

“Everybody knows that song”

The Necessary Trouble of Teaching Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water*

... beneath the bridge, trapped between the pale supports that rise out of the earth like dead trees and the tangle of rebar and wire that hangs from the girders like a web, the air is sharp, and the only thing that moves in the shadows is the wind.

—Thomas King, *Truth and Bright Water*, Prologue

What takes place with the aporia? What we are apprehending here concerning what takes place also touches upon the event as that which arrives at the river’s shore, approaches the shore, or passes the edge—another way of happening and coming to pass by surpassing. . . . Perhaps nothing ever comes to pass except on the line of a transgression, the death of some “trespassing.”

—Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*

Part 1: Making Trouble: Who Knows?

The last time I taught Thomas King’s 1999 novel *Truth and Bright Water* in a second-year course in Canadian Fiction, two comments from students stood out for me as utterances that bracketed the discussion of the novel’s position in the course, as well as reminding me of some of my own questions about being a non-Aboriginal scholar teaching a text by an Aboriginal author to students who do not identify as Aboriginal. Near the beginning of our discussions of the novel, these two students underlined the expectations that undergraduate students in that course—mostly white, mostly middle class, mostly arriving in the class with expectations that Canadian fiction will be “naturally” reflective of their experience as Canadian citizens—had about First Nations texts. Because I was new to the institution and the students, I identified myself as a non-First Nations person who was raised and trained as an academic in the Canadian west where First Nations culture is very prominent. I prefaced my introduction of the novel with the comment that I considered no course in Canadian fiction complete if it did not contain discussion of how a “Native narrative”—to use Thomas King’s term—might

fit into, or resist, the dynamics of the Canadian canon. At this, one student waved her copy of the text in the air and said that she had grown up in Caledonia, Ontario, and that as far as she was concerned, *Truth and Bright Water* bore no resemblance to her life experience. Beyond that, she refused to elaborate. Another student suggested that *Truth and Bright Water* was worth reading precisely because of its dissimilarity to other works by First Nations writers. She did elaborate, naming particular features of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* as examples of what she expected from a First Nations text: a narrative of poverty, violence, and substance abuse punctuated by governmental neglect and hatred for and by white characters. She liked *Truth and Bright Water* because she felt "included" as the text's audience rather than excluded or culpable because of the text's subject matter.

I recount the comments of these students not because their reactions to the text were out of step with the course's aims, but rather because the remarks turned out to be apposite to the tangle of tensions, pleasures, and questions that arose in the classroom around the discussion of *Truth and Bright Water*. In addition, these comments, along with others made by students who were encountering discussions of canonicity for the first time, shaped the way I began to think about King's novel as a text that does double-duty: principally, as a Native narrative that, in Jacques Derrida's terms, "passes the edge" of our expectations and "transgresses" the boundaries of genre literature by offering communal aporetics within the text; and also, as a pedagogical hook by which an instructor may emphasize the value of such aporetics within a reading community.

The dual purpose of teaching while suspending knowledge is certainly a paradox, and Smaro Kamboureli points out in *Scandalous Bodies* that such "negative pedagogy"—a practice that abandons "teaching as a teleological narrative" in favour of "negotiating our position in relation to both the knowledge we have and the knowledge we lack"—includes, among other things, the ability and willingness "to address history and historicity of our present moment responsibility—without, that is maintaining the illusion of innocence or non-complicity" (Kamboureli 25). Certainly the desire to be socially and culturally responsible to First Nations texts in the classroom does not automatically yield a politically supportive reading practice, and I am acutely aware of Aruna Srivastava's warning that the propensity for non-First Nations instructors to bring "deeply racist, colonialist, ahistorical and disrespectful ways" to reading and teaching texts by First Nations writers can make such study "infinitely more harmful in many ways to read these texts

than to not to” (Proulx and Srivastava 189). The search for socially responsible criticism in an undergraduate course in Canadian literature must mean more than adopting a pseudo-medical oath to “do no harm” to a text or with a text. It must engage with pedagogy of resistance that is rigorous enough to make demands of the students and forgiving enough to allow the students into the discussion about why abrogative or aporetic texts are a vital part of Canadian literature, that national literatures and concepts of national identity present “sites of necessary trouble,” in Judith Butler’s sense.

It is uncomfortable—pedagogically and practically—to assert that theory is a method rather than an answer and I note with some chagrin that turning to Derrida in order to practice textual humility may not be everyone’s idea of a reading strategy. But in order to introduce to undergraduate students the idea that the unsaid represents a vital component of the text, Derrida’s aporia, that term that gestures towards that which is metaphorically suspended as or caught between the necessary and the impossible, offers readers a way to relinquish passive consumption of the text. The difference between listening and consumption is a willingness to suspend knowledge. Keeping in mind Helen Hoy’s caveat against the “urgent white-Canadian self-image of non-racist tolerance” that uses “First Nations as the critical Canadian test case” (9), the aporetic reader and critic is not invulnerable to a discourse of civility, but being suspended means that reliance upon what seems like ground beneath one’s feet becomes less than practical.

