

**False Truths: Misused Reductionist Handles Examined through Canadian Literature**

by

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False Truths: Misused Reductionist Handles Examined through Canadian Literature

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in Children's Literature

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## Abstract

In Eurocentric culture, misused reductionist handles are manifestations of reductionism's mutation from a specialized tool to examine limited aspects of the world into a worldview of its own, a fragmented epistemology "predicated on the discovery of a true world of realities lying behind a veil of appearances" (Latour 474-475). As someone whose naïve belief in the Eurocentric concept of Truth was challenged by exposure to Indigenous ways of knowing, I examine in this thesis the consequences of this misuse of reductionist handles by contrasting Eurocentric Canadian with Indigenous Canadian literature. In "Royal Beatings," Alice Munro depicts how theatricality, a reductionist handle, is internalized by characters who thereby reduce themselves to culturally created roles; in "Miles City, Montana," she depicts how idealism, another reductionist handle, is internalized by characters who then face irreconcilable contradictions in reality. On the other hand, the Nuu-chah-nulth origin story "How Son of Raven Captured the Day," presented in E. Richard Atleo's *Tsawalk*, uses theatricality as a holistic rather than reductionist tool that emphasizes the importance of maintaining respect for all. Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* also portrays the conflict between Eurocentric and Indigenous epistemologies through its emphasis on contextualization and use of water as a powerful holistic symbol, thus clarifying water's rebellion against reductionism in "Miles City, Montana." The concept of misused reductionist handles is useful for future research on reductionism's epistemological influence, which can be guided by examining not only the differences between the Eurocentric worldview and other worldviews, but their intersections as well.

## Lay Summary

This thesis analyzes the problems of reductionism in Eurocentric culture through a close reading of two short stories from Nobel-prize winning author Alice Munro. I show how the characters and communities that Munro depicts misuse reductionist tools, or *handles*, by allowing those tools to control how they view the world and what they value in it, consequently driving them to fixate on emotional and ideological extremes. I then contrast Munro's Eurocentric depiction of this issue with the outside perspectives of Indigenous storytelling through close readings of the Nuu-chah-nulth origin story "How Son of Raven Captured the Day," presented by E. Richard Atleo, and Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. The concept of misused reductionist handles is useful for future research on reductionism's influence, which can be guided by examining not only the differences between the Eurocentric worldview and other worldviews, but their intersections as well.

## **Preface**

This Master of Arts thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Kevin Sun, as a partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts in Children's Literature Program at the University of British Columbia.

This is the academic portion *only* of a hybrid academic/creative thesis. The creative portion is a young adult novel titled *We With Eyes*, written exclusively by Kevin Sun.

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## **Dedication**

To those with their own embarrassing stories.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 An Embarrassing Story

When I was an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia majoring in English literature, I dreaded the inevitability of undertaking my program's Canadian literature course requirement. This was not due to my holding any particular animosity towards Canadian literature, but because I knew so little about it and possessed so little interest that I assumed it would be boring or, even worse, irrelevant to my undergraduate ambitions of seeking universal knowledge on a world literature that Canada seemed an insignificant part of. This painfully naïve and misguided notion, which I thought was quite reasonable at the time, was exemplified by my first blog post for the course: "As someone who is not as interested in Canada as he perhaps should be, my chief interest in this course is how its specific focus applies to the universal context." In other words, I wanted to squeeze all the so-called superfluous stuff out of Canadian literature—its unique histories, cultures, issues, identities—and extract from them something known as Truth, perhaps, as Lee Maracle puts it, in the spirit of those who "waste a great deal of effort deleting character, plot, and story from theoretical arguments."

The happy ending of this embarrassing story was that this course on Canadian literature, which focused on Indigenous knowledge and explored its tensions with Eurocentric knowledge, opened my eyes to new epistemologies, new ways of knowing, whereas before I only had one—the one that compelled me to seek universal Truth, push for so-called absolute and infallible progress. And just as being exposed to other cultures allows people to better observe the peculiarities of their own, being exposed to Indigenous epistemologies allowed me to step back from the Eurocentric epistemology I grew up in. I thus no longer perceived Eurocentric

epistemology as the only “*resource*” I had to understand the world, but as just one “*topic*” that I could examine with the help of other ways of knowing (Latour 475).

## 1.2 Reductionist Handles

In the next course I took on Canadian literature (for the first was so enlightening that I had to come back for more) I encountered the work of French scholar Bruno Latour, whose research aligns with my interests in its analysis of Eurocentric epistemology and the reductionist methodology that dominates it. While I do not presume to be familiar with all of his intricate and insightful work in science studies, one term that he used in “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” particularly resonated with me: “In all disciplines, reductionism offers an enormously useful *handle* to allow scientists to insert their instrumentarium, their paradigms, and to produce long series of practical effects” (483, emphasis in original). The first image that the word “handle” elicits in my mind is the handle of a door, a small object that is built to help move a much larger object.

The metaphor feels apt; when using reductionism as a tool of inquiry, one must define a workable boundary by marking the door’s outline and then build a handle capable of moving that door, unlocking that knowledge. As Latour notes, there is no doubt that reductionism is a powerful tool that has fuelled many “industries” and that its use is characterized by “the proliferation of ingenious detours, of highly localized sets of skills, [that] extract interesting and useful results from a multitude of agencies” (483). When faced with the chaotic mass of countless variables natural to everyday life, reductionism clears a precise path of study, eliminating all variables but the one under investigation; successfully analyzing this variable in the experimental environment—controlled, isolated, artificial—then allows it, in theory at least, to be manipulated and applied to any context according to the scientist’s intentions. Yet when the

properties of this specialized tool are internalized so that reductionism not only influences how people gain knowledge about the world but how they value it as well, a dangerous dissonance arises between the handle's proper purpose and how it is being used.

It is this dissonance that this paper will explore through a literary approach. What are specific examples of reductionist handles? How are they misused? What are the consequences of this misuse? To answer these questions, I examine two stories from Nobel-prize-winning Canadian author Alice Munro, asserting that as a Eurocentric writer, much of her work's power stems from how the characters and society she depicts misuse reductionist handles, thus reflecting the flaws of Eurocentric epistemology as it remains bound to the reductionist worldview. I will then draw upon the Indigenous literature and storytelling of E. Richard Atleo and Thomas King, whose holistic perspectives clarify how reductionism is both artificial and damaging while showing what an existence free of these misused handles looks like.

