences that are available only through a Native cultural association, but just as there are many levels of narrative in the novel, there are also an infinite number of levels of comprehension available to readers. I, as reader and interpreter who stands outside First Nations culture, am

able to present my unique positioning with regard to First Nations literature. My theoretical training and personal lived experiences allow me to use my knowledge about First Nations culture as a starting point from which to begin accessing the text. I am therefore able to present an entirely different group of associations that can enhance the academic literature regarding First Nations literature.

Associational literature retains many qualities that are inherent in traditional First Nations oral storytelling, such as the ever-changing focus of consecutive tales and the freedom of the listener/reader to arrive at his or her own personal interpretation of the facts of the story. In her Master's thesis, *Reading tricksters or tricksters reading?*, Doris O'Brien looks at the role of the reader in Thomas King's novels and asserts that:

Every intertextual element acts as a marker for the reader for his/her own self-awareness, and also for the critic to determine what King's assumptions are and who he is writing for, since King must assume that a reader will understand the conventions and experiences he writes in the novel (21).

The reader is given textual signs that he or she can read, but King also "allows the reader to maintain his/her own sense of self while reading" (O'Brien 95). In this manner, the reader, whether from within or outside First Nations culture can bring his or her own personal interpretation to the reading of the novel; each reader will therefore enhance the scholarship of the novel by providing ideas that might open up the text of the novel in new ways.

In this openness, King replicates the fluidity of oral storytelling. Arnold Krupat argues that, in Native oral traditions, "the core message will remain throughout the generations, but the unfixed nature of the oral tradition is what differentiates it from the written tradition" (118). Even though the details of the story might change, the Native reader can still access the philosophical core of the story. The blending of oral and written traditions lets the author tell a culturally specific story of community that can be accessed by all readers, at least to some extent, no matter what their culture of origin.

King's 1999 novel *Truth & Bright Water* is a prime example of this type of associational literature, a claim with which Jennifer Andrews agrees. In her review of *Truth & Bright Water*, "Making Associations," Andrews writes that:

in *Truth & Bright Water*, King clearly reasserts himself as an author of associational literature, creating a picture of a community that is forceful in its critique of nationalist politics and, at the same time, less interested in overturning the foundations of white, Western culture. (151)

Associational literature tells a tale of daily life, all the while incorporating traditional First Nations beliefs and the multi-layering of meaning that can often be gleaned from First Nations traditions, even by outsiders to the cultures.

In his article "Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature," Basil H. Johnston notes the presence of three levels of meaning that can be found in his Ojibway language, and, by extrapolation, in First Nations literature. These include the surface meaning that can be easily understood, a secondary fundamental meaning that can be gleaned from the etymology of a story or term, and the deeper philosophical meaning that underlies both (107).

Johnston observes that:

Language and literature are inseparable, though they are too often taught as separate entities. They belong together. In my tribal language, all

words have three levels of meaning; there is the surface meaning that everyone instantly understands. Beneath this meaning is a more fundamental meaning derived from the prefixes and their combinations with other terms. Underlying both is the philosophical meaning. (107)

In terms of a piece of literature, these levels of meaning would correspond with the surface level—the plot structure and characters, the individual component parts—the literary devices which provide a metaphoric secondary meaning, and the dialogue that exists between all of these elements and the reader—the interpretation of the elements in conjunction with the reader's association to the cultural history and values of the First Nations.

When these three levels of meaning are applied to King's *Truth & Bright Water*, a multi-layered discourse is apparent. This discourse provides a framework in which to describe the function of the quilt in the novel. At the first level, the quilt is a source of warmth, a utilitarian object. The secondary level would correspond with the quilt's representation of the towns of Truth and Bright Water. At this level, the reader could look at the way in which each scrap of fabric was joined to the quilt, and in relation to other scraps. The third and final level would

represent the discursive context of the quilt's images. Not all readers will reach an understanding of this third level of meaning (for example, Elvin does not), but in each image or representation on the quilt, the reader has another opportunity to get a better sense of the narrative's broader meaning.

Associational literature combines these three levels of meaning, and offers varying access according to the reader's position with regard to First Nations language and cultural traditions. Outsiders to the culture, such as myself, might understand the surface and secondary meanings of such a work, but those within the culture, those with access to generations of unspoken cultural associations might have access to the deeper fundamental meanings that are culturally specific.

In the Western tradition, quilt-making is a craft that is over six thousand years old and: "Originally, quilts were made for the purely utilitarian purposes of warmth and protection, and only much later, as quilting developed into a folk art, were intricate designs introduced" (Garner 1). As folk art, quilt designs became more intricate; patterns, geometrical shapes, and iconic imagery began to be used in quilt-making to create narratives and representations of life. Patchwork quilts are created from scraps of

material, including old clothing and blankets. Historical information places the introduction of patchwork quilting to Native crafters in the early nineteenth century (Feest 151). As in the Western tradition, Native-made quilts were first objects of utility and became art objects over time.

With the advent of folk art quilts came the idea that quilts are texts that can be read (Woods 21). Standard patterns were created to mark special occasions such as weddings and births. The patterns on the quilts became stories themselves, reflecting the history of a family or a place. Textiles became non-verbal texts that came to be "associated with the representations of history, both as a concept and as a narrative account of the past" (Murray 65).

In the context of associational literature, both the structure of the novel and the quilt that Tecumseh's mother, Helen, creates provide information. The reader gains an understanding of the whole by first reading the individual pieces: the individual chapters of the novel, or the elements of the quilt's design. Margaret Rogerson, in her article "Reading the Patchworks in *Alias Grace*," writes that both types of narrative are created in much the same way:

The symbolic equivalence of the activities of assembling a patchwork and writing a literary text is virtually self-evident: a patchworker selects small pieces of fabric and sews them together to make a whole; and a writer begins with ideas or images and eventually produces a finished text. (13)

This explanation works especially well with associational literature's method of presenting snapshots of life. Each of the images is not fully explained; the reader must piece together the information to come to an interpretation. In this way, the reader is given many different images and is allowed to see the interaction of the community instead of getting a narrow vision of a single character's life. This process works in opposition to the linear plot of a traditional Western novel.

The individual images on the patchwork surface of the quilt function in a similar way to the snapshots of associational literature; in different combinations these images tell parts of the community's story that would otherwise be inaccessible. The ways in which these associations come alive for each reader depend on his or her degree of connection with First Nations culture.

The images of the quilt create a secondary level of understanding in that they provide parts of the back-story to the characters' lives. The quilt tells the story of Tecumseh's mother's life, and as she works on the quilt, she makes new associations with each new addition. Other characters view the quilt's images, and subsequently make their own associations based on their comprehension of the details of history and the images on the quilt.

This multi-layering of meaning in *Truth & Bright Water* occurs through an exchange that exists both on an overt level of narrative, and on a subtextual level. The parallels between King's literary narrative and the embedded narrative of the quilt—as seen in its pattern and materials—reinforce and re-explore the past and present stories of the novel's characters. The characters in the novel read the images of the quilt in order to find its meaning, and this act is paralleled by the reading of the novel itself by readers. This weaving of the levels of text allows each individual reader to see a snapshot of First Nations life, a picture that is open to change with each successive reading. The dialogue that occurs between the levels of meaning is an act of personal interpretation; each reader, of the quilt or the novel, operates according to the particular ideologies that govern his or her

thinking. In the case of *Truth & Bright Water*, those with access to cultural information (Native readers, in this case) will be better able to comprehend the significances, and the non-Native reader will be kept at a distance. In various combinations, the multiple layers of narrative tell different stories, all depending on the amount of information to which the character or reader already has access.

In *Truth & Bright Water*, the narrative Tecumseh's mother creates with the quilt and the overt textual story of community life each share with the reader bits of information; each narrative also has an agenda—each is trying to present a particular aspect of truth. The even more confusing part is that the images of the quilt are constantly changing, and therefore, so is the message Helen is trying to send. In representing memories from the past, images of the quilt have the power to keep the stories in the present.

The communication between the quilt's narrative and the textual narrative allows for a relationship between past, present, and future. In "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," King notes that associational literature reminds the Native reader of the:

continuing values of our cultures, and it reinforces the notion that, in addition to the usable past that the concurrence of oral literature and traditional history provide us with, we also have an active present marked by cultural tenacity and a viable future which may well organize itself around major revivals of language, philosophy, and spiritualism. (14)

The construction of the quilt gives insight into the past, as when Tecumseh's mother sews an old picture of her sister and herself onto the quilt, thus preserving the memory, if only for a short time. More importantly, her reworking of the quilt also leaves open the possibility of change and advancement; she can alter the story with each new addition to the quilt. Patrick O'Neill argues that "One of the most obvious tasks of narrative discourse is clearly to select and arrange various events and participants constituting the story it sets out to tell" (33). At any given point, Tecumseh's mother chooses the arrangement of information, but once stitched onto the quilt, its interpretation is out of her hands. O'Neill writes that:

Discourse for narratologists means the *intratextual* discourse that shapes the telling and thus the meaning of the story told. But this

is clearly not the whole story, for the meaning of a text continually changes as the context of its reception changes. (120)

Discourse is a communication, and the information Helen puts in the quilt is subsequently assessed by its readers—both the characters and readers of the novel. The task for the reader then becomes deciding what, according to personal associations and the ideologies under which the reader operates, to make of the quilt's icons. For example, Tecumseh has a different level of access to the images of the quilt because he and his mother share a history and he has personal knowledge of the origin of some of the items and scraps Helen includes.

The traditional items on the quilt, including porcupine quills and feathers, keep the traditional First Nations crafts in the aesthetic eye both of those characters who view the quilt and of each individual reader. This type of continuity is exactly what King means when he explains that associational literature "reinforces the notion that...we [First Nations people] also have an active present marked by cultural tenacity and a viable future which may well organize itself around major revivals of language, philosophy, and spiritualism" ("Godzilla" 14). These types of items, whether of mythical, historical, or

cultural value, hold long-standing meaning for First Nations peoples. For example, the porcupine quills are thought by members of the Blackfoot Nation to bring "purity, strength, health, and prosperity" (Gill and Sullivan 249) to the recipient. The spiritual nature of the community thrives when the traditions of the past are kept alive.

Truth is a fluid concept in First Nations ideology; it changes with each telling of the story. This evolution does not imply that truth is lost along the way, but rather that the focus on what it is that is important changes through time. Art is a metaphoric truth that is concerned with general concepts rather than precise instructions for interpretation; the reader is expected to interpret the basic message of a work and make it relevant for himself or herself. When asked, for example, to picture a tree, no one envisions exactly the same one; the vision depends on what kinds of trees we have actually experienced in our lives. Interpretation "takes place in ever-changing contexts" (van Peer 341); we each live in the moment of experience, but are also changed by each previous experience.

In *Truth & Bright Water*, the narrative of the quilt provides an alternative forum in which the reader can

interpret the many disparate facts and stories King presents to the reader. When events in the novel, both those said and unsaid, are examined through the lens of their re-telling on the quilt, each individual reader gains access to a less, or at least differently, fractured version of the story. In turn, the reader's experience in reading the quilt can be translated to many other realms of art. Not only can we now come to a more complete interpretation of the novel, but we can also carry our new found knowledge to the larger picture—to First Nations art and literature as a whole. This is not to say that understanding the minutiae of the quilt will miraculously lead to an instantaneous and total comprehension of the reason behind every type of art. Instead, the reading skills acquired when learning to read the quilt allow for the possibility of leading the reader down the path to a better understanding of First Nations culture and artistic expression.

A better understanding of First Nations culture is perhaps what King had in mind when writing this novel. He incorporates not only dual levels of narrative—the quilt and the literal narrative—but also instances of other sites of reclamation as well. Monroe Swimmer is an artist whose projects focus on righting what he sees as the wrongs

committed against First Nations people by colonialist powers; he stocks the Prairie with buffalo decoys, paints away the old mission church, and adds Native peoples back into old paintings. These reclamation projects reflect King's desire to acknowledge and reclaim First Nations peoples' place in history.