By proposing to examine *Truth and Bright Water* through Derrida’s conception of the aporia, that “tired word of philosophy and logic” that has “imposed itself” upon Derrida’s thinking (*Aporias* 12), I do not intend to re-invoke a potentially recolonizing impulse by reading a text by a First Nations author through the “legitimizing” discourse of European critical theory. Quite the opposite: I mean to point out that reading *Truth and Bright Water* is an exercise in negotiating impositions, and the willingness to delve into the “tangle of rebar and wire” that hangs from the bridge over the Shield River in *Truth and Bright Water* suggests a willingness to enter into both a tangle of discourse and a web of community, neither of which can be reduced to easily consumed symbols. Derrida’s consideration of the “experience of the aporia” as a “transversal without line and without indivisible border” (*Aporias* 14-15) is a concept that acquires practical significance alongside King’s refusal of “racial denominators” that uphold “a romantic, mystical, and, in many instances, a self-serving notion” of otherness in Western epistemology (“Introduction” xi). When discussing the difference between Christian and

Native creation stories in his 2003 book of Massey Lectures, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, King himself invokes Derrida as a reminder that literary and ideological dichotomies are both attractive and destructive. Citing “cranky old Jacques Derrida” as the voice that opposes the easy split between “right/wrong, culture/nature, male/female, written/oral, civilized/barbaric” among other pairings, King reminds us that readers ought to be “suspicious of complexities, distrustful of complications, fearful of enigmas,” particularly since dwelling in such complications necessitates an engagement with that which is not immediately understandable (*Truth About Stories* 25). Offering a “Native universe” through literature, King asserts, is one way for First Nations writers to demonstrate how “meaning is refracted by cosmology, the way understanding is shaped by cultural paradigms” (*Truth About Stories* 112). The consideration of how such cultural paradigms surface in the Canadian literature classroom and in the pedagogical space described by such an undertaking demands a reading of King’s text in ways that may only be served by the “imposition” of a discourse as complex—and as capacious—as that offered by Derrida. Throughout *Truth and Bright Water*, King offers multiple examples of aporias of “impossible necessity,” as Derrida calls them in *Mémoires for Paul de Man*: the necessity of performing a social imperative (such as mourning, gift-giving, or hospitality) and the inherent impossibility of completely realizing that imperative.

The task—and Derrida and King seem equally clear that the experience of the aporia is a particularly involving task—that must be undertaken in reading *Truth and Bright Water* relies upon reading impasse and trepass as they appear within King’s fictional communities and within the reading community of the classroom. Robin Ridington points out in his article, “Happy Trails To You: Contexted Discourse and Indian Removals in *Truth and Bright Water*,” that King’s novel offers the twin impositions of a highly contexted discourse and buried historical reference in aid of exposing the ways that “white privilege” manifests upon narrative conventions. Readers who presume that *Truth and Bright Water* will offer a window onto fictional but realistic Canadian communities, in the tradition of Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* or Robertson Davies’ Salterton trilogy, will find some satisfaction. *Truth and Bright Water* draws affective portraits of two communities divided by the Shield River, with the small American town of Truth and the Canadian reserve of Bright Water holding the narrative mirror up to each other, allowing for rich readings of border discourse (Davidson et. al. 141-48). However, unlike *Green Grass, Running Water*, King’s

audacious challenge to the master narratives of Western literature and the bartered colonialism of canon-making, *Truth and Bright Water* focuses on community, knowledge, and a variety of narrative and conversational impasses that offer the suspension of story to characters in the novel and to readers of the novel. Calling attention to “the parochial and paradoxical considerations of identity and authenticity” (*Truth About Stories* 44), King refuses easy dichotomies between Native and non-Native readers, and reminds critics and readers alike that inclusion in a text or exclusion by a text is less a matter of race than it is a willingness to listen to a story that does not “participate fully in Western epistemologies” (*Truth About Stories* 119). By favouring communal knowledge over consumable knowledge, King suggests that the racial, national, and linguistic borders proposed in the novel must be negotiated by acknowledging the aporetic elements of the text, admitting the power of that which “concerns the impossible or the impracticable” (Derrida, *Aporias* 13).