## **Chapter 2: Misused Reductionist Handles in Munro's Eurocentric Literature**

### **2.1 Munro as a Eurocentric Writer**

Dubbed the “master of the contemporary short story” by the Nobel Prize committee, Alice Munro has won countless literary awards and is known for focusing her stories on rural contexts, where her writing on “restricted lives speak[s] to the larger human experience beyond the local settings” (Staines “Introduction” 3). While Munro’s work is undoubtedly grounded in Eurocentric culture, as can be ascertained from David Staines’ analysis of her history in “From Wingham to Clinton: Alice Munro in her Canadian context,” I am by no means denigrating it as a product of misguided reductionist worldviews; neither am I asserting that she is misusing reductionist handles herself. What I will instead show is that her stories, described by Staines as “kitchen linoleum with the deep caves of people’s aspirations and failings just beneath the surface,” draw their profound tension from the vivid reality of Eurocentric culture’s misuse of reductionist handles (“Introduction” 2). Her fiction represents Eurocentric literature in this investigation because she not only exposes this misuse, but subverts it as well.

In the following close readings of Munro’s “Royal Beatings” and “Miles City, Montana,” I will identify two reductionist handles—theatricality and idealism—and explore how their misuse is depicted in these stories respectively. I will then analyze what these handles and Munro’s subversion of them show for reductionist issues in Eurocentric culture as a whole.

### **2.2 Misused Theatricality in “Royal Beatings”**

The first words that the narrator Rose emphasizes in “Royal Beatings” is the title itself: “*Royal beating*. That was Flo’s promise. You are going to get one Royal Beating” (1125). Due to the sensationalist wording of her step mother’s threat, Rose falls into her “need to picture things, to pursue absurdities,” and imagines a theatrical situation: “She came up with a tree-lined

avenue, a crowd of formal spectators, some white horses and black slaves. Someone knelt, and the blood came leaping out like banners. An occasion both savage and splendid” (1125). These dramatized visualizations set the theatrical tone for the rest of the story, reinforced throughout with commentary such as on Flo’s interest in “the details of a death” (1127), Becky’s “stagey” behavior in her “career of public sociability and display” (1129, 1131), and the forgiven obscenities of the interviewed Hat Nettleton, whose language is “rendered harmless and delightful by his hundred years.” (1140).

As a reductionist handle, theatricality is a storytelling tool that demands the suppression of the actor’s self into a catalyst for presenting the acted role; to play these roles, actors must put aside their own personas and assume others, which can manifest visually on a stage through costumes and masks. However, while there is indeed a dissociation between the personas of actors and roles in the theatricality of “Royal Beatings,” the boundaries of this dissociation are blurred by the closeness between those personas. Jennifer Murray and Lee Garner “link the use of the theatrical metaphor in Munro to the exploration of the conflict between the social script and unconscious drives,” where the script’s “values are largely those of small-town North American Protestantism” (par. 1). Families must maintain parent-child hierarchies, even using physical discipline, and the community must maintain “public morality,” even to the extent of lynching alleged transgressors (“Royal Beatings” 1130). Actors play their roles in the social script perpetually, and Rose must continue her act as long as she remains a member of her family.

During the royal beating, Rose's father assumes the role of the parent who must punish and Rose assumes the role of his “victim,” the child who must be punished (1137). Yet Murray and Garner assert that Rose “is in an ambiguous position, perhaps not entirely authentic in her

status as victim” (par. 16). Rose is not an entirely authentic victim because of the theatrical dissociation between actor and role, and in this case, she acts out that role independently of the other actors. She “must play her part in [the beating] with the same grossness, the same exaggeration, that her father displays, playing his,” such that it is unclear whether her father “throws Rose down” or “she throws herself down” (“Royal Beatings” 1137). Murray and Garner interpret this as evidence for Rose’s internalization of her social script, blurring the lines between the “actor-victim” and the “spectator-critic” (par. 16). This internalization is furthermore evidence of theatricality’s misuse as a reductionist handle. Not only does Eurocentric culture pressure people to follow a social script that in reductionist fashion demands physical and emotional obedience to the script regardless of the actors, but it pressures actors in this way so much that the role’s persona eventually overwhelms that of the actors themselves.

In their analysis of “Royal Beatings” and another of Munro’s stories, one of Murray and Garner’s conclusions is that “Munro’s writing inscribes a certain joyful irony in the examination of the animality of humanity” (par. 28). Part of their evidence for this claim is the apparent “authenticity” of the aggression that Rose’s father unleashes during the royal beating:

He is acting the part of the punishing patriarch which he is expected to play, but the violence, which increases steadily throughout the scene, corresponds to an authentic drive, to deep impulses within him; it is the violence which is sincere, whether the motives for it are or not. (par. 11)

It is true that despite the initial reluctance of Rose’s father, being “tired in advance, maybe, on the verge of rejecting the role he has to play,” he ultimately fills with “hatred and pleasure” when acting out that role (“Royal Beatings” 1135-1136). However, do these emotions come from a primal, unconscious drive, or are they products of the social script? Is Rose’s father not

internalizing the punishing father's persona in the same way that Rose internalizes the punished child's persona, the collapsed boundaries between actor and role creating a theatrical situation where "he is acting, and he means it" (1136)?

The premise underlying Murray and Garner's conclusion is that Rose's father possesses an innate "aggressive drive" that is in Munro's story exposed and sated by the royal beating, the theatrical operation of a Eurocentric social script (par. 12). I do not disagree that such a drive exists. However, it manifests this violently during the royal beating not despite the social script, but because of it; in other words, the social script does not inhibit this violence, but rather catalyzes it. Having had his entire self reduced to the punishing father's role—such that Rose "knows everything about him" because in this scene, that is all he is—Rose's father is driven to fixate on this violence, to draw "anger," "hatred," and "pleasure" from it ("Royal Beatings" 1136). I therefore disagree with Murray and Garner's claim that the actions and observed emotions of Rose's father are "beyond the demands of the social script" (par. 18), and posit instead that every action in this scene—including Rose "letting out a noise, the sort of noise that makes Flo cry, *Oh, what if people can hear her?*"—conforms to that script rather than deviating from it ("Royal Beatings" 1137). It is important to keep in mind that Munro's story depicts one of many royal beatings and that "a scene like this" is, for Rose's family and the Eurocentric culture they represent, nothing out of the ordinary (1138). The social script normalizes these theatrics, allowing its actors to promptly return to daily "life" with nothing worse than "a queer lassitude, a convalescent indolence, [and] not far off satisfaction" (1138). The social script is thus never threatened, but only reinforced.

Rose's father "never managed really to injure" Rose physically because serious injury would go against the Eurocentric social script of how children should be disciplined (1137).