Native art is often thought to be "mystical and legend bound" (Ryan 3), but Native artists and scholars are, of late, trying to shift the critical focus to a recognition of "the active spirit of the traditional Native trickster" (Ryan 3). The trickster is a subversive character who is able to manipulate the world; he forces people to challenge their preconceptions. Ojibway artist Carl Beam calls this a 'Trickster shift': "the ultimate goal of which is a radical shift in the viewer perspective and even political positioning by imagining and imaging alternative viewpoints" (Ryan 5). King highlights these alternate viewpoints by paralleling the narratives of the quilt and the text in *Truth & Bright Water*, which, in turn, increases the potential for multiple interpretations. Each subtle shift in view creates a parallel shift in meaning; the two discourses operate together and, in snapshot form, provide active glimpses of the reality of Native life.

Art thus becomes another means of communication:

Niklas Luhmann notes that "the function of art...is to make the world appear within the world" (149). This is exactly what Tecumseh's mother does with her quilt: she creates an abstract version of her world in the appliqués of the quilt. Interestingly enough, her personal discourse with the quilt continues as she alters the shapes and images of the quilt.

Traditionally, "bedcovers are a metaphor for life...they envelop, enclose, and enfold" (M'Closkey and Morey 18). In *Truth & Bright Water*, the quilt performs the same function; it is a figurative womb that maintains a sense of community without curtailing potential for change. The story of the quilt is just as fluid as the story of the community's life; people leave the community, return as Cassie does, and grow up within the confines of Truth and the quilt, as Tecumseh does. Life in the community constantly evolves, and because of this fluidity, the narratives of the community member's lives evolve as well.

In the context of narrative, the quilt provides an alternate form of media for the exploration of truth. Narrative communication thus works both on textual and metaphoric levels, and the discourse between the two presents a view that is at once literal and interpretive.

In writing about the open nature of narrative interpretation, Didier Coste asserts that "all media can, in principle, serve as vectors of narrative" (275). Media can control the flow of information and direct it so that it influences a reader's opinion. Tecumseh's mother's quilt has the potential to change the flow of the story as needed so that the community-based feel of First Nations oral storytelling is now rendered in a concrete narrative base that works in conjunction with the literal text. Each reader is then charged with the task of listening, with creating a personal association that leads to an interpretation of his or her own.

I will be focusing on the same strands in each chapter: the times when the characters, especially Tecumseh, Elvin, Lum, and Cassie are interacting with or examining the quilt. I will pay particular attention to the entirety of Chapter Eight, which is devoted to a lengthy description of the quilt's images. These scenes will be covered from many angles, thus showing how meaning is fluid and cannot be held to a singular, stagnant, concrete truth.

In the first chapter, I will discuss how the quilt, as a secondary level of narrative, adds meaning to the overt level of the literary narrative. I will also include a

discussion of how King, as an artist, just like the other characters, creates indigenous truths in the novel. Tecumseh's mother, as creator, forms the quilt to tell the story of her life, but it has the perhaps unintentional side-effect of providing Helen's family members with an insight into the history of their community. By reading the quilt, the reader is able to garner a more comprehensive knowledge of the events in the lives of the community members. This information, in turn, increases the potential for coming to a multitude of interpretations.

Chapter Two will focus on the indeterminacy of meaning that is implied by the concept of associational literature and by the mutable nature of the flowing Bright Water. I will discuss why this indeterminacy is important to First Nations literature and how King is able to open the novel up to a multiplicity of meanings.

In the third and final chapter, I will discuss the concepts of comfort and danger as they are seen in the quilt. I will then expand the focus to include a discussion of the function of art and First Nations literature in more general terms, with special notice paid to the ways in which the novel might provide the same comfort and be open to the same sorts of danger as Helen's quilt and Swimmer's projects. This discussion will also

consider that the acts of reclamation and the preservation of memory might also be dangerous acts.

In First Nations culture, meaning is fluid and rife with the potential for multiple interpretations. Truth becomes not just some abstract and stagnant concept that is set in stone, but a tradition that is as fluid as the wandering waters of the Shield River. Even though the river divides the towns of Truth and Bright Water, it is also the life-giving element that holds them together.

Chapter One

Truth & History

The landscape of the quilt in *Truth & Bright Water* parallels the textual form of the novel; its seemingly scattered images come together to form an abstract version of the communities of Truth and Bright Water. This abstraction parallels the novel's representation of the abstract nature of truth; details are carefully placed about the narrative and become significant only when formed into a cohesive whole by a reader. The abstract nature of the quilt's images arises from the way in which the 'truth' of the details changes depending on the focus and perception of their reader.

This chapter will focus on the ways in which the patterns and images of the quilt mirror the events of the novel itself, and more importantly, the ways in which the quilt allows its readers to read the past as narrative. Finally, I will explore the connection between reclamation and truth, focusing on Tecumseh's mother's reworking of personal history and Monroe Swimmer's larger attempts at cultural reclamation.

Tecumseh's mother, Helen, uses the medium of quilting to express her re-visioning of her life because it is a medium that provides crafters (particularly women), an arena that can be both useful and personally expressive. Quilts use remnants from daily life, items that have often been used by the crafter's family or community. Craig Douglas Dworkin notes that:

Quilts [are] thought of as autobiographies not only because they [are] the products of substantial daily labor, but also because their subject matter was often quite literally composed of remainders of the artist's daily life (work clothes, daily wear, fancy dress) and reminders of the important occasions of that life (crib swaddling, wedding dress, mourning gown). These textiles, drawn from the clothes of people close to the quilter, transform the quilt into a text.

(60)

Helen uses not only the clothing that holds particular significance for her, but also items such as stones, feathers, quills, and the like, thus making her quilt into an art form that is markedly autobiographical and representative of her life and community. Thomas King includes the quilt as a secondary layer of narrative

precisely because, in the Native storytelling tradition, there is no singular, linear narrative line. Helen's quilt is the medium through which King presents the reader with options; it is up to the reader to make sense of these facts.

In keeping with King's concept of associational literature, I will detail how the scattered images of the quilt reinforce the experiences of the novel's characters. As individual items, the images of the quilt make little sense, but once they are put in a larger context, both within the quilt and within the novel itself, their association to the textual narrative becomes apparent.

Jace Weaver notes that First Nations oral storytelling traditions are charged with the task of being "a powerful builder and unifier of community" (47). They allow a community's history to be spread, thus keeping traditions alive: "By transmitting specific cultural knowledge, with its specific meanings and messages, it [the oral storytelling tradition] helped strengthen tribal identity and provided for its continuity" (Weaver 47). Though oral literature is a means to transmit cultural ideologies, once spoken, it is the listener who determines the meaning of the text and the subsequent cultural meanings according to his or her personal connection to a culture.

A single item might seem to hold a fixed meaning, but it also carries with it the associated memories of each of its readers. Tecumseh's mother constantly reworks the story of the quilt. She removes, adds, and places layers on top of sections of the quilt in her own personal reinterpretation of her own and the community's history. In this fashion, the quilt becomes what, in traditional quilt-making, is called a "pictorial autobiography" (M'Closkey and Morey 3) that enables Tecumseh's mother to piece together various events in her life, so that she, and the quilt's readers, might try to make sense of them.

Traditional quilts are "generally divided into three main groups" (M'Closkey and Morey 5): plain, appliqué, and pieced or patchwork. The quilt in *Truth & Bright Water* is a blend of patchwork and appliqué, albeit a decidedly unorthodox form of appliqué. In a patchwork quilt, "straight-edged or curved bits of fabric stitched together mosaic fashion form patterns, blocks and borders" (M'Closkey and Morey 5). On Tecumseh's mother's quilt, these are the "squares and triangles and circles of cloth" (King, *Truth* 63) that form its geometric pattern and subsequent abstraction of the towns of Truth and Bright Water.

Appliqué quilts have "a top made of whole cloth in which shapes cut from other contrasting fabrics are stitched down, and the blank areas between the appliqués are often quilted in a decorative pattern" (M'Closkey and Morey 5). On top of the basic landscape mosaic, Tecumseh's mother uses a variety of items to express the details of her environment and community. She includes potentially dangerous items such as fish hooks and needles to express her anger or sadness about her past. Both fish hooks and needles have practical uses but they are also sharp instruments capable of inflicting pain. The cluster of needles, while potentially harmful, can, according to Tecumseh, also be beautiful, thus indicating Tecumseh's mother's confusion as to her ever-changing reflections on her history. The needles can be seen symbolically as double-edged swords that perhaps reflect Helen's fluctuating emotions about her past.

The quilt is a means for Tecumseh's mother to deal with and accept the events of her life. She recreates her community on the quilt in order to have a forum in which to explore her version of history. The basic form of the quilt includes a geographic element—symbolic representations of the towns of Truth and Bright Water. This depiction of the towns indicates that the narrative of

the quilt will concern the lives and actions of those living in the two communities. Tecumseh's mother is situating her personal history firmly within the confines of the two towns.

King provides little information about the quilt until Chapter Eight, which is a short two-page chapter that focuses entirely on the quilt. The chapter both fleshes out the quilt's physical construction and sheds light on potential meanings within the patterns; it lists many of the objects that appear on the quilt. Those first basic shapes on the quilt soon evolve into a more complicated pattern that begins to tell a story:

The geometric forms slowly softened and turned into freehand patterns that looked a lot like trees and mountains and people and animals, and before long, my father said you could see Truth in one corner of the quilt and Bright Water in the other with the Shield flowing through the fabrics in tiny diamonds and fancy stitching.

(King, *Truth* 63)

The collage of traditional quilting patterns and odd bits and pieces come together to create what M'Closkey and Morey term an abstract landscape (11). This technique is often seen in traditional quilt making, and on Tecumseh's

mother's quilt, the abstraction resolves into an image of Truth and Bright Water, as well as of the people of the community.

This chapter of the novel also introduces the concept of the quilt as a potential source of danger, and hints at the reasons for the inclusion of such a wide variety of items on its surface. This quilt is constructed partly of traditional quilting patterns and partly of eclectic additions:

Along with the squares and triangles and circles of cloth that have been sewn together, patterns with names like Harvest Star, and Sunshine and Shadow, and Sunburst, my mother has also fastened unexpected things to the quilt, such as the heavy metal washers that run along the outside edges and the clusters of needles that she has worked into the stitching just below the fish hooks and the chickens' feathers. (King, *Truth* 63)

The core of Helen's quilt is inlaid with traditional quilting patterns that provide the background of the quilt's design. The geometric shapes of these patterns provide a sense of unity to the quilt that can be extrapolated to include the community as well. Their repetitive pattern provides a basic linear connection

between the images she later includes on the quilt. The strange household objects and hardware Tecumseh's mother includes on the quilt provide the details that begin to flesh out the story of her life and also begin to distinguish this quilt from traditional forms.

On a personal level, Tecumseh's mother uses the narrative of the quilt to express her own interpretation of history. The quilt is Helen's personal political statement; it is a means for her to put the events of her life in perspective. By contemplating past events while she includes the artifacts of her life on the quilt, Helen is better able to accept the path her life has taken. Along with traditional quilting patterns, Helen includes mementos of events, and items that express her emotions about times in her life that are significant, both for herself and for those around her. In turn, her son, Tecumseh interprets the pattern of the quilt for the reader. This dis-associative technique, which creates space for multiple levels of interpretation, is a starting point for exploring King's theory of associational literature; there is plenty of room for the many threads of narrative to co-exist. Subsequently, each of these interpretations are equally valid and true; Tecumseh's mother intends to tell one story, but each of the quilt's readers pick out

different details that he or she use to form his or her own interpretation. This freedom to interpret the quilt does not mean that the readers are missing the point, because as soon as pen meets paper, or needle meets fabric, authorial intention is no longer as relevant. Though First Nations writers and theorists acknowledge that there must be a core message that transfers from author to reader (such as the wisdom passed down through the oral storytelling tradition), the path the reader takes to that message is variable. Discourse, as in that between the levels of narrative, can be "*reflexively layered* in terms of significance meant to be conveyed and the meanings meant to be elicited" (Perinbanayagam 109), but it simply cannot be controlled. In an attempt to tell a particular story, Helen can include specific objects and designs on the quilt that she believes will generate a certain response, but in the end, the quilt's narrative can only be read on an individual basis.