For “community,” King himself turns to Chippewa-German-American novelist Louise Erdrich’s definition as “not simply a place or a group of people,” but as a place where “the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history” (King, “Introduction” xiv). King’s creation of a Native landscape as community in *Truth and Bright Water* refuses simple inclusiveness to readers, both those without a First Nations identification, and those whose connections to First Nations status, heritage, culture, language, and education are viewed with varying standards of authenticity in what King calls the “racial-reality game that contemporary Native people are forced to play” (*Truth About Stories* 55). Although some First Nations writers concentrate upon insider discourses, King himself argues against the notion that “the matter of race imparts to the Native writer a tribal understanding of the universe, access to a distant culture, and a literary perspective that is unattainable by non-Natives” (“Introduction” x), and suggests that Native readers, too, will come from a wide variety of cultural contexts and may not be “included” in the text. “You’re not the Indian I had in mind,” an employer tells a youthful King in *The Truth About Stories*; King knows that many people who have First Nations backgrounds do not necessarily bring insider knowledge to their reading practices, and asks “What difference does it make if we write for a non-Native audience or a Native audience, when the fact of the matter is that we need to reach both?” (118).

But if—given King’s warning against assuming that Native readers have “insider knowledge”—no reader may successfully be “the Indian [reader]”

that the author “had in mind,” what then of the instructor who teaches the text? There is no shortage of scholarly and pedagogical warnings against a precipitous understanding of the novel that ignores the cultural or racial background of the author, and an equal number of warnings against assuming, for example, that First Nations texts will be instantly understood by First Nations people. In her essay “Socially Responsible Criticism: Aboriginal Literature, Ideology, and the Literary Canon,” Jo-Ann Episkenew warns that “non-Aboriginal scholars need to be cognizant of the authority that society accords their voices” and must “examine the ideological baggage they bring to their readings and counter it by looking into the contexts in which they are written to glean some kind of understanding of the ideology of the people whose works they interpret” (57). Helen Hoy delineates a continuum of rhetorical positions available to non-Native scholars reading Native texts, moving between the extremities of feigned naivete, in which the instructor takes refuge behind the bulwark of her/his own ignorance, and feigned mastery, in which the instructor relies on fast semantic footwork to preserve the scholarly ego while diminishing the potential for learning. Hoy notes “the ‘retreat response’ is one alternative to stances either of unexamined authority or static self-recrimination,” and she goes on to cite Linda Alcoff’s view that the decision “not to attempt to speak beyond one’s own experience . . . can be a self-indulgent evasion of political effort or a principled effort at non-imperialist engagement (although in the latter case, with seriously restricted scope)” (Hoy 17). If finding a space between these positions of “unexamined authority or static self-recrimination” can be a challenge for scholars, it may be even more so for students, and a responsible pedagogy should not only point out these positions but suggest to students that negotiating the dynamics of the text and the reading community is an ongoing exercise in which critical theory, and some examination of subject positions, can be useful.

Derrida suggests that taking up this impracticable reading position is awkward, but that awkwardness is precisely the point, noting that Aristotle’s original term for *aporia*, *Diaporeō*, means “I’m stuck.” In my English translation of *Aporias*, translator Thomas Dutoit includes the French expression for “I’m stuck” as “dans l’embarras”—that is, to be obstructed, but also situated “in embarrassment” by one’s own obstruction (Derrida, *Aporias* 13). I appreciate Dutoit’s inclusion of the original phrase, as it describes succinctly my experience of asking questions about the *aporias* in this text. In the interest of making explicit the type of anxieties that students discussed in class about

encountering a text like *Truth and Bright Water* (that is, a text that does not “give up” secrets or symbols, but asks students to assume a suspended and uncomfortable reading position) I have come up against a list of questions that highlight my own obstructions that reveal some of the constructions—literary, social, and theoretical—that plague the reading and the teaching of this text. What if the aporetic elements in the text are, in fact, easily identifiable, and I have merely assumed that the signs are unreadable? There is every possibility that in focusing on suspending knowledge that I am appeasing my own ego with one more act of self-congratulatory neo-colonialism, a way to shirk responsibility by assuming an impassable cultural divide. I am not the first scholar, nor will I be the last, to wonder about the difference between a student’s lively curiosity and an instructor’s desire for discursive mastery. And what of the nagging doubt that teaching the aporia will do little to assuage students’ expectations that professors can, and should, boldly go where students cannot, into the treacherous territory of textual unknowns and come back loaded with certainty and willing to share that certainty with the students? My dual aims, to teach King’s novel as a text and as a practical example for a capacious reading methodology, are defined by the “embarrassing” parameters of these questions. The vulnerability of this perspective reminds me, powerfully, of the size and scope of questions asked by students: why this novel? Who are we as readers? What does it mean to read both as an individual and as a group? Who decides meaning, and how?