However, the horrifying yet ordinary theatricality of her royal beating nonetheless engraves lasting mental scars. Faced with the experience of her father reduced to a punisher filled with simple aggression, Rose is driven to pursue similar reductions and extremes:

She has passed into a state of calm, in which outrage is perceived as complete and final. In this state events and possibilities take on a lovely simplicity . . . She will never speak to them, she will never look at them with anything but loathing, she will never forgive them. She will punish them; she will finish them. (1137)

After being reduced to a victim, Rose imagines turning the tables on her parents by reducing herself to a punisher, playing out a theatrical situation in her mind where she commits suicide. Had she gone through with this idea, she would have finished her parents by reducing them and herself ultimately and irreversibly. It would no longer matter what kind of people they were, what their struggles and passions and fears had ever entailed—they would just be the parents of a child who committed suicide. Unlike the aggression of Rose’s father, suicide certainly does go against the social script. However, the royal beating is the direct cause of these horrifying thoughts and desires that go against life itself.

Of course, Rose never actually follows through with her thought experiment. Despite attempting to suppress her own persona by reducing herself to another theatrical role, she is pulled back into her own persona by her personal “favorites,” edible reminders that pleasures other than revenge through death are still available to her; this so-called “helpless corruption” is thus a cleansing that washes away the dangerous fixations that misused theatricality drives her to, at least until the next Royal Beating (1138). On the other hand, even with the cleansing and the return to a less emotionally lopsided normality, a degree of permanent damage is done. This damage is acknowledged in yet another contemplation on death, a contemplation that transcends

the time of the story's royal beating and yet is inserted right into the middle of it: "[Rose] has since wondered about murders, and murderers. Does the thing have to be carried through, in the end, partly for the effect, to prove to the audience of one . . . that the most dreadful antic is justified, feelings can be found to match it?" (1136). Rose thus wonders how it is possible to cross the line that she never crosses with her thoughts on suicide, to be successful at suppression and reduction from the thought experiment to the act's execution. It is the actor's holistic self that is suppressed by the role's demands; the complex, naturally contradictory feelings of human beings that are reduced to simplistic, single-minded perspectives; and from that reduction, the feelings that remain become fixations, amplified to the extent that make people capable of murder.

Despite the dramatic force of the Royal Beating and its emotional consequences that take up so much of her story, Munro acknowledges the humanity that exists beyond the theatricality mandated by the social script. Rose's father, the punisher who otherwise toils in his labours to help provide for his family, has a knowledge of "Spinoza" and Shakespeare that has nothing to do with his social identity (1126-1127). As someone who lives "in a poor part of town" in 1930s rural Ontario, Rose's father knows that this side of him is incompatible with his role in society: "When he realized [the words] were out, there would be a quick bit of cover-up coughing, a swallowing, an alert, unusual silence" (1127-1128). Rose knows this as well: "The person who spoke those words and the person who spoke to her as her father were not the same . . . It would be the worst sort of taste to acknowledge the person who was not supposed to be there; it would not be forgiven" (1127). Pressured to act, think, and feel according to their social roles, characters suppress the deviations that reflect their true personas. Those who deviate are

compelled to police themselves back into conformity, whereas those who witness the deviance willfully ignore it.

Yet even if Munro's characters never mention these kinds of displays, theatrical in their own right, they cannot be unseen, unheard, or forgotten. The bathroom in the kitchen reflects this most dramatically, where although the social agreement is that "[t]he person creating the noises in the bathroom was not connected with the person who walked out," they are nonetheless "all familiar with each other's nether voices, not only in their more explosive moments but in their intimate sighs and growls and pleas and statements" (1127). The social script, oppressive and traumatic in its theatrical reductions, can only pretend that things such as basic human needs and philosophical yearnings do not exist; in reality, they are still there, genuine, ready to be acknowledged. Their acknowledgement would ultimately entail the destruction of the social script's theatrical illusion, a reversal from suppression and reduction to freedom and the expansion of complexities—of what fathers, daughters, humans can be.

### **2.3 Misused Idealism in "Miles City, Montana"**

Like "Royal Beatings," Munro's "Miles City, Montana" employs theatrical language to illustrate how its characters are influenced by their social script. However, whereas "Royal Beatings" focuses on the theatrical act itself and how its misuse as a reductionist handle inflicts deep-seated trauma, "Miles City, Montana" focuses on how the inevitable contradictions between reality and Eurocentric idealism—contradictions manifested through theatrical scenes—create trauma as well.

The narrator of "Miles City, Montana" fixates on imagined details. She does this first with her description of the drowned Steve Gauley's "nostril" and again with her description of Cynthia's "strangely artificial style of speech and gesture" when she panics about Meg's near

drowning (1141, 1151). In both cases, the narrator presents the detail and then claims she has just imagined it, making the facts clear afterwards. This emphasizes that two narratives exist in this story: factual and imagined, and these narratives interact in various ways throughout. When the narrator reveals that she “would not have been allowed” to see Gauley's nostril, the imagined narrative is revealed to be filling a gap in the factual narrative, and when she dramatizes Cynthia’s “naturally graceful” movements, the imagined distorts the factual (1141, 1151). When the narrator lies to Andrew about the lettuce, she conceals the factual with the imagined (1145); when Cynthia denies Andrew’s boast about his suave “image,” she exposes the imagined masquerading as the factual (1143).

John J McKenna asserts that in “Miles City, Montana” the “conflict centers on the virtually impossible task of reconciling the ideal with the real” (13). From this perspective, the interactions between the imagined and factual narrative represent attempts by the imagined to become the factual. These attempts fail when the narrator rescinds her descriptions of Gauley and Cynthia, when she admits her lie about the lettuce to readers, and when Cynthia denies Andrew's boast. The idealized narrative seeks to create a symbolic link between reality and its dramatic significance. The narrator imagines Gauley's “face unaltered except for the mud” to symbolize an innocent victim; she imagines Cynthia’s “slow and inappropriate” demeanour to symbolize that she is “monstrously self-possessed” because she disregards her drowning sister (1141, 1152). The latter example illustrates that the idealized narrative is not simply a portrayal of “the best in people” (McKenna 9). Like theatricality in “Royal Beatings,” the idealism of “Miles City, Montana” serves to simplify complexity by reducing reality, thereby imposing a perspective of the world that is modified to fit neatly into societal expectations centered around good and evil, heroism and malice. The mundane but genuine middle ground—that Cynthia is

slow to recognize Meg's possible drowning rather than guilty of ignoring it and that Andrew scrambles up the fence rather than leaping over it—is thus intruded upon by ideological, emotional extremes (“Miles” 1152).