The first mention of the quilt occurs in Chapter Two when Tecumseh wakes to find his mother in the kitchen, cutting up an old shirt. At first, the reader is not aware that these scraps are intended to be part of a quilt; it is only in retrospect that the reader can see the significance of both the choice of material and its history. This was

Elvin's shirt, one he left behind when he left the family years ago. In traditional quilt-making, the use of fabric scraps is a means of maintaining a connection with the past:

The use of fabric scraps from clothing worn by family or traded with friends, embodied a spiritual and emotional dimension non-existent in other art. The creation of textiles often marked important milestones: birth and infancy, childhood and school, then marriage, friendship and community, and of course religion, and ultimately, death. (M'Closkey and Morey 9)

Tecumseh's mother marks such events in retrospect, rather than in celebration; she is telling the entirety of her story in the collage of the quilt. It is up to the reader to decide if this is a sentimental or a melancholic act.

Tecumseh's mother is cutting up a shirt that "is blue with thin red stripes" (King, *Truth* 17), which belonged to Tecumseh's father. Again, these few small details cannot at this point tell the whole story, but throughout the novel there are enough recurring themes and colours that the reader can begin to piece together the larger narrative. Just as the river runs between the two communities, so too does the red ribbon run through the

novel. Tecumseh and Lum loop a red ribbon through the skull they find on the prairie, and Rebecca, the little girl Tecumseh meets at the campground wears a red ribbon in her hair. Most significantly, near the end of the novel, when Monroe Swimmer tells Tecumseh about the ceremony he performs in returning the bones to the river, he states: "I've been using ribbons...But I ran out" (King, *Truth* 266) and Tecumseh gives Swimmer the red ribbon that Rebecca gave to him.

These threads are constantly moving and drawing the readers' attention. In the instance of the shirt that Helen is cutting up, the colouration of the shirt brings to mind the American flag, perhaps representing Elvin's move to Truth when his marriage broke up. Tecumseh's mother is in a nostalgic mood as she sews the patch on the quilt; she is putting the memories of her past in order. This shirt is a rem(a)inder from his time with his family. Its inclusion on the quilt is a necessary part of the family's personal history and of the narrative of the community.

On the following page, we are introduced to the process of making the quilt, a process that might seem unorthodox at first. Tecumseh's mother has her quilting basket by her side:

Inside are all sorts of odds and ends.
Paperclips, coloured stones, pieces of fur,
candles, buttons, fish bones, sticks, glass, and
bits of dry stuff that look as if they should
have been thrown out long ago. (King, *Truth* 18)

This catalogue includes items that are not typically associated with quilt making. They seem to be random bits of household junk, and, as the narrator points out, some appear to be fit only for the trash.

King gives no reason as to why Tecumseh's mother keeps these things in her quilting basket; he simply has her choose a stone, encase it in netting, and begin to sew the little package onto the quilt. Helen does not explain her choice to her son, and therefore both he and the reader are left to discern the possible meaning of her choice without the omniscient voice of the narrator stepping in to provide the answer. Even though the reader is not privy to the reasoning behind her choices, each item used on the quilt holds a special significance for Tecumseh's mother, and becomes significant to the structure of the overt narrative as well.

In retrospect, there are clues to Tecumseh's mother's reasoning in the dialogue and actions of the novel before and after the description of her quilting basket's

contents. It is Tecumseh, as narrator, who pulls the details together. In "Happy Trails to You," Robin Ridington notes Tecumseh's reflexive acts of interpretation:

Experiences that did not make sense to him as they happened come into focus as the story develops. He quotes the voices of his mother, grandmother and auntie Cassie, and then returns to place their stories in a larger context. Each new story and experience has a reflexive relationship to all those that went before. As the novel progresses, both narrator and reader piece together clues embedded in the stories and story fragments that his mother, father, uncle, aunt and grandmother reveal in their own context-dependent conversations. (Ridington 95)

It is through a combination of dialogues with his mother, the contexts in which they occur, and an exploration of the images of the quilt that Tecumseh begins to understand his mother's history. At this point in the novel, Tecumseh's mother is thinking about escaping from Truth for a while: "What would you think," she says, "if I went away for a day or so?" "Where would you go?" "I don't know." "Why?" "Oh, just to get away," she says. "The shop wears me out

after awhile'" (19). Tecumseh's mother wants a break from her present life, and has been thinking about a prior family trip. That particular trip to Walkerton Lake ended badly, with Elvin abandoning his family. Tecumseh and his mother were forced to make their own way home by bus: "As soon as we got settled in our seats, my mother closed her eyes. I don't think she was asleep, but she didn't talk and she didn't move the whole trip" (83). Tecumseh's mother is now returning through memory to that long ago trip; she is reclaiming her past just as Monroe Swimmer tries to reclaim the Native artifacts from museums.

Her journey through memory places the choice of the stones in the context of the larger narrative. Pebbles are often taken as souvenirs from lake trips and in the section of the novel in which Tecumseh recalls his family's trip to Walkerton Lake, he notes that: "My mother walked behind us. Every so often she would stop, bend over and pick up a small stone, and put it in her pocket" (80). The stones she is currently sewing onto the quilt could be souvenirs from that long ago trip, though King never specifically reveals this as their origin. If they are, the inclusion of the stones indicates her attempt to situate and come to terms with the experience in the history of her life.

This episode in the novel occurs at a point in the narrative when Tecumseh's mother is focused on the past; both her sister and Monroe Swimmer have returned to town, and their presence has reminded Helen of events and relationships in her past. Her need to escape, if only for a short time, might indicate that she wants to rewrite history, to find some good in the memory of the trip to sew over the unhappy one. In any case, the unpleasant memories are just as important as the happy ones; without them, the narrative of her life would be incomplete. Helen reclaims her past by playing with its narrative in a tactile manner on the quilt; she includes the good and the bad to form as complete a picture as possible.

The other reclamation project in the novel involves Monroe Swimmer's attempts to paint the Indians back into paintings, to return human remains to the land, to obliterate the church, and to return the buffalo to the plains. All of these projects have meanings as indeterminate as that of the quilt.

In attempting to rectify what Swimmer sees as an injustice, he, the "Famous Indian Artist," uses his position to try to make the colonizers see that they are essentially lying by omission. In not including Native

peoples in their art, the colonizers are leaving out an integral part of history.

Swimmer hires Tecumseh to help him in his restoration work. During their second meeting, Tecumseh tries to get Swimmer to tell him the details of his life as a famous artist: "'So what do you paint?' 'I don't paint.' I can see where trying to have a conversation with Monroe could be tricky. 'But you're a famous Indian artist.' 'Absolutely,' says Monroe" (King, *Truth* 137). Although he does not create his own paintings, Swimmer still considers himself an important artist because he is involved in putting First Nations people back in the narratives of existing paintings.

Swimmer admits that his own paintings were derivative, that his work was not original, and that "What [he] was really good at was restoration" (King, *Truth* 137). However, this restoration work is not the type of work that merely peels years of grime from old paintings; instead, it is work that re-paints what Swimmer sees as the truth back into the paintings. He tells Tecumseh of the incident that caused him to begin his lifelong work of restoring the Indians to their place in the history of the world:

'One day, the Smithsonian called me in to handle a particularly difficult painting. It was a

painting of a lake at dawn, and everything was fine except that the paint along the shore had begun to fade, and images that weren't in the original painting were beginning to bleed through.' 'And they pay you to fix things like that?' 'So I worked on the painting until it looked good as new,' says Monroe. 'But something went wrong.' 'You messed up?' 'The new paint wouldn't hold. Almost as soon as I'd finished, the images began to bleed through again.' 'So, you had to paint it over.' 'You know what they were?' says Monroe. 'What?' 'Indians,' says Monroe. 'There was an Indian village on the lake, slowly coming up through the layers of paint. Clear as day.' (King, *Truth* 138)

Whether Swimmer actually saw these images reappear through the paint, or simply believed that they were necessary additions in order to be historically accurate is not clear. The subject of the painting could be seen from different viewpoints. Perhaps its painter accepted the colonial version of history as paramount, or perhaps Swimmer was trying to reinstate historical accuracy (as Helen does with the quilt) to the best of his knowledge.

Swimmer also attempts to rewrite history by taking back the First Nations relics that have long been kept in dusty museums. He wishes to negate the hold of colonialism, and reintegrate the pieces of First Nations history into their present-day culture. In his ceremonial return of his rescued bones to the land, Swimmer dons a wig, becoming a mother figure, and throws the bones into the river. It is Tecumseh's dog, Soldier, who finds a small skull. The boys think at first that the dog has just found a ball:

Soldier stands up, growls, and drops the ball at his feet. As soon as it hits the ground, he snatches it up quickly, takes several steps back, glances at us, and drops it again...Soldier rolls it over in the moonlight, and I can see that it's not a ball at all. 'Is it human?' 'Not anymore.'

(14)

Once the skull is in their hands, Swimmer's job is done; history is forced once again into the present. The skull becomes an active participant in the current story of First Nations culture. The boys carry the skull with them, play with it, and Lum even finds comfort in it. The skull is elemental in allowing Tecumseh and Lum to explore their connection with their personal and cultural histories, just

as Tecumseh's mother does with her quilt and Monroe Swimmer does when he returns the Natives to the paintings and the buffalo to the prairie.

Swimmer's most interesting reclamation project is taking back the land for the buffalo. He creates life size iron wire replicas and places a herd of three hundred and sixty buffalo on the plains around the church. He tells Tecumseh that this is his "new restoration project" (King, *Truth* 139). These decoys are meant to lure the real buffalo herds back to the plains, thus restoring life to the way it was historically. This type of project is proactive; Swimmer is actively trying to recreate the world with First Nations people in it.

In its own way, the quilt becomes just as much a reclamation project as Monroe Swimmer's retrieval of remains and obliteration of religious colonial symbols such as the church. Swimmer does not deny the past. He does not simply destroy symbols of colonial oppression; instead he changes them, brings them home again. Tecumseh's mother not only uses old clothing and objects of personal significance to create the narrative of the quilt, but the story itself reclaims historical events. She also paints over images as Swimmer does with the church. For example, Tecumseh notes how his mother: "stitch[es] pieces of the

shirt over part of the pattern that I thought she had finished" (King, *Truth* 24). She is recreating the memory of a person or event, in this case, an event that involved her husband Elvin, with sometimes subtle changes in meaning as she mulls over her history.

The continual alteration of the narrative of Tecumseh's mother's history leaves room for her and those around her to return to their roots in the community. The quilt evolves each time Tecumseh's mother changes it; each feather, strip of cloth, or needle prick changes the story. This evolution enables her to come to terms with her role in the community, and it also allows others to do the same.

At the end of Chapter Two, Tecumseh's mother picks up the quilt again while waiting for a client's hair to dry. As she reworks the pattern, she changes the way she chooses to remember the history of her life, perhaps in an attempt to come to terms with her past, or to form the future to her liking. For Tecumseh's mother, the story of her history is constantly evolving; there is no single interpretation that holds true forever.

This continuous revamping of story is the essence of the quilt and of the narrative of the novel as well. Tecumseh's mother gains some satisfaction from the process of quilting; at the end of Chapter Two she runs her fingers

over the quilt, "leans back, closes her eyes, and begins humming to herself" (King, *Truth* 24). For whatever reason, perhaps because she controls the representation of her life as seen in the quilt, she is happy with her life when she sees it through the pattern and items of the quilt. For a short time at least, the story of the quilt is up to date and representative of her history.