Part 2: Song, Story, Ceremony: Everybody Knows

Communal knowledge in *Truth and Bright Water* and communal knowledge in the classroom are both characterized by forms of mutual understanding. To give the most obvious of examples, based on their reading of a series of texts, students in my Canadian Fiction course take in historical and cultural examples of ideas that they encounter in other texts, accruing a sense of the dynamism of the literary entity that we have called “Canadian fiction” throughout the duration of the course—and hopefully, beyond the course. The people of Bright Water have their communal texts as well; King’s choice of popular song as cultural shorthand perform a kind of soundtrack throughout the novel, as characters choose songs from mainstream popular culture to either parody that culture or carve out a niche within it. Tecumseh watches his father (the nearly iconically named Elvin) sing “Love Me Tender” as part of his parody of Elvis as romantic masculine icon. But Elvin’s performance of Elvis, as part of the carnivalesque atmosphere of the

“Indian Days” celebration (itself a festival that turns the colonial celebration of Canada Day on its head), also operates as a lesson about the cultural limits of this form of masculinity. Just as “Elvin” implies but does not deliver “Elvis,” Elvin is not as “tender” a lover as the lyrics suggest: he neglects his son, and ignores Helen’s repeated requests for practical and financial assistance in taking care of Tecumseh. Lucy Rabbit, with whom Elvin is tenuously romantically connected, is found weeping over his insensitivity at the Indian Days booth. Lucy Rabbit is, in turn, associated with the music of the Rolling Stones, a contrast to Helen’s operas and Broadway musicals. Helen’s record collection, inherited from her father, include soundtracks from *The Desert Song* (54), *Carmen*, *Show Boat*, and *South Pacific* (17), all musicals that exoticize racial otherness as a major plot point, suggesting that King is parodying how the white gaze is obsessed with “the Other” even (or especially) in popular entertainment. Monroe Swimmer likes musicals too, reinforcing his possible romantic link to Helen when he offers his version of “Oklahoma” at the improvised dedication ceremony for his buffalo installation (*Truth and Bright Water* 140). What people sing, how they sing it, and how others receive their performance of the songs becomes a way that people in Bright Water “read”—or engage with—each other, and one way that the reading community of the classroom can read the politics of community in Bright Water.

However, the happy allusiveness of popular songs is arrested in the text by the haunting presence of an unidentified song that brackets the narrative, suggesting an aporetic element that the text does not offer up for recognition. In parallel incidents involving the two young protagonists, the first-person narrator Tecumseh and Tecumseh’s troubled cousin Lum, the Shield River becomes an aporetic space over which concepts of “truth” and the “brightness” of understanding are suspended. In dividing Truth from Bright Water, the States from Canada, whiteness from Aboriginality, the river captures Derrida’s concept of the aporia as “a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such” (*Aporias* 12). At the start of the novel, the boys watch from a distance as an unidentified woman drives up to the Horns, a rock outcropping shaped like bison horns at a bend in the river. When the woman turns on the truck’s radio and begins to dance, the sound of the music drifts down to where the boys are standing, and the boys’ gleeful and incredulous voyeurism changes to an uneasy invocation of the unexplained:

I turn to see what Lum wants to do, but he’s looking straight ahead. “You hear that?” he says.

“The music?”

Lum doesn't take his eyes off the woman on the Horns. "It's my mother's favourite song."

I move back a bit just in case Lum is in one of his moods. The song is okay if you like sad stuff that sounds like rain and cloudy days. "Yeah," I say, "It's one of my mum's favourites, too." (*Truth and Bright Water* 11)

The loss of Lum's mother in an "accident" is never fully explained in the text, though the fact that Lum's father Franklin beats his son badly several times throughout the novel implies strongly that Lum's unnamed mother may have died as a result of Franklin's violent temper. But *Bright Water*, like every community, has its open secrets and disagreements about causality. Is Franklin violent because of the loss of his wife, or was his violence the cause of her death? The text does not confirm or deny either possibility. But Lum's investment in the beautiful dream of his mother's magical return is fostered by the lack of reference to her corporeal death, and suggests to readers a mystery where perhaps there is no mystery other than the usual difficult questions about why marital violence receives little or no public censure.