The narrator of “Miles City, Montana” positions her loyalties in-between the factual and imagined narrative, providing room for both without allowing either to completely silence the other. However, there are two points in the story when the imagined is not presented as attempting to distort the factual but is instead distinctly contrasted to it. This first occurs during the narrator's reflection on Meg's survival of the pool incident: “That was all we spoke about—luck. But I was compelled to picture the opposite. At this moment, we could have been filling out forms. Meg removed from us, Meg's body being prepared for shipment . . . The most ordinary tragedy” (1153). While there is a reducing of the factual narrative to a “chain of lucky links,” the focus in this moment is on a completely separate, clearly imagined scene that the narrator only summons because it is imagined. This imagined narrative highlights that in the pool scene, the collective, idealized consequence of the narrator being distracted by her “thirst[,]” of Andrew being unaware until the narrator “cried out” for him, of Cynthia's “lack of urgency,” and of the lifeguard's incompetency would have been for Meg to die (1151-1152). It is of course not as if the narrator wishes her daughter had drowned, yet that imagined narrative nonetheless lodges itself in her consciousness, powered by the societal ideal of how this particular chain of mistakes should logically be punished.

Why does the narrator fixate on this imagined narrative? Having avoided the worst outcome, why does she not do her best to forget about the what ifs and focus on the reality of her daughter's survival, her family's intactness, rather than subjecting herself to this thought experiment of already averted horrors? Because this is her “safe shock” (1153). It is a chance to

taste tragedy without actually experiencing it, and by tasting it, she relieves some of the tension that the “virtually impossible task of reconciling the ideal with the real” has caused her throughout her life (McKenna 13). This point is hammered in with the second presentation of a distinct, imagined narrative:

When I stood apart from my parents at Steve Gauley’s funeral and watched them, and had this new, unpleasant feeling about them, I thought that I was understanding something about them for the first time . . . Their big, stiff, dressed-up bodies did not stand between me and sudden death, or any kind of death.  
(“Miles” 1154)

The Eurocentric societal ideal of life free from death, which is itself a reductive denial of death’s role in life, is thus revealed as “effrontery, hypocrisy,” the ideal’s illusion exposed by Steve Gauley’s death and dangerously threatened by the pool incident (1154). Despite understanding this fact and despite her aspirations towards being the contrary, “indomitable” type of mother (1145), the narrator ultimately cannot escape the reductive illusion of safety that Eurocentric idealism provides, feeling “relief” to return from the road trip and back into everyday life (1154). The safe shock therefore allows the narrator to reaffirm her knowledge of the truth—that deaths are “anything but impossible or unnatural”—without destroying her ability to live within the confines of the imagined narrative (1154).

After realizing the falsity of the Eurocentric idealism that she is raised under, the narrator accepts it and continues the cycle as a parent, hoping that her children will forgive her even though she cannot forgive her own parents. Yet despite the apparent hopelessness of breaking out of the societal cage, there is one person that the narrator “lets off the hook”—Steve Gauley’s father, who is scorned by society in how he deviates from the social norm:

His fatherhood seemed accidental . . . They lived in a steep-roofed, gray-shingled hillbilly sort of house that was just a bit better than a shack—the father fixed the roof and put supports under the porch, just enough and just in time—and their life was held together in a similar manner; that is, just well enough to keep the Children’s Aid at bay. (1141)

Steve’s father is not let off the hook because he is able to protect his son, or because he gives him some kind of special love; Steve dies, and his father thinks of it “as an accident, such as might happen to a dog” (1154). Steve’s father is let off because although “[h]e couldn’t prevent anything, [] he wasn’t implicated in anything, either—not like the others . . . oozing religion and dishonor” (1154). In other words, he does not participate in and therefore does not propagate the imagined narrative, the Eurocentric ideal of absolute protection from death. He is gritty proof in Munro’s story that it is possible to live entirely truthfully, free of impossible, ultimately damning ideals.

#### **2.4 Analysis of Misused Reductionist Handles**

The misuse of theatricality and idealism as reductionist handles is depicted by Munro’s stories, and her stories are powerful because they reflect truths about Eurocentric culture as a whole. Before diving into further analysis on the implications of this misuse and Munro’s subversion of them, I will clarify what exactly I mean by misuse and contrast that to my own understanding of what proper use entails. It is important to note that while my own understanding of the rich literature and history surrounding theatricality and idealism is limited and will be depicted very simply hereafter, a substantial exploration is beyond this paper’s scope, which prioritizes using these concepts as examples to illustrate the properties of reductionist handles as a whole.

As I asserted earlier with Latour's help, in a world full of overwhelming complexity, reductionism is a useful tool in the pursuit of specific, specialized knowledge that can contribute to our understanding of how to thrive on Earth. Theatricality and idealism have worked towards this purpose as well. Didactically speaking, theatricality like any storytelling medium can teach about human experiences that the audience can reflect on, thus gaining knowledge applicable to their own lives; idealism, on the other hand, provides guidance towards achieving a desired result, emphasizing an imaginary, future-oriented situation that will through its artificial visualization support efforts to make the illusion into a reality. While the narrator's fantasy about Meg's death in "Miles City, Montana" reduces Meg to a helpless victim and everyone around her to guilty neglecters, this fantasy, rather than a full-fledged manifestation of misused idealism, is more of a therapeutic countermeasure to the story's true manifestation: the irresolvable contradiction that the Eurocentric ideal of absolute protection from death causes.

Theatricality and idealism as reductionist handles share a commonality of distance between the reduced entity and its non-reduced reference—distance between fictional role and real actor in theatricality and distance between imagined ideal and factual reality in idealism. In order for reductionism to be used properly, this distance needs to be respected and travelled both ways; in other words, reductionism should first take something natural and reduce it into something artificial, then return to the natural with the newly acquired knowledge, understanding that the ultimate goal is for this knowledge to be translated into a form that will function in the natural.

To further clarify this idea, think of a laboratory experiment employing the scientific method with controlled variables. The experimental design forcefully manipulates these variables, allowing scientists to study the isolated relationships between them in an environment



that cannot be maintained outside of the laboratory. Yet the experiment is still useful because after a deep and precise understanding of the relationships between the variables is gained, scientists apply that knowledge in a way that is functional outside of the laboratory. The research's final application thus does not match its manipulation in the experiment, but it is the experiment that allows—or at least accelerates the process of—gaining the knowledge that leads to the final application.

The same principles apply to reductionist tools that are employed not for technological advances, but for understanding the human experience and navigating its social dimensions. Theatricality, idealism, and reductionism itself are not inherently harmful tools, but their misuse creates harmful results of the kind that Munro's fiction illustrate. Both "Royal Beatings" and "Miles City, Montana" show how the misuse of their respective reductionist handles inflicts a heavy emotional and psychological toll on the characters who mistakenly fixate on them. The stories' narrators are thus driven to reduce their complex emotional realities into fragmented extremes, causing a chain reaction of misalignments that can result in responses such as fantasizing about suicide and the death of your children. How much more would it really take for these fantasies to result in real consequences, especially for someone like Rose?