Tecumseh's mother uses the quilt to work through her personal history, all the while recognizing and accepting the unhappy or dangerous memories. Tecumseh relates his mother's reaction when his father left the family:

my mother didn't yell and throw things the way you see women do in the movies. She stayed in the house and worked on the quilt. I was pretty sure she was angry, but maybe she was sad at the same time. (King, *Truth* 67)

Instead of allowing her anger to take root and change her, she expresses it in the abstraction of the quilt, providing herself the distance through which she can determine what she has learned through her experiences. For example, Tecumseh's mother incorporates a gift from Elvin into the story of the quilt. Elvin tells Tecumseh: "I bought her a really nice pair of earrings once, and they wound up on the quilt" (King, *Truth* 64). Rather than continuing to wear

the earrings, or hiding them away in a box, Tecumseh's mother gives them new life in the pattern of the quilt. She is once again in control; she is going to tell her version of the truth about their relationship.

The quilt serves to keep Tecumseh's mother in the present, to enrich her life as she reworks its images, but perhaps more importantly, it is an artifact, much like Monroe Swimmer's reclaimed skulls, that can be carried into the future. It becomes a bridge between past, present, and future that will keep the story of her world, her community, alive.

It is exactly this open-ended nature of the quilt and, by extension, of life in First Nations communities that promises a viable future for both the community and Native literature itself. Associational literature promotes the concept of a link between past, present, and future, that once established creates a sense of release that allows for what Beth Brant calls an unimpeded growth in the sense of community (18). As I mentioned in the Introduction, in associational literature, the past, present, and future are connected. In reclaiming the past, whether it be skulls or scraps of fabric, the novel's characters form a link that allows for the transmission of cultural memory; reclamation becomes a means of keeping the stories of the past alive.

Within the pattern of the quilt are the appliquéd images of people or icons that signify them. Tecumseh's mother sometimes uses a scrap of someone's clothing to form a shape, as in the case of the baby clothes that are presumably from the baby Cassie gave up. The quilt depicts Tecumseh and Elvin as well: "My father decided that a tall figure with a yellow and blue face was him and that I was a piece of cloth that looked more like a purple jelly bean than a person" (King, *Truth* 64). This is Elvin's interpretation of course, not Tecumseh's mother's; once again, as soon as the image is on the quilt, its potential meaning changes from person to person.

There are many ways to retain the memories and stories of the past. Tecumseh's mother creates new things from scraps of the past, Monroe Swimmer paints in what he considers the part of the past that has long been left out or ignored, and Cassie burns her past. She feels no need to keep tangible scraps of the past; all she needs are her memories.

By the end of the novel, it seems as if Cassie is ready to accept her family into her life again. After Monroe Swimmer's giveaway, Cassie is left staring into the fire. It has been a tumultuous night for the community. Unlike her sister, who incorporates remnants of the past

that she intends to save into the quilt's narrative, Cassie has a means of dealing with the past that, while freeing, also has an air of finality. She opens the suitcase of baby clothes and throws a small shirt onto the fire, implying that she has finally come to terms with her past; she is letting go of the baby she gave up years ago. Cassie no longer has to maintain a connection to the past through these remnants and can now begin anew. The fire is a cleansing agent that frees Cassie. Tecumseh's mother approaches and:

opens the quilt and wraps it around her sister's shoulders, while auntie Cassie takes each piece of clothing out of the suitcase, deliberately, one at a time, and casts them all into the flames. (King, *Truth* 260)

Cassie has finally made her decision about her pregnancy; the clothes are no longer needed. That chapter of her life is over and all that will now remain of the baby clothes is the scraps that are included on the quilt.

Unlike her sister, Cassie does not feel the need to save remnants of her past. Her sister chronicles it for her in the pictures, the baby clothes, and the image of the Flying Bird in a corner of the quilt that Tecumseh believes represents his aunt. Cassie is included in the narrative

of the quilt; her story will be remembered. Cassie is as much a part of the story as everyone else. Without her, the quilt would not be complete. The narrative of the quilt is up to date; it is no longer necessary to the community members, therefore the flow of the novel's narrative moves to the present situation of Truth and Bright Water.

Cassie willingly accepts the comfort she finds in her sister's quilt; indeed she finds strength in it. She is now a part of the community again. This is the final time the quilt is seen or mentioned in the novel. Tecumseh's mother has reinvented the narrative of her family's history so that it is up to date; once the quilt has brought the family back together, its purpose is fulfilled. Alterations might be necessary some time in the future, but for the moment the narrative is complete.

Tecumseh's mother shows her acceptance of Cassie's decision not in words, but in the maternal gesture of enveloping Cassie in the spiritually nourishing comfort of the quilt. The symbolic embrace of her community's history frees Cassie to get rid of the last material connection to her past. She no longer needs to keep the remnants of clothing that remind her of that long gone child. If she chooses to have the new baby, she will get new clothes for

it; she will create an entirely new history for this new portion of her life.

The connection between past, present, and future lies at the heart of the quilt's narrative. Every stitch weaves the three periods together into a cohesive whole. In telling the story of her past, Tecumseh's mother has a focus for her present life, and a potential avenue to guide her into the future. Beth Brant writes:

I think a lot of Native writing takes place in the past and future. The present is sort of like a nebulous, almost an unreal place. It's the past and future, and making those into something viable for our communities, for our children, our grandchildren. (18)

In this scenario, the past, present, and future are concurrent and ongoing (Brant "Weaving" 18; Sands 33). Past, present, and future mesh into a continuum that allows for the preservation of memories and their subsequent use as a learning tool. One must recognize and accept one's place in history in order to progress. As such, the 'truth' about past events must find its place in the narrative; the core of the message remains throughout generations of readers, even though the trappings that

surround the message (and therefore the subtle nuances of meaning) might change.

The two levels of storytelling in *Truth & Bright Water* set the stage for the confluence of images that provide the narrative of the novel. The details in the images on the quilt and of the events in the novel's textual narrative work together to give the reader the power to comprehend the story of these communities. Paula Gunn Allen writes that:

Literature is that act of mind which allows significances created by events to become apparent. If the work of literature is imbued with the power which is in the mind of the writer, the meaning will take a form and shape that is real and vital, and that will continue to bear meaning for generations to come. (578)

The quilt is another level of narrative that parallels the written narrative. If the narrative takes on a material form, such as the quilt in *Truth & Bright Water*, it will indeed continue to exist for future generations. Even now, Tecumseh is already searching for the meanings that lie in the quilt.

When the different levels of narrative are considered together, the images give meaning to the novel that can

also be translated to the larger arena of First Nations literature. These narratives raise the reader's awareness as to the significance of similar stories in First Nations culture. The details of life depicted in the quilt are those of the community as a whole; they provide a way to keep the values and ideals of First Nations culture at the forefront.

Now that I have established the way the quilt provides meaning, I will, through a detailed examination of the quilt's images, explore the idea that there is more than one valid interpretation of both the quilt and the novel as a whole. King provides the reader with a multitude of images that can lead the reader in a wide variety of directions, with each one being valid. King's only condition seems to be the reader's proximity to First Nations culture, which necessarily gives different readers different levels of potential comprehension of Native symbols and history. The reclamation of historical artifacts and memory serve to uphold the continuum between past, present, and future that is vital to First Nations culture.

Chapter Two

Bright Water

In opposition to the Eurocentric, typically detail-oriented notion of truth that I addressed in the introductory chapter, here I will explore the fluid and ever shifting concept of truth as seen in the image of Bright Water. The river that runs between the communities of Truth and Bright Water at the same time divides and binds the towns together. The river makes crossing to the other side difficult, but it is also representative of the exchange of the community's ideas and stories.

The flowing river also evokes memories of the phrase that was often used in treaties between First Nations peoples and the Canadian government. Historically, the treaties were intended to grant land and education rights and financial remuneration, and intended to last forever, or at least "as long as the sun goes round and the water flows" (Stanley 11). This phrase incorporates First Nations concepts of the flow of the natural world into the organized and written nature of Western government. However, as history has shown, and, I am sure, as King

intends the reader to see, this is an ironic statement, as treaties were often broken soon after they were written.

In the novel, the water continuously reflects the world around it; it is not telling the "truth", but multiple versions of truth. The rippling motion of the moving water breaks up the reflection into fragments that then flow apart and momentarily come together in different ways. Individuals see different images in the unstill water's refractions and reflections; the same fluid images are also a part of Tecumseh's mother's quilt. She is not telling absolute truth in the quilt's story, and the quilt's different readers focus on different aspects of its images. As I noted in the Introduction, Basil Johnston denies the existence of absolute truth, favouring instead the highest possible degree of accuracy (108), and this accuracy is exactly what Tecumseh's mother is trying to attain by reworking the quilt's images. Bright Water represents versions of truth that are not totally fractured, but fluid, ever-changing ideas, just as in the oral stories of the First Nations traditions.

Oral literature is fluid precisely because its stories have not been cemented in the written word. Instead, "all tribal knowledge [is] passed on orally from one generation to the next and [is] accumulated and stored primarily in

the memory of the elders" (Schneider 23). When the receiver's role changes to that of storyteller, the focus and details of the story are also altered according to the wishes of the teller. Robin Ridington writes that in the oral storytelling tradition: "every story is at once a fragment and an entirety. Each one hints at every other. Stories function as metonyms" (95). The individual fragments of the story or the particular images of the quilt upon which the reader focuses, may change, but the theme is still connected to the greater historical or cultural narrative. The same basic core knowledge would remain, and this core is what is carried to the future; the minor details are merely embellishments that add to the spectacle of the story and allow for different readings in different contexts.

This chapter will focus on different characters' interpretations of the quilt, and these interpretations' subsequent role in the larger textual narrative of the novel. This process will show how the pieces of patchwork in the quilt are just as fragmented as the many versions of narrative and therefore reflect the many possible perceptions of truth. The indeterminacy of meaning implied by the multiplicity of truths is important in First Nations literature. I will pay particular attention to the First

Nations oral storytelling traditions, which allow for the possibility of a multiplicity of 'truths'.

A piece of art is a microcosm of the world around it; it has the ability to focus attention on a particular idea. It is then up to the reader to figure out how to reconcile the impact of a piece of art with its commentary on the world. This process of communication takes place within each discourse between a piece of art and its readers (Luhmann 19-22). The work of art is communicating an idea to the viewers, albeit an idea that, once out there, is wholly indeterminate; it is up to the viewers to put the idea into words, and for each person these words can be slightly, or radically, different. In the case of a work of literature, readers must absorb the meaning from the text on a page and process it into a meaning that is significant on a personal level.

The prologue to *Truth & Bright Water* provides a description of the landscape of the two towns that mirrors the division as well as the unity of the quilt:

Grey-green and frozen with silt, the Shield shifts and breaks out of the mountains in cataracts and cascades, fierce and alive. It plunges in chasms and dives under rock shelves, but as the river leaves the foothills and snakes

across the belly of the prairies, the water warms
and deepens, and splits the land in two. (1)

This opening metaphor—the river as the flowing, ever-changing nature of truth in First Nations culture—sets the stage for the reader's comprehension of the novel. The Shield River is a shifting, ever-changing flow of water that at once reflects and distorts the scene around it, in much the same patchwork fashion as the quilt. The river is fiercely animate as it crosses the landscape; it is an active piece of art that holds the stories of the communities of Truth and Bright Water. It is clear from the very beginning of the novel that much, if not all, of life and community is structured in the same patchwork way.

As a forum for showcasing King's concept of associational literature, *Truth & Bright Water* provides innumerable snapshots of daily life; there are no "ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature" (King, "Godzilla" 14). The streaming consciousness that allows for movement between past, present, and future is a far more open-ended means of telling a story, and is one that harkens back to First Nations oral storytelling traditions. *Truth & Bright Water* presents details about many community members' lives that might not make much sense when read against the background

of a linear plot line. It is only when readers step back and choose the angle from which to look at events that the larger pictures become clear.