As Lum's association of the song with his mother is played out in the rest of the text, the results are more tragic than they are magic. The two boys hear the "rain and cloudy days" song after the unidentified woman has thrown the unknown contents of a suitcase into the Shield River, and Tecumseh initially assumes the items to be garbage (10). This conflation of the unknown and the unwanted gains poignancy later in the narrative, when Tecumseh "sees what [he] should have seen before" (263), that the "woman" is the trickster/artist figure Monroe Swimmer in a wig. The objects that Monroe throws into the river are the bones of First Nations children, removed from their communities and kept in museums across Canada. Monroe's project of "de-collecting" these bones, as Barbara S. Bruce uses the term, "represents a desire to undo the colonial process" by "initiat[ing] a counter-process" that reclaims the lost children through an improvised, perhaps imperfect, act of repatriation that Bruce likens to King's own artistic project offering "resistance through art" despite the limitations of form (198-202). In his introduction to *All My Relations*, King suggests that contemporary Native writers will continue to write stories set largely in the present until they no longer feel trapped by a colonial past; Monroe's project of "de-collection" may be read as one attempt "to make our history our own" (xii), as is *Truth and Bright Water* itself.

But as much as Tecumseh's identification of Monroe as the woman and of the items in the suitcase as the bones of lost children offer "solutions" to the mystery of the plot, as well as a political reading of Monroe's (and King's) art,

the boys' perception of the ceremony on the Horns leaves other questions unanswered. What is the power of the unidentified song that Monroe uses for the ceremony, the song that galvanizes Lum when he first hears it on the truck radio? Why does he associate it with his lost mother? Tecumseh sloughs off Lum's claim as either unimportant or incidental, likening the song to one of his own mother's favourites, but he notices that hearing the song changes Lum's mood, and no amount of casual dismissal dissuades Lum from his association. The mystery of the song's impact and origin suggests an aporetic entry into the text, or rather, a suspension of those very Western epistemologies that demand that such a literary clue offer itself up as allusion, the way that Ridington's "contexted discourse" does. Being nameless, the song does not possess the researchable historical allusions that hide in plain sight in King's references to historical personae such as Dog Soldiers, Rebecca Neugin, and Tecumseh. The song, in remaining unnamed much as Lum's mother is unnamed, stands in for what "everybody knows" but chooses not to name. Note, too, that the ambiguity around the name of Cassie's lost child gives us another example of that which goes unnamed despite its location in "knowable" communal discourse. Tecumseh is the only person in the novel who refers to the child as Mia, after hearing from Cassie that she gave herself her American Indian Movement (AIM) tattoo while looking in a mirror. While the child's name might be Mia, the MIA letters also stand for Missing in Action, likening the child's absence to that of a soldier lost to enemy forces and not yet recovered. Missing people in *Truth and Bright Water* go unnamed not because they are unimportant, but rather because the importance the text grants them relies on communal knowledge, not consumable knowledge.

In discussing Robert Alexie's novel *Porcupines and China Dolls*, King uses the metaphor of song to discuss the structural components that Alexie's novel takes from oral storytelling. These elements, I note, are equally present in the ways King constructs community in *Truth and Bright Water*:

The continuing attempts of the community to right itself and the omnipresent choruses of sadness and humour, of tragedy and sarcasm, become, in the end, an honour song of sorts, a song many of us have heard before . . . there are more of us who know this song than there should be. (*Truth About Stories* 117-118)

This refrain, an "honour song of sorts" that is offered in repeated narrative "choruses of sadness and humour" returns us to the unnamed song's appearance towards the end of the novel, after Tecumseh's discovery that the "woman" on the Horns is actually Monroe in a wig. While Tecumseh is pleased both by the solution and by his own powers of deductive reasoning,

Lum's maternal fantasy is shattered by the revelation, to the point where Lum seems not to care about Monroe's repatriation of the children. It is only when Tecumseh suggests that they should re-enact Monroe's improvised ceremony with the skull that Lum refers to as his "baby" that Lum smiles (*Truth and Bright Water* 269). But instead of dancing and playing music as Monroe did, Lum berates his skull "baby" as "pathetic" and "one useless piece of shit," while whipping himself across the chest with a piece of rebar from the half-finished bridge (271). Lum, abandoned by his mother to the vicious beatings of his father, is moved to re-enact Monroe's ceremony by dropping the skull into the river only when he hears "his mother's favourite" song drifting down once again from the Horns, where Monroe is playing the piano on the back of his pickup truck (271). The song calms him, dangerously, as he says to Tecumseh, "All you have to do is let go" (272). In the novel's most painful moment, Lum runs off the unfinished bridge, followed by Tecumseh's dog, Soldier; Lum's body is later pulled from the river, along with the "junk" that Tecumseh has warned always ends up in the river, "tires, car parts, a lawn mower, a mattress" (274). While Ridington insists that Lum's jump is an allusion to the historical figure of Geronimo and a deliberate reference to earth diver creation stories (102), Bruce reads Lum's run off the bridge as a suicide that imitates de-collection because "neither repatriation nor decolonization can save all those impacted upon by the colonial process" (203). My own reading is haunted by the image of the child treated as garbage, and recalls the unknown fate of Cassie's missing child, the death on the Trail of Tears of the ghost child Rebecca Neguin, and all of those children who "died hard" in circumstances beyond their control. The difference between Monroe's invented ceremony and Lum's run off the bridge is the difference between design and desperation. For Monroe, the unnamed song represents ceremony; for Lum, it represents irreparable loss, a "letting go" that "junks" his corporeal existence.