Once again, I want to emphasize that I am not accusing Munro of misusing reductionist handles in her own creative process; if anything, her perspective of the story as a "house" where you "go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while," is anti-reductionist ("What is Real?" 1655). Nor am I implying that her depiction of misused reductionist handles implicates her writing as representative of the aforementioned flaws in Eurocentric culture. Because the misuse of these handles is supported and propagated by the Eurocentric culture that Munro's *characters* live under, they lack the ability and language to

even identify their misuse of reductionist handles, much less work towards resolving it. Yet despite her Eurocentric perspective, Munro herself shows the cracks of reductionism's seemingly pervasive influence through the unforgettable quirks of "Royal Beatings" and through Steve Gauley's father in "Miles City, Montana." Mundane, bizarre, and cruel as these cracks may be, they nonetheless prove the existence of reality beyond the influence of misused reductionist handles and therefore assert the possibility of life free from them. Therefore, despite being restricted to Eurocentric culture, Munro writes with an outsider's insight. In the next chapter, I will further analyze these insights using the outside perspectives of Indigenous writers.

## Chapter 3: Other Perspectives

### 3.1 A Counternarrative to Reductionism

If life without misused reductionist handles (hereafter referred to as MRHs) is possible, then what exactly does it look like, and how exactly does it work? I believe that the biggest issue with MRHs is how ingrained they are in our Eurocentric culture, causing for us the same issues that Munro's characters face—unable to identify and grapple with MRHs effectively because we do not know any other epistemologies. Yet other epistemologies do exist, and those that are perhaps the most different from Eurocentric reductionism are those of the many Indigenous cultures that live in Canada and the rest of the world. As the former, Eurocentrically fixated undergraduate who had his eyes opened to new ways of knowing through Indigenous literature, I believe that there is much that Eurocentric knowledge can learn from Indigenous knowledge.

E. Richard Atleo, a hereditary chief of the Ahousaht First Nation, wrote two books showing how an Indigenous theory can serve to better Western, Eurocentric theories, especially in their catastrophic handling of the environment. In his introduction to *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview*, Atleo prefaces his Indigenous knowledge with an abundance of Eurocentric literature highlighting the problems with reductionism. What I find most interesting in Atleo's introduction, however, is his point that the Indigenous theory of "*Heshook-ish tsawalk* [everything is one] means more . . . than the empirically based meaning attached to the word 'holism'" (xi). Holism is a concept that I became familiar with through Indigenous literature; it is the word I think of as the rallying cry against reductionism. Yet just as "[I]ndigenous languages are often verb-oriented and verb-based" whereas "Eurocentric languages tend to be more noun-oriented" (Coleman et al. 148), Atleo's declaration asserts that while holism may be an English word that aligns with Indigenous theories in their opposition to Eurocentric reductionism, it is

still an English word and therefore cannot be entirely free of Eurocentric influence. Therefore, while I will continue to use the word holism to describe the ideas of unity and interconnectivity that Indigenous epistemologies value, I now do so with the understanding that I am neither fully expressing nor understanding those Indigenous values with my ultimately Eurocentric language.

In the previous chapter, I presented Nobel-prize-winner Alice Munro's stories as representative of Eurocentric culture and analyzed them to illustrate the insights that they provide into the MRHs that plague it. For the Nuu-chah-nulth, origin stories are "the foundation of knowledge about the state of existence" (Atleo xi). Their origin story "How Son of Raven Captured the Day" provides this foundation, thus serving as a valuable source of Indigenous knowledge that reveals another perspective from Eurocentricity. In the following section, I will, with the support of Atleo's analyses, examine how this origin story uses theatricality—the MRH in "Royal Beatings"—as not a reductionist tool, but a holistic one. Following that, I will explore how Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* portrays the conflict between Eurocentric and Indigenous epistemologies through its use of allusions and water as a powerful holistic symbol—a symbol also featured in "Miles City, Montana."

### **3.2 Holistic Theatricality in "How Son of Raven Captured the Day"**

The Nuu-chah-nulth origin story "How Son of Raven Captured the Day" contains several elements that from my Eurocentric perspective can be considered theatrical. In their efforts to capture the day from the Chief—the leader of the "spiritual" realm's community, separate from Son of Raven's "physical" realm's community—Son of Raven's community first attempts to "entertain the Chief with a dance" (Atleo 18, 7). Son of Deer is chosen to be the dancer, and with his "finest dancing costume," the Chief's community as the audience, and the dramatic action of the performance conducted "tirelessly, effortlessly, drawing strength from all those who lived in

darkness,” this scene is distinctly theatrical (7). Yet unlike in “Royal Beatings,” there is no conflict between the personas of the actor and role here. Son of Deer is not forced to suppress his own self in any way to play his performative role, but is in fact chosen because he “can not only run fast but also leap far”; he thus perfectly suits the role, and although he possesses the ulterior motive of capturing the day, that motive provides “strength” for his performance rather than interfering with it (7).

Whereas Son of Deer’s dancing fails to capture the day because he does not have “membership in the Chief’s community,” Son of Raven’s transformation into the Chief’s grandson gives him that membership and allows him to bring light back to his own community (21). This performance, complete with relentless theatrical “whin[ing]” to sway the audience of the Chief’s community into complacency, is perfectly executed throughout (9). By transforming into a “tiny leaf” rather than the disastrous “giant” forms that his ego compels him to favour, Son of Raven successfully separates the emotional fixation of his own persona from his role’s before assuming that role. Despite the authenticity of his performance that allows him to catch the Chief’s community off-guard, Son of Raven never loses himself in his role and returns triumphantly to his own community with no damage to his sense of self.

How does Son of Raven avoid internalizing his role like Rose and her father do in “Royal Beatings”? Of course, Son of Raven’s role as the Chief’s grandson is very different from the roles of a punisher or victim, which are inherently reductive in action and emotion. Yet by returning to his old community, does Son of Raven show that it was all just an act and that despite “acquir[ing] membership in [the Chief’s] community, the rights of citizenship, and a birthright to the resources of the Chief,” Son of Raven ultimately rejects his new life? Although Atleo emphasizes a clear distinction between the spiritual realm’s community that the Chief

leads and the physical realm's community that Son of Raven captures the light for, he also clarifies that "the two worlds were experientially one, which is the meaning of the Nuu-chah-nulth phrase *heshook-ish tsawalk* (everything is one)" (10). There is thus a connection, a commonality, that unites the worlds and those within them.