For example, the razor blades Tecumseh's mother sews onto her quilt at first only seem to be an unusual and dangerous addition. When Elvin asks Tecumseh if they are still a part of the quilt's mosaic, Elvin is also providing contextual information to the reader. Obviously, Elvin is at least partly aware of why Helen included the razor blades; perhaps they were his, and she uses them to symbolize the dangerous facet of their life together.

Although the quilt seems to present a single narrative line, it is one that Tecumseh's mother constantly reinterprets. The meaning of the quilt's narrative shifts each time she adds or removes items. On an additional level, the quilt's meaning shifts yet again in the hands of each character and reader.

The shifting patterns of the quilt reflect the shifting patterns of the novel; the plot moves from snapshot to snapshot, giving details that do not immediately fit neatly into one cohesive picture that leads to a single conclusion. This continual reinterpretation of events implies that there is no single truth; meaning depends on a number of variables that are different for

each reader. As Jan Vansina writes in the book *Oral Traditions as History*, any "oral tradition is but a rendering of one moment, an element in a process of oral development that began with the original communication" (3). The mutable nature of truth is reflected in much of the First Nations oral storytelling traditions.

Not every reader will make the same jumps in logic to come to the same understanding of a piece of literature. For those, such as myself, standing outside First Nations culture, the culturally specific meanings of a piece of First Nations literature might be lost because I do not have access to the implied meanings inherent in a work. Isabel Schneider notes that "our understanding of traditional oral literature is impeded by the fact that it was created for an audience already familiar with its cultural context; consequently, much more was implied in a text than that explicitly said" (24). King structures *Truth & Bright Water* in much the same fashion; he provides detailed descriptions that can, on one level, be interpreted by every reader, but for those "in the know," namely Native readers, these details can often lead to many other culturally inscribed associations and significances. However, the open-ended nature of this process also has the possibility of leading to a number of meanings and

differing levels of accessibility. The core message that is accessible to many Native readers reaches Basil Johnston's third, philosophical level of meaning that I mentioned previously. Readers have different capacities for comprehension due to proximity to Native culture or literacy levels, and might not have complete access to the philosophical message of a text, but such differences do not negate the effect the text has on its readers. King's theory of associational literature leaves room for different levels of comprehension at which the readers are able to gain insights from the text.

Quilting, and in particular the patchwork method, is an appropriate forum to showcase the indeterminacy of meaning. Though many of the traditional quilting patterns revolve around basic themes, their material construction of repetitive patterns allows for a wide breadth of personal interpretation. Each time one sees a quilt, its discerned meaning can be different, given changes in light and shadow, or the mood and focus of the viewer, or whether the reader knows or is a part of the history behind the fabric scraps that are used.

A patchwork provides many different areas to draw the eye; different fabrics and combinations of shapes may seem more eye-catching to certain people. This patchwork

process "undermines linearity and the cause-and-effect logic that derives from it" (Michael 421), and therefore it opens the door to the possibility of free association in a larger context.

In *Truth & Bright Water*, the only unchanging thread that runs through the whole quilt is the fact that Tecumseh's mother is its creator. However, even for her there is no single story in the quilt. Each time she changes an element, the quilt's narrative changes as well. The picture of the quilt becomes a retelling of the history of the community; the fact that is an ever-shifting collage of images only serves to reinforce King's idea that associational literature presents snapshots of life rather than a single unified picture.

King symbolizes Tecumseh's mother's role as creator through images of water and ice. Water represents the basis of all life; it is an integral part of the human body and each person needs it to live. In *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Michael Ferber notes that: "it is common to speak of the phases of a river from its source to its mouth as ages in a human life" (172). In this context, the opening of *Truth & Bright Water*: "The river begins in ice" (1), is a birth—literally of the novel, and figuratively, of Helen's quilt narrative. Later, Helen's role as mother

is further situated when she reaches her cold wet hands under the quilt to shock Tecumseh. She is the quilt's creator, and the cold wetness of her hands echoes the Shield's icy roots. Just as the river acts as an artery that flows through the two towns, Tecumseh's mother lies at the heart of the novel's narrative.

For Tecumseh's mother, the quilting process began years ago, and—as we have seen—started out rather simply, as Elvin tells Tecumseh: "'In the beginning,' he told me, 'everything was pretty much squares and triangles'" (King, *Truth* 63). These words bring to mind the same words that begin the book of Genesis in the Christian Bible. In his doctoral thesis, *Inventing the Indian: White Images, Native Oral Literature, and Contemporary Native Writers*, King explores the position of the omnipotent Christian God and contrasts the singular notion of authority with the multiple narrative possibilities that are seen in First Nations creation stories. He also confronts this singular belief system in his short story "One Good Story, That One," and his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. In these stories, King rewrites the Genesis creation story, framing it in a fashion that emphasizes its multiplicity. He uses repetition, such as in the phrase "In the beginning," not only to explore the different contexts the creation stories

can be read, but also to foreground the importance of not making mistakes when telling stories. This repetitive aspect of storytelling is precisely why King allows Helen to edit the quilt's narrative until she is satisfied with its accuracy.

As it becomes a form of therapy for Tecumseh's mother, the quilt begins to resemble the towns of Truth and Bright Water. Her community and her history are designed in unusual odds and ends that carry with them secondary meanings or memories. With each addition of freeform patterns, the quilt is better able to express Tecumseh's mother's vision of her life. These alterations also allow the readers to form a clearer understanding of the novel; each successive layer of the quilt provides more information readers can use to interpret the novel's narrative. Rather than being a rigid design that is highly structured, the quilt takes on a softer, more random shape, one that is more easily open to individual interpretation. Its meaning can change with every look, depending on what element of the pattern the viewer focuses; interpretation lies in the associated memories, in desires both fulfilled and lost throughout life.

The truly therapeutic nature of quilting began when it also became an act of what Adrienne Rich calls re-vision:

"the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (11). Of course, Rich is referring to literary works, but as the quilt becomes a narrative in and of itself, this definition applies to it as well. Tecumseh's mother is re-visioning her past each time she covers over a section of the quilt with a new image or adds another piece to the puzzle.

This re-visioning operates in much the same way as the First Nations oral storytelling traditions. Each time a story is told, the emphasis and symbolism might change, but the overall message at its heart remains. Basil H. Johnston writes of the Ojibway language:

all words have three levels of meaning; there is the surface meaning that everyone instantly understands. Beneath this meaning is a more fundamental meaning derived from the prefixes and their combinations with other terms. Underlying both is the philosophical meaning. (107)

Johnston's three levels of meaning fit well with King's tribal theory of literature; tribal literature is able to maintain the philosophical level of meaning within the community setting because of the exclusivity of this literature. It is this philosophical meaning that remains even under the pressure of constant re-visioning.

Tecumseh's mother's life and that of her community is the theme at the heart of the quilt's narrative; it does not matter if she reworks the details or arranges them in a different fashion. She is simply changing the vantage point from which she looks at her history.

The other characters who view or use the quilt also change their perspective according to how they are using it, but the one thing they all acknowledge is that the quilt is created by and belongs to Tecumseh's mother; she is the only certain thread that holds the quilt together. King runs similar threads through the narrative of the novel. For example, ribbons are used on the quilt, to decorate the skulls, and as a gift that Rebecca gives to Tecumseh. This continuity reminds readers that even though the ultimate meaning might be ambiguous, there is still a tie that binds; there is still a community.

Tecumseh appears to have a greater knowledge of the quilt's powers than do other characters, perhaps because he is the one who is most interested in learning details about his family's history. He always wants to know why things happened. Tecumseh is searching for the truth, but is not really disappointed when it is not simply given to him; he is comfortable with letting the story come to him in

pieces, in the bits of feathers, needles, razors, and fabric.

As mentioned in Chapter One, learning for oneself is an important tenet of First Nations storytelling and teaching; children or students of storytelling are not made to memorize the story by rote; instead they are left to mull over all of the connotations of language, tone, and associations within their own memory to learn a lesson. Lee Maracle writes of just such an incident:

In my granny's kitchen, the sweet smells and gentle words soothed the aches and pains of a six-year-old growing up in a schizophrenic situation. Unlike in school, in my granny's kitchen I was not made to memorize or even contemplate the meaning of her words. "You will remember what you need to know when the time comes." (68-9)

Tecumseh accepts that his mother's story will come to make sense to him over a period of time. This means of developing the story is a key aspect of King's theory of associational literature. The characters and readers absorb details one by one, and come to an understanding of their meaning over time. This meaning is entirely dependent on the personal connections readers make between

the details of the story and their own various and individual knowledges.

While Tecumseh is the character who seems most interested in the quilt, at the same time, he is also the one who is most unsure of how to interpret it. His mother provides no clues for him at all; she seems to understand that he needs to find the meaning for himself. He gets most of the background to the images of the quilt from his father.

Tecumseh asks his father about the story behind the needles and fish hooks, but Elvin responds "that those came later, and that I would have to ask my mother about them" (King, *Truth* 64). Once Elvin left the family unit, he lost his chance to be part of the story, and he wisely does not even speculate as to the reason for the inclusion of the needles and fish hooks on the quilt. Unfortunately, (perhaps only for non-Native readers such as myself), Tecumseh never does ask his mother about their origins, and therefore readers are left to extrapolate their meaning from other similar objects and the stories behind them. Perhaps they are representative of the traditional crafting tools and food gathering techniques of First Nations communities. Leaving the symbolism of the objects open-ended, but providing enough clues in the novel to follow

one or more strands to a possible answer makes the reading of *Truth & Bright Water* a far more personal, individual, associational process than reading a text with a more linear plot structure and obvious symbolism.

Elvin suspects the meaning behind the quilt's images has a lot to do with Tecumseh's mother's unhappiness with the past, and his role in her life. The only reason he believes he understands more than Tecumseh is that he has experienced some of the same events as Tecumseh's mother. Unfortunately, Elvin has only a rather literal and therefore limited comprehension of the details. While he remembers the events of the past, they are merely historical markers. He fails to interpret them as Tecumseh's mother does. For this reason, Elvin does not really understand her reasons for continuing to work on the quilt; his literal move away to Truth from the shifting nuances represented by Bright Water has kept him from fully exploring the history of their life together. Now that Elvin lives in Truth, it seems he also subscribes to the Eurocentric notion of singular truth; for him, truth is not an abstract, flowing concept as seen in First Nations traditions.

Tecumseh is the medium through which the origin of the quilt is related to the reader, but all of the information

originates with his father, Elvin. His mother began the quilt just after Tecumseh was born, and at first, it was just an ordinary textile but it soon became a more abstract narrative. His father tells Tecumseh that "even before he left us and went to Truth, the quilt had begun to be a problem" (King, *Truth* 63). Elvin sees Tecumseh's mother's introspection as a dangerous act that might change the way he himself sees their past—and he wants their past to remain static so that he can believe that he can return to her at any time. He holds out hope that she is only waiting for him to return to her, as instanced by his repeated questioning of Tecumseh as to whether or not his mother has a new boyfriend. The evolving narrative of the quilt points to Tecumseh's mother's long struggle to come to terms with her life.

Elvin either does not want to speculate as to the reason Tecumseh's mother began adding strange things to the quilt, or he chooses not to share his ideas with his son. He merely reconciles it as "one of those obsession things that women get...Like wanting to be beautiful or wanting to have kids" (King, *Truth* 63); insensitive comments such as this also show his lack of understanding on a most basic level. Not only do Elvin's comments about women being obsessed with beauty and having children demean women, but

his reference to the quilt as simply an obsession also devalues the importance of Helen's need to reclaim her past. The quilt had started out as a simple craft project, and became the journey, the narrative of a lifetime. Tecumseh finally gets his father to admit that it was probably a means for Tecumseh's mother to cope with her "frustration and disappointment" (King, *Truth* 64).