The song appears once more in the text's final pages, and its reappearance—now removed from the physical environment of the Shield River—changes the song's relationship to the text. Monroe gives Tecumseh his piano in the giveaway, and teaches him "a couple of songs" (278). When Helen and Lucy Rabbit insist on hearing Tecumseh play the piano, he resists but eventually obliges:

I play a little bit of what Monroe showed me. It isn't much, but I don't make any big mistakes. When I finish, Lucy and my mother clap.

"I know that song," says Lucy.

"Everybody knows that song," says my mother. "Monroe showed him how to play it." (276)

King has played with the misidentification of song before, in *Green Grass, Running Water*, when Coyote misidentifies the song sung by the calling card handed to him by A.A. Gabriel: "I know that song" says Coyote, who begins singing a hymn, conflating "Hosanna" with "Canada" to come up with "Hosannada." When told that the song is actually the Canadian national anthem, with the lyrics "O Canada, our home on Natives' land," Coyote is disappointed by his inaccurate identification, and by the song's colonial message: "Oh," says Coyote, "That song" (*Green* 226). The ability to correctly identify a song is an act of self-inclusion, one that Coyote cannot perform, despite his best efforts. When Lucy Rabbit identifies the song that Tecumseh plays, Helen's rejoinder acknowledges that Lucy is part of the "everybody" of the community: someone who—even with her bleached hair, professed desire to be Marilyn Monroe, and fondness for Rolling Stones songs—shares communal knowledge without particular effort. Does Tecumseh play the same "rain and cloudy days" song that he and Lum heard twice by the river? While King does not confirm whether or not the song that Tecumseh plays is the same song, he leaves a few clues. It is Monroe who plays the song, initially on the radio, and then on his piano, even playing on after Lum runs off the bridge's end, leaving Tecumseh anxiously listening for any noise that would indicate that Lum and Soldier are still alive: "all I hear is the wind and the faint strains of the piano rising out of the land with the sun" (*Truth and Bright Water* 273). For Monroe to teach Tecumseh the song that was playing during the death of his cousin is not necessarily as cruel as it may seem. In the same way that Tecumseh sings an honour song in an improvised ceremony to commemorate the installation of Monroe's buffalo sculptures, Monroe uses the unnamed but lingering tune as an honour song to a dead warrior and also as a lesson for Tecumseh in how to be a "minstrel" who records and is responsive to events in his community (203, 261). Tecumseh's reluctance to play the song, then, is not only shyness about his ability as a beginning musician, but also about a new seriousness about his responsibilities as the keeper of the song and the keeper of Lum's memory. Lum's identification of the song as elegiac in the book's opening pages has come to fruition; now he, too, is honoured by the song's ceremony. The import of the moment is not lost on Lucy, who does not hum or spin in her chair as she does when she hears other songs, but instead begins to weep at Tecumseh's use of his and Lum's usual greeting for Lucy: "What's up, Doc?" (276). Lucy knows the song is commemorative, as "everybody" in *Bright Water* knows.

However, the "everybody" of King's community does not necessarily include the reader; not everything is offered up as knowable, or consumable,

within this text, and this conscious elision underscores the need to protect a culture that has suffered, both historically and in the present, by the consuming spirit and practices of colonialism. So despite the song's obvious significance in the text as a narrative framing device, as an elegiac artifact, and as an inherited performance bequeathed to Tecumseh from his possible father Monroe Swimmer, the song remains for the reader tuneless, lyricless, and nameless. In the Canadian literature classroom, the unnamed song functions as a pedagogical pivot from which to address readership and differing modes of understanding. As a radicalizing trope, the song can be read through King's refusal of the term "postcolonial" and his suggestion of four other terms that describe the functions of Aboriginal literatures: tribal, polemical, interfusional, and associational. The unnamed song is "tribal" in that it is meant to be heard and understood within a single community; it is "polemical" in the ways that it emphasizes differences between cultures; it is "interfusional" in how it honours the inclusion of the oral in a written text; and it is "associational" particularly as a piece of "fiction which eschews judgements and conclusions" ("Godzilla" 13-14). Ridington suggests that King's use of historical allusion points up the book's position as a "neo-premodern" text, rather than a postcolonial text (105). Like the historical allusions, the song is a sign that resists easy interpretation, but the song—to a great degree—refuses identification. Noting the song as a hinge between a "First Nations text" and a "Canadian text" suggests the aporetic suspension upon which King's novel relies: the movement of the "impossible and necessary," that moment that "comes to pass by surpassing" the simple rules of racial inclusion and exclusion (Derrida, *Aporias* 33). The inclusion of such a text in a Canadian literature course is vital for discussing the historical practice of colonialism in a settler-invader nation, for questioning the many meanings of postcolonialism in Canada, and, as John Willinsky has discussed, for shining a light on how readers "learn to divide the world" within and beyond the classroom.