That connection is "Qua-ootz," the "Creator" (16). The Nuu-chah-nulth believe that all life comes from Qua-ootz and therefore believe that all life, as creations of Qua-ootz, should be respected. It is this concept of respect, or "*isaak*," that allows Son of Raven to both be acting and to mean it (16). Unlike Rose's father, who must discredit his peaceful disposition and literary interests as shameful to assume the punisher's authoritative role, there is no denigration of either Son of Raven's role or himself, no conception of assuming a state of higher or lower value through the performance. Keep in mind that Son of Raven does make that mistake in his first two transformations, where his "egotistical one-upmanship" violates *isaak* and causes "an imbalance with other egos," resulting in failure (8, 16). It is therefore a requirement of the successful Nuu-chah-nulth theatrical performance, social interaction—and one could even say social script—that there is unwavering, foundational respect for all parties involved, which naturally includes respect for oneself. Son of Raven cannot reduce himself or his role into that of a punisher, victim, or thief, but must always respect his existence as that of a holistic, "completed being" (16).

Theatricality as a MRH creates problems because it causes actors to essentially forget who they are, driving them to suppress their natural complexities and fixate on the aspects of their roles, emotional or otherwise, that turn them into reduced versions of themselves who are rendered capable of horrifying extremes. On the other hand, the holistic theatricality in "How

Son of Raven Captured the Day” keeps actors from forgetting themselves by requiring them to reassert the connections that define them:

In order for Son of Deer to dance for the Chief who owned the day, protocols had to be observed. Petitions, preparations, prayers, cleansing ceremonies . . . an important underlying assumption about traditional experience is that the whole of life and existence is characterized by relationships that are inherent. (7)

Son of Deer is the dancer for the Chief’s community, but he never becomes just a dancer, his persona rendered irrelevant to his dancing performance; once again, he is allowed to dance precisely because of who he is. Explicitly acknowledging and respecting the complexities of identity and interaction through Nuu-chah-nulth protocols thus allows actors to avoid reductions and the consequent fixations that can arise from them.

Consider this in contrast to the protocols conducted before the lynching performance in “Royal Beatings.” The actors performing the lynching “blackened their faces” to hide their identities; they drink “a quart of whiskey apiece, for courage” that they can fixate on to suppress their personas and commit this extreme action; they attempt to mimic a Eurocentric social protocol with “a mock trial” but “could not remember how it was done” (1130). These actions reduce “Jelly Smith,” “Bob Temple,” and “Hat Nettleton” to faceless, aggressive punishers, and Tyde in turn is condemned with “*Butcher’s meat!*”, a proclamation that reduces him to a man who deserves to be the victim because he sells the meat of his children that his daughter gave birth to. It does not matter how ridiculous this reduction is, how clearly it is “all lies in all probability”—Tyde’s true persona is cast aside for what the town wants him to be (1130). The town furthermore violates and disrespects social protocols with a “farce” of a trial, and no one, Tyde’s children included, has “interest in seeing justice done” (1131). This story “reflected no

good on anybody” not because all the characters involved are inherently bad, but because Eurocentric society, with its epistemology tainted by MRHs, drives them to these destructive ends (1131).

“How Son of Raven Captured the Day” shows the importance of holistic approaches to social interactions, including those that are theatrical. Atleo’s description of “A Traditional Nuu-chah-nulth Feast” shows how the Nuu-chah-nulth put these teachings to practice (99). At every turn, the ceremonious theatrics involved—including speeches, dancing, and singing—reassert “the importance of relationships, of maintaining protocol, of showing respect” (112). These practices reflect the Nuu-chah-nulth belief of “*heshook-ish tsawalk* (everything is one)” and “that all life forms share a common origin, or spirit: that of Qua-ootz, the Creator” (106). This holistic principle of Nuu-chah-nulth epistemology is furthermore reflected in the *tloo-qua-nah* (“we remember reality”), which is “a ceremony to remember the Creator” that is “much more than a wolf ritual” (80). Here too is another theatrical performance where the performers are both acting and mean it:

[E]ach struggle is real and some struggles apparently dangerous. Once each blanket has been retrieved, the wolves have no choice but to allow, although unwillingly, the abducted children to be returned to the community . . .

Eventually, after much strife, great struggle, and evident mortal danger to the rescuers, the children are rescued. (106)

Holistic theatricality ultimately renders irrelevant the issue of the distance between the actor’s persona and the role’s persona and how the performance bleeds into reality. The performance is reality, carefully contextualized with intricate protocols that keep in the foreground the complex



identities between actors and audiences, the complex connections that motivate the performance, and the role of the performance itself for the community.

### **3.3 Running Water in *Green Grass, Running Water* and “Miles City, Montana”**

Thomas King’s *Green Grass Running Water* also presents an Indigenous holistic perspective that resists Eurocentric reductionism. In foregrounding its many cultural allusions, King asserts that his novel should be read not in isolation, but in the context of the network that it is a part of and that it cannot be disconnected from. This fluid interconnectivity is furthermore characterized by water, a powerful symbol in the novel that breaks down reductionist barriers to set itself and the world around it into motion.

As discussed earlier, the Eurocentric scientific method utilizes artificial research environments where the complex world is stripped into select variables to be examined and manipulated, thus reflecting “a prevailing tendency to compartmentalize experience” (Atleo xii-xiii). The principles behind this practice have been adopted by Eurocentric scholars of stories as well, to perhaps much less value: “Among European scholars there is an alienated notion that maintains that theory is separate from story . . . Academicians waste a great deal of effort deleting character, plot, and story from theoretical arguments” (Maracle). In the assumption that there exists the valuable and the not valuable in a story, the Eurocentric perspective separates the valuable from the not valuable to extract a theoretical truth from a supposed mass of irrelevant noise. This framework is “predicated on the discovery of a true world of realities lying behind a veil of appearances”; it is premised on the belief in the “potential” of a “transcendence” that lies beyond the immediate world, the immediate story (Latour 474-75).

King’s novel rejects this premise. When Lionel asks a seemingly straightforward question, seeking a quick, straightforward answer, Eli asserts that this kind of answer cannot be

given: “Can’t just tell you that straight out. Wouldn’t make any sense. Wouldn’t be much of a story” (361). To tell the answer “straight out” would be to provide the kind of truth that the Eurocentric framework seeks, isolated from its natural context, but in King’s Indigenous framework, this idea of truth does not “make any sense”; to gain true meaning, it needs that context, needs to become a “story” (361). To have a story be only its isolated conclusion is thus like having a “joke” be only its punchline (Fee and Flick 132). King’s Indigenous framework privileges the whole story under the premise that everything is valuable and necessary in the pursuit of understanding.