Though Elvin's reading is a valid one from his vantage point, Helen also adds to the quilt when she is feeling happier emotions. To celebrate her sister's return to the community, Tecumseh's mother crafts a picture of a "purple and red Flying Bird" (King, *Truth* 154). She is quick to incorporate her sister into the topmost layer of the quilt. Her swiftness at adapting the quilt's narrative reiterates the changing nature of its story; the meaning can shift over time, and older interpretations can be written out by the addition of new parts of the story.

Basil H. Johnston, while denying the possibility of absolute truth, speaks of this shifting truth as a "philosophical proposition [in which] a speaker casts his words and his voice as far as his perception and his vocabulary will enable him or her...[and] the best and most the speaker can achieve and a listener expect is the highest degree of accuracy" (108). Accuracy too can be

fleeting, especially when telling a story of a particular life, but it is the attempt itself that makes it the closest to truth. Tecumseh's mother makes just such an attempt. Each time she updates the quilt she is trying to present as accurate a picture of her current emotions and reality as she possibly can. In this manner, in sewing on the Flying Bird image, the nearest thing to the truth as possible is recreated on the quilt, at least according to Tecumseh's mother.

Tecumseh figures that the Flying Bird image is "probably auntie Cassie come home, but I know it's too soon to tell" (King, *Truth* 154). Tecumseh understands the potentially fleeting nature of his mother's quilting process. This bird image has a migratory theme; all creatures return home when the time is right. There is safety within the arms of the community.

The details of Cassie's return to Truth and Bright Water are hazy at best. King metes out only small hints here and there in the overt narrative. It is only through the representation that Tecumseh's mother presents on the quilt that the reader can guess at the greater significance and meaning behind her return. Cassie is pregnant and nostalgic for the comfort and safety of home. The Flying Bird icon that represents her on the quilt provides the

reader with symbolic hints as to her position in the community; she is the child who returns home to the nest.

Readers sit at perhaps the best vantage point from which to determine the quilt's meaning; however, it must be noted that all details about the quilt are filtered through Tecumseh's narrative, and therefore, the reader does not see everything. Readers are privy to the characters' interactions with the quilt, and, at times, their insights into specific details; however, this perspective does not mean that the quilt has one specific meaning. Rather, we simply have access to more of the 'snapshots' than do most of the characters themselves. Of course, this virtually unlimited access is also problematic as it leads to an almost unmanageable number of possibilities. How then can readers decide what insight to gain from the quilt, and by association, from the novel itself? Just as the focus must be on only a portion of the quilt at a time, so must our focus on the novel. With each reading of the novel, readers focus on the 'snapshots' that work best with their individual associated memories that are currently in the foreground.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Tecumseh's mother's story becomes a journey of reclamation, but this project does not mean that she is searching for an ultimate answer

to the questions of life. Instead, her journey through the past while creating the quilt provides a playing field on which to move the bits of information around, trying the threads of narrative in different combinations.

The material nature of the quilt's story provides a link between past, present, and future in the novel, and in First Nations culture in general. First of all, the indeterminacy of meaning allows each generation to find its own meaning in a narrative. Discourse theorist Patrick O'Neill writes that: "The meaning of a text continually changes as the context of its reception changes" (120). In the context of First Nations literature, the changing meaning is exemplified by the ability of the oral tradition to retain stories of the past that are subsequently passed down to the next generation with subtle shifts in nuance. Secondly, even while each generation finds new meaning in a narrative, some basic themes remain that are carried into the future. Just as in First Nations oral storytelling traditions, the stories of the past are retold and kept alive.

In Chapter One, I discussed Monroe Swimmer's attempts to reclaim his culture's place in colonial history and wipe out signs of colonialism within his community. There is an ambiguous aspect to this act. Barbara Bruce notes that in

restoring the artwork, Swimmer "attempted to rewrite history and to give national and global visibility and presence to Native peoples, who are often absented from historical accounts and representations" (198); however, a reader with a literalist imagination and a distrust of historical revision might feel that, in simply painting in what he believed was missing, Swimmer was ignoring the possibility that the image that was bleeding through the layers of paint might not have been a Native settlement. King's text encourages his readers to see Swimmer's restoration as a resistance to the colonial powers that have long ignored the role of Natives in history, but a resistant reader might argue that Swimmer was simply enraged that his people were left out of the world's history. Though I am sure King intends for readers to see Swimmer's project as a way of allowing what has been omitted to assert itself, a resistant reader could argue that Swimmer is not correcting a technical problem, but rather, vandalizing a piece of art in order to present his particular point of view. Barbara Bruce writes that:

"Monroe's efforts to resist the colonizing process are met with counter-resistance and are, essentially, futile: he did not change anything—the paintings would only be re-restored—and he lost his position within the museum system

from which he may have been able to effect some real change" (198). In this act of reclamation, Swimmer is not advancing the beliefs and values of his culture on his own terms, but rather working from within the confines of the existing colonial world in a manner that could discredit his efforts.

Even his attempts to return Native remains to their proper burial grounds might be considered unsuccessful. Though these artifacts were wrongly taken to be displayed in museums, in ceremonially returning them to the land by throwing them into the Shield, Swimmer does not consider that these remains should have been returned to precisely the land from which they were originally taken. Tecumseh's Grandmother looks at the skull he and Lum found and states "she wasn't from around here...She's a long ways from home" (King, *Truth* 170). In returning them to the water that runs between Truth and Bright Water, Swimmer is only abandoning them far from home yet again. Unfortunately, as Barbara S. Bruce writes, Swimmer is "homogenizing Native cultures by returning the remains to the prairie" (200-1) without regard for their tribal ethnicity. His is a well-intentioned act, but in the end, the skulls and bones end up with all of the other refuse that pollutes the Shield. This includes the medical refuse that Elvin transports, and

part of which Tecumseh's dog, Soldier, finds in the river—a filthy pad (King, *Truth* 184).

In painting the mission church to blend with the landscape and recreating the buffalo herd, Swimmer is trying to regenerate the land. Trying to blend symbols of oppression into the prairie merely hides that fact that the colonizers had been there. This is exactly the same situation Swimmer experienced with the old paintings, except this time he is the one who is simply erasing what he does not want to see. Swimmer is trying to marginalize the colonizers, just as the colonizers have long marginalized First Nations peoples. Though it is significant that Swimmer chooses non-violent action and does not merely destroy the church, he is ignoring the reality of the history of this continent instead of finding a new path. In fact, the church becomes even more dangerous when it is invisible. On a literal level, there is a physical building somewhere on the prairie that is now an invisible obstacle. On a figurative level, hidden signs of oppression are perhaps even more dangerous than those that one can see.

In *Truth & Bright Water*, Thomas King uses the quilt to communicate another level of the story; it gives details that no character states out loud. Some of these details

are surely missed by readers and by the characters as well, but such is the case for any work of art. The details of the novel we do pick up on, even on a subconscious level, enhance our interpretation of the literary narrative. Now we turn back to the question of truth. If we are missing some details concerning the plot, do we have access to the truth of this novel? The answer would, of course, depend on which concept of truth is applicable to the work.

As with First Nations oral storytelling traditions, there is no single truth written into the quilt. Each time the story is told, and each time it is interpreted by the listener, there are subtle shifts in meaning. Truth is an abstract concept after all; it is more an interpretive art than a singular reality. In his definition of associational literature, King describes associational literature as literature that "eschews judgements and conclusions" ("Godzilla" 14) and is open to a multiplicity of meanings.

The indeterminacy of meaning inherent in the quilt is a vital part of First Nations culture. The 'truth' that each reader sees in the quilt allows for an area of common ground in which the community is bound together with the basic stitches of history, but at the same time is allowed to add details that make the story come alive. Each

interpretation of the details will be different, but at its heart the common bond, the "philosophical meaning" (Johnston 107), is apparent.

In the next chapter, I will look at the necessary connection between safety and danger in the context of the quilt. There are dangerous and sharp items on its surface, but it is warm and safe underneath the covers if one understands one's place in the community. Helen's quilt is a womb-like source of comfort for Tecumseh, Lum, and Cassie when they need it. Finally, I will explore the issue of reclamation as a viable and perhaps dangerous means of maintaining a connection with the past that will also benefit future generations.

Chapter Three

Both Sides of the Quilt: Comfort and Danger

The quilt in *Truth & Bright Water* acts in the same manner as any other piece of art; it has an aesthetic function, and it is also able to communicate to those who view it. What wisdom is gleaned from it differs from person to person. In fact, the artist's intended message is not what is important; the piece would have little meaning for anyone other than the artist if it were not for its ability to be translated into a multitude of arenas. While a lasting piece of art does retain some recollection of the artist's intended meaning, it is the associated feelings of the viewers that imbue the form with meaning.

Art can drive a person to strong displays of emotion, or cause him or her to consider ideas previously unimagined. It can also cause a peaceful sense of comfort or provoke an uneasy feeling of inherent danger. This chapter will focus on the functions of the quilt and art in general, and the quilt's role as an object of use. I will then consider whether or not this act of reclaiming or altering the perception of history is a dangerous act in and of itself.

The story of the quilt is not just the story of one woman; it is also the story of the entire community. Each person who views the quilt finds something appealing in it, whether it be in the images and items on its surface, or the subconscious nurturing gleaned from the quilt, and by association, from a strong mother figure. It becomes a maternal icon; its power lies in its ability to provide warmth, protection and nurturing. The quilt has the potential to be a warm, safe place for those members of the community that are comfortable within its folds.

Each addition to the images of the quilt occurs either because of a significant event, or because Tecumseh's mother is mulling over memories from the past. When she is considering auditioning for a part in the play *Snow White*, Tecumseh's mother absently focuses her energy on the quilt. Each button, stone, or stitch soothes her. King words this passage so that the reader gets the feeling that she merely has to be in contact with the fabric of the quilt and she becomes lost in the past, in what might have been: "My mother smooths the quilt and runs her fingers over the buttons. She leans back, closes her eyes, and begins humming to herself" (King, *Truth* 24). She is perhaps dreaming of the comforting and magical fairy tale world of

Snow White or *Sleeping Beauty*, perhaps imagining her life being played out with the stereotypical happy ending.

Helen auditions for Carol Millerfeather's "modern version" (King, *Truth* 172) of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. This re-visioned version of an old fairy tale claims a place for Natives in the roles of Snow White, the Queen, and the Seven Dwarves. When Tecumseh finds out his mother got the lead role, he is surprised to find that the lead is the evil Queen, not the virginal and good Snow White. Carol Millerfeather tells Tecumseh that: "'The Queen is the best role in the play...Any fool can play Snow White'" (King, *Truth* 215). Even though Helen's lead role as the Queen undercuts the traditional Western reading of the narrative, she is still taking part in a fairy tale in which she can be happy and powerful at the same time. By the end of the novel she has played the role to great acclaim.

In her role as creator, Tecumseh's mother, on one level, creates the quilt as a substitute womb that nurtures and protects. Many characters find comfort under the quilt, and it is not just because of the warmth of its layers. There is a psychological comfort that perhaps is more important than its physical function.

This psychological benefit is perhaps the quilt's most important role in the novel. Tecumseh's mother augments her role as creator when the quilt comforts and protects her family members. She is the mother figure of the novel that gives comfort to all members of her community, and she is also the person who strives to retain the community's history. She is the elder who holds wisdom and the power of story that she passes on through the quilt.

Tecumseh, Lum, and Cassie all wrap themselves in the quilt as a way to escape the reality of their lives and return to the dependent comfort of the womb. The quilt might only provide a subconscious knowledge that leads to a sense of safety, but it allows Tecumseh, Lum, and, in the end, particularly Cassie, to relax. However, they are only able to rest for brief interludes; they must all return to the world as independent beings.

Whether he knows it or not, Tecumseh understands the quilt's message on some subconscious level. He is comfortable beneath it and is not afraid of getting hurt by the sharp items his mother has sewn onto its surface. He feels safe within the confines of his community, and seems at ease with slowly understanding the quilt's story; he never seems concerned that he has not figured out the whole story.