Part 3: The Gift: Suspending the Nation

The unnamed song functions as a gift, and Derrida's aporia of giving (discussed in *The Gift of Death*) proceeds on the necessity of practising generosity coupled with the impossibility of giving without conscious thought, and without conscious gratitude, expressed or unexpressed, from the receiver. Monroe offers the unnamed song to the bones of the children and to the spirit of the ancestors in his de-collection ritual. When Monroe

asks Tecumseh to take up the task of composing songs about Monroe's "great deeds," both heroic and mock-heroic (203), Monroe engages the necessity for storytelling as a memorial device and cultural touchstone, while pointing up the impossible necessity of a gift that is given without the recognition of the gift's reception. The unnamed song that Monroe teaches Tecumseh becomes the gift of memory, ushered in by Monroe's giveaway of his collection of appropriated Aboriginal art—a giving back of that which was stolen. This ceremony approaches the impossible necessity of an aporia in that Monroe never calls the event a giveaway, but merely places the items in a field and waits for people to show up. This ritual of gift-giving almost escapes articulation, until Cassie names it "the giveaway" (258). Though Derrida would contend that this articulation would undo "true giving," it is worth noting that in *Truth and Bright Water's* giveaway, recipients reclaim as much as they receive. The giveaway as a textual presence is a gift, a reclamation of the potlatch ritual that was outlawed by the Department of Indian Affairs in the early twentieth century. King's project of recovering the potlatch tradition in this part of the novel engages Derrida's aporia of giving even as it confounds it: this gift-giving is culturally conscious, yet goes personally unacknowledged. The giver is kept from admiring his/her own generosity by the ritual nature of the task, and for the same reason, the receiver does not thank the giver. Gratitude is not absent, but it is understood rather than spoken; the true gift can then remain uninvaded by the "third party" that language represents. Considering Tecumseh's first-person narration and his function as Monroe's "minstrel," we can read the novel itself as a kind of "song" that Tecumseh eventually writes, not just for Monroe, but for everyone in the community.

More mysterious functions of song can be found in the ominous and contemplative humming of Tecumseh's maternal family. When his mother stops singing in order to hum, she is inevitably thinking of "another life, another time" (219). Even though Helen and Cassie laugh their way through their personal version of "I Remember It Well," from *Gigi* to testify to the differences between male and female perspectives, that song's examination of the mutability of memory reinforces the novel's mystery about the paternity of Lum, Tecumseh, and the missing Mia. Tecumseh's grandmother has taught both her daughters the art of "humming to herself when she's thinking. Or when she's sad" (170). When she "reads" the skull that the boys have found, the elder's sensitivity to the life, death, and locality of the lost child is rooted in her humming as a sign of interpretative ability. The "impossible necessity"

of mourning surfaces in this feminine act of humming, as the grandmother notes that the skull belonged to a girl who “died hard . . . a long ways from home” (170). If the right to mourn is predicated by the right to inherit, the girl’s blood relatives must mourn her loss: impossible when the skull is so far removed from her place of origin. On the other hand, mourning the death of a child is absolutely necessary, so the grandmother’s observation is aporetic, occupying the space between the impossibility and necessity of mourning the unknown.

However, the grandmother in *Truth and Bright Water* is neither stuck in nor embarrassed by the aporia of mourning; she understands the negotiations between past and present, between languages, between cultures. When asked to offer hospitality to the novel’s ghost figure, Rebecca Negin, the grandmother does not hesitate to welcome Rebecca, and so engages in another Derridean aporia. The aporia of hospitality involves the necessity of welcoming guests without suspicion and the impossibility of controlling those guests. King parodies the aporia of hospitality in his invention of “Indian Days,” a carnivalesque holiday that enacts a parodic reversal of colonization, during which white tourists are happily “swindled” by the Bright Water residents. During “Indian Days,” acts of recolonization are ridiculed rather than regarded as threatening, and the “trespass” of the white people on reserve land is doubly ironized as a repetition of history, and as a potentially profitable event for the First Nations people. This parody of hospitality, which is primarily a parody of history, finds a contrast in the cultural hospitality that Tecumseh’s grandmother offers the ghost-child Rebecca. The grandmother tells Rebecca that guests are welcomed into her lodge according to the traditional exchange of food for a tribal story. The impossibility of controlling a guest emerges when Rebecca begins to tell her story in Cherokee, a language that the grandmother does not speak. But the grandmother’s contention that there’s “more to a story than just the words” (232) suggests the ultimate relinquishment of control over language, and the grandmother’s skill in listening reflects the grace of her hospitality.