*Green Grass, Running Water* furthermore asserts a holistic perspective through its foregrounding of allusions. Fee and Flick write that the novel “is full of jokes that require detailed cultural/historical knowledge for full appreciation” (133). It is not necessary to understand all or really any of the allusions to follow the novel’s surface plot, the events that happen to characters like Alberta and Lionel. However, understanding these allusions enhances the reading experience, providing “the pure pleasure of getting the point or the joke” (130). King draws his cultural allusions from Eurocentric and Indigenous cultures in North America. The result, as Robin Ridington writes, is that “King plays sagaciously with an intercultural vocabulary of biography and experience that can be shared only partially by any given reader” (350). This is true if the reader belongs within one of the groups, but the point is that “[t]here is no reader of this novel, except perhaps Thomas King, who is not outside some of its networks of cultural knowledge” (Fee and Flick 131).

King’s novel thus promotes intercultural knowledge acquisition because it contains allusions to more than one cultural group, allusions that readers may seek to understand because understanding them enhances the reading experience. It is a “border-crossing,” one that in this

case goes “between white ignorance and red knowledge” (Fee and Flick 131-32). King does not value the cultural groups equally; instead, his novel “subsumes European culture and history into an Aboriginal framework” (136). In a push back against colonizing Eurocentric influence, King’s novel reframes the cultural groups from an Indigenous “pedagogy” where he “tells the story of the creation of the world [among others] in order to tell the story of Lionel Red Dog and Alberta Frank in 1992 in Blossom, Alberta, Canada” (138). Here too is an emphasis on interconnectivity, the necessity of all parts working together to make the whole, whether those parts are of a story, of many stories, or of the cultures behind those stories.

Water is the common and perhaps most important symbol that courses through *Green Grass, Running Water*’s many stories and allusions, with Coyote remarking that “[a]ll this water imagery must mean something” (352). James H. Cox asserts that the water “ebbs and flows and shifts meanings depending on the literary and the cultural contexts” and explores the many contexts where this occurs (229). In particular, King’s novel contrasts the ways that Eurocentric and Indigenous cultures differ in how they perceive and value water. The Eurocentric forces build a dam to harness the water for electricity, and when Eli states that “[i]t’s the idea of a dam that’s dangerous,” he highlights that the dam is a symbol of the Eurocentric reductionist worldview (260). As “the physical manifestation of European American and European Canadian imaginations and narratives,” the dam contains and exploits the water because in Eurocentric culture, that is what water is: an inanimate resource to be collected and used (Cox 239). However, because the novel privileges Indigenous knowledge, the water does not conform to that presumption. The dam inevitably breaks and “the water roll[s] on as it had for eternity,” circling back to Coyote’s origin story where everything begins with “[j]ust the water (King 415, 1).

In contrast to the massive quantity of water in the dam and the torrential rain that makes Alberta pregnant, the “puddle” water in King’s novel appears at first to be powerless and isolated from the greater bodies of water aforementioned (284). Yet King’s puddles are in truth far from insignificant. They are left in the wake of the disappearance of three non-Indigenous people’s cars that then reappear at the dam, implying that these puddles are responsible for the movement of the vehicles (404). Water thus maintains its power regardless of how isolated it may appear, how little of it there may seem to be, because its connection to itself and the world cannot be broken. The focus is thus not on what the water is—be it the contents of a dam, the rain, or a puddle—but on what it does. Grass is green, the sky is blue, and water runs through King’s novel, causing both “creation” (e.g. Alberta’s pregnancy) and “destruction” (e.g. the dam breaking) in its pursuit of “the restoration of life” as an Indigenous worldview values it: holistic and interconnected (Cox 238).

Water is also a prominent symbol in “Miles City, Montana.” When Steve Gauley drowns in a river, the townspeople blame the accident on Steve’s nonconformity to their Eurocentric ideals of what childhood should entail: “If [Steve] had been warned enough and given chores to do and kept in check . . . he wouldn’t have drowned. He was neglected, he was free, so he drowned” (1154). The townspeople thus frame their conception of childhood chores and adult control over children as protection, in turn framing the river as an external threat to be avoided. Nature is therefore distinguished from society, and water in nature—where it cannot be controlled by human hands—can only be perceived by the townspeople as a threat.

As an employee of “B. C. Hydro,” Andrew furthermore parallels the control of water that defines his workplace through his attempts at keeping the narrator within their imagined narratives (1143). He admonishes the narrator for struggling with the lies of misused idealism

that keep intact the illusion of safety he depends upon: “I know there is something basically selfish and basically untrustworthy about you” (1146). Because the narrator stays on the illusion’s edge, unable to break free but also conscious of its delusion, she puts those around her into jeopardy of becoming like her and is therefore simultaneously identified as a threat and temptation by Andrew. “I’ve always known it,” he says, and then goes on to say that “I also know that that is why I fell in love with you,” expressing that as deep as he is in the illusion, he too finds allure in life beyond it (1146).

Just as water defies Eurocentric control in King’s novel not only through the dam’s breaking but also in its seemingly insignificant puddles, Eurocentric control in “Miles City, Montana” is not just threatened by the river water that Steve drowns in but also by the pool water that Meg almost drowns in. Even in the small confines of a human-made pool, with a human whose job is to guard against its dangers, water still refuses to be subdued. Of course, Meg does not drown. Is she ever really in danger of drowning? For all the panic that the narrator feels, the categorized list of self-identified mistakes that she fixates on, Andrew’s dramatized, fence-jumping rescue operation in reality just consists of him going “to reach over and grab [Meg], because she was swimming somehow, with her head underwater—she was moving toward the edge of the pool” (1152).

While having her head underwater suggests a dangerous situation through Eurocentric lenses, Meg “had not swallowed any water” and “hadn’t even scared herself,” but is in “amazement” over how “deep” the water is (1152). As someone not yet drawn into the reductionist framework of her culture—for “her body still had the solid unself-consciousness, the sweet indifference, something of the milky smell, of a baby’s body”—Meg does not view the water as something to be either controlled or avoided, but as just another part of the world that

she lives in, a wonder to explore and learn from (1151). It is thus not because of “luck” that Meg is fine, but because Meg does not make a mistake (1153). The Eurocentrically ideal result of her drowning requires her to be reduced to the role of a helpless child and the water to be reduced to a dangerous hazard, but both she and the water defy this reduction. The misused idealism of parents needing to protect their children from death is thus shown to be false both ways—parents cannot always protect their children, but neither do they always need to.