By Chapter Twenty-Six, Tecumseh is in need of comfort and an escape from the confusion of his relationship with Lum, and he finds it under the quilt: "It's comfortable under the quilt, and I roll back and forth until I'm wrapped up like a baby" (King, *Truth* 217). He continues the baby charade when he wakes up after a much needed nap. He demands attention from his mother, telling her "I'm a baby" (King, *Truth* 217). She sits on his stomach and reaches under the quilt to shock him with her cold hands. This image of cold hands reminds the reader of her role as creator; she is the water that runs between the two communities, between the people of her community. It is a loving interaction; Tecumseh and his mother are feeling their connection to each other. She feels safe going beyond the dangers on the surface of the quilt to reach out to her son who is safe underneath it and nudge him to leave the comfort of the artificial womb.

Tecumseh's cousin Lum rarely focuses on the quilt's decorative appeal, but he does seem to grasp the quilt's overt motif of community on a very basic level. He seeks comfort and protection in its warmth because he senses that the familial bond that he is lacking in his life lies in the narrative of the quilt. Through the quilt, Lum's aunt

is able to provide the security he needs, if only for a brief time.

Lum has had a difficult life; he is a troubled youth who misses his dead mother and is ignored and abused by his father, Franklin. Lum is searching for the safety of a strong family unit and he finds it in the quilt that tells the story of the people in his life. Lum wraps himself in the quilt after he has been fighting with his father. The quilt is able to perform this comforting function because quilts traditionally "augmented family ties that joined members together and forged a bond of love and solidarity" (M'Closkey and Morey 9). Unfortunately, Lum's connection to his community is unstable and, in the end, he finds no peace in the folds of the quilt.

In Chapter Nine, Tecumseh comes into his kitchen to find Lum with the quilt wrapped around his shoulders. Tecumseh is concerned that Lum will damage it, but Lum insists he will not hurt it. By wrapping himself in the quilt, Lum regains a sense of the comfort that is innate in the mother-child bond. Tecumseh does not fully understand Lum's need for maternal comfort: "Hey! Take it off. My mother sees you with that and I'll catch shit" (King, *Truth* 67). However, in reality, Tecumseh has no reason to worry because Lum treats the quilt respectfully. When he takes

the quilt off at Tecumseh's request, he "folds the quilt up and puts it back in the basket" (King, *Truth* 67). Tecumseh is placing Lum firmly outside the immediate family, emphasizing Lum's status as outsider. Even though the quilt can provide neither true comfort nor a replacement mother figure for Lum, he still recognizes its power to help others and he returns it to its proper place for the next person to find. In fact, he treats the quilt more reverentially than others, like Cassie and Tecumseh, who leave the quilt simply lying on the couch.

Lum's respect for the quilt stems from his desire to find stability. When wrapped around him, the quilt becomes a symbol of potential stability in the world; he feels part of a family unit again. Lum's mother has died, but at times Lum forgets -or refuses to accept- that she is dead (King, *Truth* 15). He constantly searches for a replacement mother figure. Lum seems to feel the need to search for this maternal connection secretively. He is not able openly to ask his community for help; instead he searches for stability in the quilt, and, in the end, Lum dies alone.

Tecumseh's aunt Cassie is another character who seems to need the comfort of the quilt and does not really even notice the narrative on its surface. Both when she sleeps

under the quilt at her sister's house and when it is wrapped around her shoulders as she ceremonially burns the baby clothes, Cassie is somehow quieted by the nurturing nature of the quilt that tells Truth's and Bright Water's history. Her part in this history is included in the baby clothes and pictures that are remnants of her past.

Tecumseh's aunt also finds comfort within the warm confines of the quilt. Cassie has returned home for some mysterious reason that no one will share with Tecumseh, although he eventually puts the facts together and surmises that it is because she is pregnant. Cassie and Tecumseh's mother stay up late talking and when Tecumseh wakes in the morning:

The place is a mess, and I have to step over blankets and pillows and magazines. There are photographs all over the floor and on the kitchen table. My mother's quilt is piled up on the couch. The suitcase is open, and the baby clothes are arranged in little stacks next to a couple of wineglasses. (King, *Truth* 127)

Tecumseh looks through some of the photographs and finds one of a newborn baby: "I figure it's me, only the hair doesn't look quite right" (King, *Truth* 128). This picture and the piles of old baby clothes, which are usually stored

in a suitcase, provide Tecumseh with clues about Cassie's past, as well as about her reasons for returning to Truth. The 'snaphots' are coming together for Tecumseh; he is beginning to understand the whole story.

The piled up quilt on the couch that morning turns out to be hiding Cassie. She is visibly tired and hung-over; she "wraps the quilt around her and closes her eyes" (King, *Truth* 128). The evening with her sister has apparently been an emotionally exhausting one and she needs as much psychological comfort as she can get. Cassie forgoes the blankets that are strewn around the room in favour of the warm comfort of her sister's quilt.

When Tecumseh's mother shouts from the front of the shop, Cassie once again hides under the quilt: "Tell her I left" (King, *Truth* 129). She cannot escape her sister, however, and finally pushes the quilt away. It is part of Helen's role as Creator to force her "children" out into the world. Cassie cannot rest yet; she must step out of the quilt's comfort to find her own path; the story is not yet completed.

Later that day, Tecumseh returns to find his mother adding to the quilt:

My mother has cut a picture of her and auntie
Cassie in a circle and is sewing it on the quilt

just above the needles...The picture of my mother and auntie Cassie is when they were young. My mother has an apple, and auntie is trying to get it. (King, *Truth* 152)

The night of reminiscing with her sister has caused a necessary addition to the quilt. The photograph is a reminder of the past, a new focus for the quilt, signifying Cassie's role in this community. The addition of this picture is a source of comfort for Tecumseh's mother; she now understands Cassie's decision to give baby Mia up for adoption and has accepted the baby's place in her history. The apple image is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden myth; Cassie is the fallen woman who yields to temptation, but King is treating this fall ironically. In his doctoral dissertation, King writes of the fall:

it is fortunate...in a less orthodox reading of Genesis, because they move from a state of innocence (ignorance) to a state of knowledge...[and] these relationships help to develop a way of seeing the world, a way of understanding the world, that is passed on to members of the culture, who translate these relationships into action. (71-2)

In this context, Cassie, in the role of fallen woman, now becomes a provider for her community; she plays an active part in passing on cultural values, memories, and knowledge to her community. The picture Tecumseh's mother sews into the quilt's narrative indicates that she is acknowledging Cassie's 'fall' as an integral part of the community's story.

Tecumseh asks his mother: "Is that going to hold?" (King, *Truth* 152), perhaps referring only to the paper photograph being sewn onto the quilt. His mother replies: "I guess we'll see" (King, *Truth* 152). She considers Tecumseh's question on both literal and symbolic levels. She sews the paper to the quilt with much care, whether it will hold for long remains to be seen. The same applies to her relationship with Cassie. Will their bond be strong enough to allow them to remain close? Will her advice to Cassie be heeded?

By the end of the novel, it seems as if Cassie is the one for whom the quilt is intended. Once she accepts the stories in the quilt, which include her own history, the quilt is not seen again. Her community has taken her into its arms once again; she is now comfortable with the narrative of the quilt, and with her place within it. It is the community in which Cassie will raise her child.

Cassie's story can be seen in its stitching; enmeshed in the other strands of the narrative, she is truly home.

With any discussion of safety and comfort necessarily comes a consideration of danger. The danger of the quilt in *Truth & Bright Water* lies both on its surface and in the symbolic retelling of history in its narrative. The question then becomes whether this retelling is an acceptable, or even necessary, risk, or if the cost of the reclamation is too high. In this novel, the answer seems to be that the danger is inherent in life itself, and therefore is an important and necessary aspect of any retelling of history.

Tecumseh's favourite part of the quilt is one of the more dangerous of its unusual additions: "What I liked best were the needles. When you held the quilt up, they would tinkle like little bells and flash in the light like knives" (King, *Truth* 64). What other characters might see as the strangest and most dangerous parts of the quilt, Tecumseh sees as the most beautiful. To him they are musical and filled with light, though he does acknowledge their potential for danger when he recognizes them as knives. The confluence of images of safety and danger implies their necessary connection to each other. Tecumseh is confident in his place in the community, and in his

mother's world. He does not feel like an outsider, as Elvin does. Tecumseh does not need to evade the dangers on the quilt to reach the underside; he can appreciate both sides for what they are.

Elvin, on the other hand, primarily sees the danger inherent in the quilt's narrative. He asks Tecumseh if his mother has removed the razor blades from the quilt: "'Nope, they're still there.' 'Not sure I'd sleep too well knowing that'" (King, *Truth* 64). Though Elvin does not explain the reason that Tecumseh's mother included the razor blades in the narrative of the quilt, he seems to understand that they are there to keep him out.

Tecumseh is not concerned about the razor blades. He is comfortable using the quilt because "All the dangerous stuff is on top" (King, *Truth* 64). His father advises him to stay away from the quilt, hinting that the razor blades are a means of emasculation: "You know the difference between a bull and a steer, don't you?" (King, *Truth* 64). Still, Tecumseh remains sure that the dangerous blades will not affect him: "My father was probably right, but it looked as if you'd be safe enough as long as you were under the quilt and weren't moving around on the outside, trying to get in" (King, *Truth* 64). As long as one is part of the community's story, and not at odds with the quilt's

creator, the quilt can serve as metaphorical womb, protecting and sheltering those underneath its layers. An intruder could not try to force himself or herself into the comfort of the quilt without getting hurt. This barrier of protection would imply that characters such as Elvin, though indeed a part of the quilt's narrative, need to reconcile themselves with the truth of the past, and make amends for their actions, before gaining a place of comfort within the quilt's community. Elvin's commodification of art decries his inability or unwillingness to examine his history. As such, his art is only a profit-making tool; it does not express anything about Elvin.

Some symbols of danger also have the potential to be considered symbols of comfort and safety: "My mother has added some things to this area. She's linked safety pins in a semicircle around a yellow diamond so that they look a little like an old-time headdress" (King, *Truth* 218). These safety pins not only symbolize the dichotomy between safety and danger, but they also reinforce the baby motif that runs through the novel. Safety pins are used on diapers, and because the sharp needle can be encased in its holder, they are a safe way to secure items. The danger in them lies in the possibility that they may come undone. If

they do, one could be injured just as one could with any other needle or pin.

Other sources of potential danger on the surface of the quilt are the clusters of needles, fish hooks, and porcupine quills. All of these are sharp and have the potential to injure someone trying to get beneath the quilt. All of the potentially dangerous items on the quilt are not there to hurt those who find comfort in the quilt; rather, they are a protective force that keeps them safe within its community. Being certain of his connection to his mother, and therefore to the narrative of the quilt, Tecumseh, in particular, does not worry about getting cut or pierced by the razor blades, fish hooks, and needles.

Tecumseh's aunt Cassie does not even notice the danger on the quilt's surface. When Tecumseh finds her wrapped in the quilt the morning after her evening of discussion with his mother, his dog Soldier shoves his nose into the quilt. Tecumseh warns the dog to "Watch out for the fish hooks" (King, *Truth* 128). He is startled when a voice from under the quilt, Cassie's voice, asks: "What fish hooks?" (King, *Truth* 128). Cassie is totally at home when surrounded by the warm expanse of her sister's quilt. Its womb-like properties are in full force when those closest to Tecumseh's mother need protection.

Just as danger is a necessary aspect of the narrative of the quilt, it is also a vital element in reclamation projects. The overt reclamation projects that Monroe Swimmer undertakes, though well-intentioned, are fraught with danger. What is dangerous about Swimmer's reclamation projects is that some people, the curators, for example, would get angry with Swimmer for 'ruining' paintings. Swimmer concluded that they did not want Native peoples placed into old paintings: "I think they liked their Indians where they couldn't see them" (King, *Truth* 261). He understands that though the curators might acknowledge Indians are a part of history, they think they should be a silent memory.