Just as there is more to a story than just words, the ability to recognize a song without its lyrics is not only the stuff of game shows. If language is a disruptive third party, then music without words, a song without lyrics, skirts the spoken even as it takes up discursive space. Tecumseh plays the piano but does not sing. Still, what Lucy Rabbit acknowledges as knowledge refers to the unheard lyrics: the “song,” not the melody. She acknowledges what cannot be articulated but is understood in the community of the book.

Tecumseh picks out the song, as Monroe has taught him, on the piano; this mourning song *needs* no language within the community of the text. As a gift, it *offers* no language to the reading community, who must, in turn, learn to listen, not because answers are in the offing, but because listening is the operative action of hospitality. In a reading community where the book is composed of a neopremodern text beneath a reader's sometimes marauding colonial eye, the impossible necessity of a rhetorical bridge built on something other than language must assert itself. A suspension of attitudes takes attentiveness, and an aporia's impassability is also its rhetorical usefulness; it invites discussion, it challenges language, and it resists easy dichotomies. A conscious reading community must become and remain alert to the possibilities of listening carefully to that which we cannot hear.

The unfinished bridge, as a central metaphor for speaking over the chasm between cultures, also appears in Lee Maracle's essay about conflict at the 1988 "Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures" conference in Vancouver. King's unfinished bridge that cannot quite link Truth to Bright Water, Maracle's "ramparts hanging in the air," and Derrida's aporetic "experience of nonpassage" (*Aporias* 12) indicate three ways of thinking about learning that use, rather than ignore, the gap between cultures. King's unfinished bridge in *Truth and Bright Water* performs a suspension of the nation and of the future, suggesting, much as Derrida does, that impossibility and necessity are conjoined in very practical ways in lived experience, and particularly in the lived experience of colonized peoples. Intellectual suspension, as a reading practice and as a mode of discussion in the classroom, may appear to be simple in theory, but is difficult in practice; it requires an investment in balance as a literary symbol, as a rhetorical mode, and as a reading position. As Erin Mouré has written about her own poetics of suspension: "It's not easy. And it's anxious. And it takes attentiveness" (203).

WORKS CITED

- Bruce, Barbara S. "Figures of Collection and (Post)Colonial Processes in Major John Richardson's *Wacousta* and Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*." *Is Canada Postcolonial?: Unsettling Canadian Literature*. Ed. Laura Moss. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003. 190-206.
- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991. 13-31.
- Davidson, Arnold E., Priscilla L. Walton and Jennifer Andrews. *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993.

- . *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- . *Mémoires for Paul de Man*. Trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.
- Episkeneuw, Jo-Ann. "Socially Responsible Criticism: Aboriginal Literature, Ideology, and the Literary Canon." *Creating Community: A Roundtable on Canadian Aboriginal Literature*. Ed. Renate Eigenbrod and Jo-Ann Episkeneuw. Penticton, BC: Theytus, 2002. 54-67.
- Hoy, Helen. *How Should I Read These?: Native Women Writers in Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford UP, 2000.
- King, Thomas. "Godzilla vs. Post-colonial." *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990): 10-16.
- . *Green Grass, Running Water*. Toronto: HarperPerennial, 1994.
- . "Introduction." *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*. Ed. Thomas King. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990. ix-xvi.
- . *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: Anansi, 2003.
- . *Truth and Bright Water*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1999.
- Maracle, Lee. "Ramparts Hanging in the Air." *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures*. Ed. Telling It Book Collective. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1990. 161-171.
- Mouré, Erin. "Poetry, Memory and the Polis." *Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender*. Eds. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel. Toronto: Coach House, 1990. 201-208.
- Proulx, Sharron and Aruna Srivastava. "A Moose in the Corridor: Teaching English, Aboriginal Pedagogies, and Institutional Resistance." *Creating Community: A Roundtable on Canadian Aboriginal Literature*. Ed. Renate Eigenbrod and Jo-Ann Episkeneuw. Penticton, BC: Theytus, 2002. 187-208.
- Ridington, Robin. "Happy Trails to You: Contexted Discourse and Indian Removals in Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*." *Canadian Literature* 167 (2000): 89-107.
- Willinsky, John. *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998.