The final place where water runs in “Miles City, Montana” is in the narrator’s reminiscence of the night when a “freakishly heavy rain” flooded the turkey field of her father’s farm (1147). The turkeys, living animals reduced to resources “on a straight path to becoming frozen carcasses and table meat,” their role until then only to serve as “fluttering laundry,” can do nothing more in this situation than “crowd to higher ground and avoid drowning.” Their peril parallels ours as we struggle under the MRHs of Eurocentric culture. As MRHs distort not only our perception but our value systems as well, the rising divide between the holistic world and our fragmented, fixation-ridden versions of it threaten to suffocate us—that is, if we do not first “push each other off, suffocate each other, get cold and die” (1147). Unlike the turkeys in this story, we cannot expect anyone to bring a boat and come save us. We need to learn how to swim.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

### 4.1 Where Are We, and Where Can We Go?

The goal of this paper is to help pave the way for new understandings of how Eurocentric culture, with its undeniable scientific advancements and supposed societal progress, has driven us towards dangerous fixations. Theatricality and idealism are two examples of the MRHs that catalyze these fixations, and MRHs are manifestations of reductionism's mutation from a specialized tool to examine limited aspects of the world into a worldview of its own, a fragmented epistemology. The deeper workings and flaws of this epistemology are best made clear through contrast to other perspectives, and this paper reveals stark differences by exploring Atleo and King's Indigenous texts. I am far from confident that reversing the damage MRHs have caused is as simple as wholeheartedly adopting a more holistic view of the world, excruciatingly difficult as that may already be. However, I do believe that continued reflections on this issue can be guided by examining not only the stark differences between the Eurocentric worldview and other worldviews, but their intersections as well.

While this paper primarily employs a literary lens to examine Eurocentric reductionism, the gravity and scale of this issue requires the attention of many more disciplines if we are to make real strides towards change. This has been occurring in many places, including the sciences. For example, Cori Hayden, an anthropologist writing on perspectives of reductionism in chemistry, states that "to reduce complex local knowledges . . . [is] to lose sight of complexity and relationality . . . to place local and indigenous knowledges on the losing side of an epistemological contest for explanatory power" (272). In contrasting reductionist and holistic models of cancer pathogenesis, Marta Bertolaso and Giampaolo Ghilardi assert that the "paradox we are facing today, studying living beings by means of non-living science, to which everything

should be formally reduced in order to speak ‘scientifically correct’,” is flawed “as many phenomena inside science itself reveal the inadequacy of this methodology” (500). Ecologist F. H. Bormann, commenting on Robert B Laughlin’s *A Different Universe*, rejoices that physics has reached common ground with ecology regarding the rejection of reductionism, thus bringing the sciences closer to “develop[ing] human enterprise designed to work with nature and not against it” (472). These discourses show that while reductionism’s historical contributions to science are irrefutable, its limitations in scientific contexts are now also well recognized. Studying these flaws in more disciplines will allow greater understandings in what ultimately must be a collaborative effort.

I believe that the terminology of *misused reductionist handles* that I have employed to explore these issues can be useful in future research as well. The word *handle* clarifies that we are talking about tools used to transition from one knowledge space to another, a space where knowledge scope is reduced to provide knowledge depth. The word *misused* highlights that these handles are not inherently harmful and that the answer is not to destroy them, but to instead understand their proper and improper uses so that the latter can be avoided. Proper use involves always keeping a firm grip on the handle when beyond the door; in other words, we must always remember that we use RHs to temporarily work in the reductionist space—a space that we are not meant to reside in, a space that is not our home. Making it our home results in fixations such as what Rose is almost lost in when she contemplates suicide, threatening to reduce her entire life into a simple punishment for her parents; it results in fixations such as what all the adults in “Miles City, Montana” are lost in as they live with the irreconcilable contradiction between reality and the artificial ideal that they cling onto.



Yet it is not as if only one RH can be used or misused at a time, and I am far from confident that the denotative boundaries of the MRHs I describe in this paper are infallibly precise. My suspicion is that regardless of how many RHs we diligently keep firm grips on, we who live under the influence of Eurocentric culture are simultaneously lost in a maze of reductionist spaces that we forgot the nature of and RHs that we do not remember misusing, a jumble of fixations so dense that it is a wonder if we can ever make it back to where we belong. One thing is clear: the blazing-fast process and relentless pursuit for so-called universal truths that characterize reductionist methodologies would only make this situation worse. If progress can be made, it should be made “slowly, with caution and precaution” (Latour 487). Developing a methodology for this navigation is beyond the scope of this paper, though I suggest that Latour’s discussion of category mistakes in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* could be a possible resource to explore in seeking to develop it.

#### **4.2 A Cautious Story**

As a graduate student completing my master’s thesis, the only sure thing I can say is that I know less now than I thought I did when I was an undergraduate student. I believed wholeheartedly in the Eurocentric concept of Truth with a capital *T*, pure and unfettered from the world around me; I believed that reaching it required opening a door that would transport me from where I was to where it lay. Little had I expected that this fixation would infect that which I was spurning, transforming my world into an ever less hospitable environment. Learning about Indigenous epistemologies opened my eyes to this reality, but rather than replace one concept of Truth with another, this learning has made me realize the naivete of my previous conviction and driven me to be ever more cautious of what I think I know, and how I know it. My embarrassing story was a necessary step in this journey.

While Latour helped me to formulate the language required to express the idea of MRHs and think about them philosophically, it is thanks to Munro's fiction that I can examine them in real contexts. By *real*, I am of course not asserting that characters such as Rose and Meg actually lived at some point in time, nor am I concerned about any non-fictitious "starter dough" mixed into Munro's fiction ("What is Real?" 1656). My point is that through meticulous and meaningful detail, stories allow us to examine true human experiences in ways that no other medium can achieve. For example, while I must again stress that I am not a scientist, I find it difficult to imagine how a scientific study could, due to both methodological and ethical restrictions, accurately study the impact of MRHs in living test subjects.

Stories provide the means to circumvent these restrictions, and even if their subjects cannot breathe alongside us, they can serve as our reflection. Whether they are accurate reflections or not is dependent on both the story and its audience, and it is ultimately up to each member of that audience to decide for herself. For my part, I believe that "Royal Beatings" and "Miles City, Montana" reflect my experience as someone who has lived and struggled under the influence of MRHs; studying these stories alongside "How Son of Raven Captured the Day" and *Green Grass, Running Water* has allowed me to think about my own experiences with newfound clarity. Stories thus serve an invaluable role as tools for developing our knowledge as cultures and as humans.

The concern with all of this is that stories as a tool for obtaining knowledge is a reductionist handle, at least in the Eurocentric way that I use it in. The technique of close reading that I rely on in this thesis and the institutional procedures that I follow at my university are all to a greater or lesser extent influenced by the very RHs—perhaps even MRHs—that I caution against. I believe however that rather than undermining my work, this is a testament of our need

to build onto Eurocentric epistemology rather than destroy it. Even if we succeed in finding our way back from the maze of MRHs, that does not mean we will become just as we were before entering in the first place. Nor should we. Our experiences with MRHs, like my embarrassing story, should serve as a foundation to grow from. We should not renounce our reductionist tools, but learn to use them better.

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