Barbara Bruce notes that "museums render cultures as past, extinct" (199-200), and through Swimmer, King attempts to bring Native history and culture into an active present. What cannot be ignored, however, and this is apparent through what Bruce calls King's "gentle parodying [of] the idea that one can simply erase the impact of colonization or re-create what is lost" (201), is the reality of the historical erasure of Native cultures and history. Swimmer seems to understand this as well. He tells Tecumseh that "realism will only take you so far" (King, *Truth* 208), indicating perhaps that surreal

depictions such as painting Natives into pictures, figuratively returning the buffalo herds to the prairies, or obliterating Western religious symbols from the landscape are necessary steps in reclaiming a place for Native cultures. Swimmer seems to see these actions as a beginning, an intermediate step, that he hopes will bring awareness of the lack of 'truth' in history to the forefront.

Truth & Bright Water, as a novel, might also provide the same sense of comfort and danger as do the quilt and Swimmer's reclamation projects. I think that this is where the excitement of the novel lies—precisely at the crossroads of its comforting and dangerous tones; there cannot be comfort without danger.

Just as the colonizer's artists tried to exclude the Indians from the full story of history in their paintings, so Swimmer decides to paint out a grand symbol of their hold on First Nations culture— the church on the plains. The church is representative of historic colonial oppression of First Nations people through missionary work. A telling tale of oppression is described in Raymond Huel's book, *Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indians and the Métis*:

The Oblate Apostolate in the Canadian North West had a dual purpose. There was an initial pioneer

stage in which the natives were to be taught the fundamental truths [italics mine] of the Catholic faith. It was believed that the Christian message was so compelling that it would be accepted immediately by those to whom it was preached...Baptism did not bring an end to the process of evangelization because it was but a stepping stone leading to Christianization, a greater spiritual maturity that was the ultimate objective of the Oblate missionary thrust. (128)

The church that Swimmer repaints is a lasting symbol of the missionaries who forced their beliefs onto First Nations people. In their book *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions*, critics Davidson, Walton, and Andrews argue that: "Monroe employs his talents to play a joke on the legacy of North American missionaries, and to reclaim the land on which the church was constructed for the local Native community" (185).

Since merely adding to existing works was not an effective way to reclaim a place in history, Swimmer takes colonial icons out of the First Nations world. He does an excellent job, so much so that he loses track of the church (King, *Truth* 230) and asks Tecumseh and Soldier to find it. The danger in this type of reclamation act is the problem

that simply erasing a symbol does not negate its role in history—colonial oppression did happen. On a far more literal level, people can be hurt bumping into things they cannot see.

Swimmer's projects have both aesthetic and practical value. Though they are surely artistic interpretations of the world, the projects also allow the reader to learn tangible facts—facts that might prove dangerous. Tecumseh learns just such a fact firsthand when he bumps his shin on "Teaching the Grass About Green" (King, *Truth* 44), Swimmer's attempt at teaching the prairie how to behave. This block of green in the prairie grass is safe for those who are aware of its presence and dimensions, but for those who merely stumble across it, it can provide a painful lesson. In an interview, King states to Harmut Lutz that: "with a Native society there is the sense that everything is part of a living chain and you have to pay attention to what happens with the animals, with the environment. The world has an organic flow" (116). Swimmer recognizes this need to heal the land as a means of healing the community.

Although Swimmer's grass tutorial project and his other attempts to return the prairie to its former pre-colonized state may seem ineffectual, unrealistic, and transient, they do represent hope for the future. Swimmer

has taken on the responsibility of reminding First Nations people that the narrative line can be amended to include changes. His giveaway at the end of the novel is analogous to the potlatch tradition of Northwest Coast First Nations cultures in which gifts were often given to seal treaties and agreements. Olive Dickason writes of ceremonial gift-giving that: "Gifts were metaphors for words; and treaties, once agreed on, were not regarded as self-sustaining. To be kept alive, they needed to be fed every once in a while by ceremonial exchanges" (56). At Swimmer's giveaway, the entire community comes together as a whole, and rekindles its spirit. The gifts become a means to give the community members hope for the future.

The value of Swimmer's reclamation projects also lies in his desire to make the First Nations community aware of its place in the history of the world. Rather than blindly accepting Western versions of history, Swimmer reminds his people that they too played a role in history, and, more importantly, that they can continue to play an important role in the future as well. Just as Swimmer returns the buffalo to the prairie, so his people can also become a renewed part of the narrative.

Though it is vital to maintain a connection with the stories of the past, reclaiming history is a task fraught

with danger. In her poem "One Way to Keep Track of Who Is Talking," Marie Annharte Baker considers the need for Native people to keep their culture alive through oration. She writes: "If I change one word, I change history" (190). The same concept can be applied to the erasure of the church and to the constantly evolving story of the quilt. Just as, if Monroe Swimmer is to be believed, First Nations people were erased from paintings, colonizers are painted out of the community's history, and events in Tecumseh's mother's life are remembered in a fashion that inevitably must leave something out.

Thomas King recognizes the danger of altering memories or history, but he believes that personal interpretation is key in keeping the past alive. First Nations oral storytelling traditions reinforce this idea; the manner of speech and details of the narrative might change but the same basic premise remains. Accuracy of facts is not paramount; it is the lesson that each individual takes from the narrative that keeps the story alive. As such, safety and danger mesh in each narrative. The risks of leaving something out are outweighed by the value of the comfort that is given when someone is able to learn a lesson from the facts of history.

Conclusion

In *Truth & Bright Water*, Thomas King uses the patchwork narrative of the quilt to provide ways of reading the plot details that are absent in the literal narrative of the novel. The novel's narrative is presented in much the same patchwork way and the dual narratives must work together in order for the reader to come to an understanding that meaning is indeterminate and a part of a continuum from the past, through the present, and into the future.

In the discourse between these two levels of narrative, form and function meld into a cohesive means of telling the story of the community of Truth and Bright Water. This type of narrative follows the traditional patterns of First Nations oral storytelling. Different pieces of information are given each time a story is told; the focus changes depending on what point the storyteller is trying to get across, and also on the particular parts of the story with which the listener connects and his or her subsequent associations to personal experience.

The readers' ability to focus on particular details is an integral part of Thomas King's theory of associational

literature. In a patchwork fashion, King metes out details that at times seem incongruous, but when these details are associated with some of the other pieces of the patchwork narrative, and most importantly, with the compendium of the reader's own personal associated memories, a more complete picture comes into focus. Because it is a personally relative experience, each character in the novel and each of its readers comes to a different conclusion.

Although King believes that new labels are necessary to describe First Nations literature, he too has been influenced by all that has come before. By merely weaving the web of narrative in the quilt and the novel, he rekindles memories of Aristotle's concepts of 'ploke'-the weaving of a web, and 'desis'-a tying or knotting; a complication of a plot. King stitches his words together to form a whole cloth, while at the same time maintaining an obvious connection with the historical oral traditions of the First Nations peoples. The so-called truth of the words King uses is another matter entirely.

Is there any 'truth' in literature? Who decides what is true? In naming this novel *Truth & Bright Water*, King pointedly sets the stage to explore the division between fixed and multiple and/or shifting meanings. For King this

division appears to lie in the split between concrete and abstract knowledge.

Given that it is a non-Native female who explored the link between the quilt and the novel's textual narrative, a possible further avenue of exploration would have to lie in the hands of a First Nations person, someone with access to all of those unsaid meanings that remain inaccessible to me. As a side note, it would also be interesting to see what a male, either Native or non-Native would find in an exploration of the typically female-centred handicraft arena. The avenue I would most like to continue exploring is a comparison of the ways in which quilts are used in different pieces of literature. It would be interesting to explore how, for example, Margaret Atwood uses quilting in *Alias Grace* to show the development of Grace Marks, or how Alice Walker defines the quilt as both an aesthetic and utilitarian object in "Everyday Use." These two selections, along with *Truth & Bright Water*, would entail a cross-cultural examination of the history of quilt making.

The greatest problem I have encountered is working with a First Nations novel from my position outside the boundaries of First Nations culture. Let me start by saying that I chose this book, *Truth & Bright Water*, because I love Thomas King's writing style; it was not a

politically-minded decision to work cross-culturally. At first I encountered few problems, but after a couple of months spent researching, it became apparent that first of all, little has been written specifically on Native quilting traditions. Secondly, I became aware that First Nations scholars, including King himself, seemed determined to keep me firmly in my place. King acknowledges that non-Native readers are probably his largest audience, but we would never be able to access the real point of his stories.

So what am I to do? I could get angry. And stay angry. Never pick up another piece of First Nations literature again. Or I could not waste my time and instead try to figure out the key to getting the most access I possibly can. Doris O'Brien reminds us (as quoted in the Introduction) that there is room for me to keep my personal baggage; I am an individual who is shaped by literature and academic criticisms, and they do help me to journey down the road to wisdom. There are many ways to interact with a piece of literature, and I think Thomas King would agree that as long as I continue to engage with literature and other forms of art, I am welcome to voice my opinions.

King provides innumerable facts in the novel that are not presented as having any necessary connection to each

other. It is up to those with access to these facts to create meaning for themselves. More importantly, these potential meanings shift according to the current associations in the mind of the interpreter. Tecumseh's mother, for example, has access to the historical experiences of her life in a primary way—she lived them. She re-visits these memories when she incorporates items from the past, such as Elvin's old shirt, into the quilt. For her, the meaning of these items has changed over time, and while a concrete item might specifically represent her husband on one basic level, the new manner in which she uses it on the quilt reflects her current, shifting opinion. As Helen's history is reflected in the images of the quilt, the line between the two narratives blurs. Robin Ridington writes that: "History and story are the same. There are no boundaries, no borders, between what you know and what you can imagine. Everything is story, and all the stories are true" (98). The 'truth' thus changes from a concrete version of facts to an abstract representation of history.

In using an ampersand in the title of the novel, King implies that both Truth and Bright Water, both abstract and concrete knowledge, are necessary to form a complete picture. They cannot be separated from one another. The

two types of knowledge become yet another shift of meaning while still being integral parts of the community. My experience standing on the periphery of First Nations culture is another shift of meaning.

In the prologue to the novel, King describes the bridge between the two communities as a connection that, from a distance seems "delicate and precise" (King, *Truth* 1). It is only when you get right up close to it that you can see the "tangle of rebar and wire that hangs from the girders like a web" (King, *Truth* 1); the bridge is unfinished and decaying. This bridge is a metaphor for the connection between the concrete form of "truth" (implied in the name of the town of Truth) and the flowing multiplicity of truths (implied by Bright Water). Just like King's use of the ampersand to title the novel, this bridge speaks to an attempt to travel from the concrete idea of truth to the flowing version. The fact that this bridge is unfinished, that there is only the reflecting, flowing water of the Shield below hints at the idea that though a concrete idea might be a good place to start, there must still be room to consider other possible truths.

Just as the river between Truth and Bright Water flows continuously, so too do the potential meanings and interpretations of the events and connections within the

community. Each thread of memory becomes a new story each and every time it is picked up by a reader and run through another part of the narrative. Though history can be reclaimed in this way, by placing it once again into the consciousness of the community, this arena is subsequently open to perpetual cycles of discourse. Each listener begins the discourse with a core of personal knowledge, and this 'baggage' directs a reader's interpretation. New stories are created from the individual details based on a combination of the listener's background and the facts. Some readers or listeners might not comprehend the author's political or cultural message in the same way the author intended them to, but, in my opinion, some small part of it almost always gets through.

Interpretation is a personal communication between readers and texts; cultural background might provide a similar core knowledge upon which interpretation can be based, but in the end, it is a private and individual matter. Each time someone reads the narrative of the quilt in *Truth & Bright Water*, it provides a new and different meaning. I, as reader and analyst, create one more interpretation of the threads of narrative that mesh in this novel. However, in the final analysis, mine, just as everyone else's, is just one more story.

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