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Idling No More: The Road in Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*

DEENA RYMHS

“If that useless old chief of ours was a woman, we’d see a few things get done around here. We’d see our women working, we’d see our men working, we’d see our young people sober on Saturday nights, and we’d see Nanabush dancing up and down the hill on shiny black paved roads.”

—Pelajia Patchnose, *The Rez Sisters*

In this sharing of the power of the violence of speed what sort of political repercussions may be expected? In the driving of the motor, what democratic illusion is at work? What liturgy?

Paul Virilio, *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*

In early 2013, Indigenous communities and their non-Indigenous allies mobilized under the banner of “Idle No More,” demanding justice for gendered and racial violence, advocating for sustainable environments, and insisting on a more equitable relationship with the Canadian state. This grassroots movement, initiated by four women, took to roads and highways to protest.¹ Inspired by Idle No More’s momentum, nearly three hundred Indigenous youth, known as the Nishiyuu walkers, undertook a two-month, 1,600-kilometer trek from Hudson Bay to Ottawa. The walk was motivated by a desire of its participants, who live on isolated reserves, to emerge into public visibility and to exercise a political voice over issues uniting Indigenous communities across the country. One of these issues is control over natural resources, sparked by recent claims

to Indigenous lands by the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline, the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, and the now federally approved Northern Gateway Project. All these foregoing developments, which cohere around roads, provide a political context for reading the road narrative in Tomson Highway's play *The Rez Sisters*. Set on a fictional, remote reserve on Manitoulin Island, *The Rez Sisters* follows seven plucky women who undertake a journey to "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD" in Toronto.² Almost thirty years since its writing, many of the key issues raised in *The Rez Sisters*—substandard living conditions, neglected infrastructures, Indigenous women's struggles for political agency, and sexual violence localized around roads—have become more, rather than less, insistent. My reading of *The Rez Sisters* makes an intervention in the field of the environmental humanities by focusing on racial and sexual geographies, geographies in which roads figure as contested and violent spaces. Indigenous people's movement in Canada has been administered by the state in myriad ways—through forced relocations, reserves, the pass system, and uneven wealth accumulation, to name but a few examples.³ Roads, as one form of spatial management, have the ability to constitute and contain racial and class differences in powerful and often imperceptible ways, concealing the very social relations they produce.

One year after *The Rez Sisters* was published, Anishnaabeg residents from Manitoulin Island joined a blockade on a disputed logging-road extension in Temagami, Ontario. The following year, at the peak of the Oka crisis in Quebec, a roadblock was erected on Highway 6 between Manitoulin Island and the mainland, in a demonstration of solidarity for Mohawk barricades at Kahnawake and Kahnésatake.⁴ At the time that *The Rez Sisters* was gaining critical and popular attention, roads were very much on the minds of Indigenous communities mobilizing around emergent "desire lines"—a term that Nick Shepherd and Noëleen Murray borrow from traffic engineering to describe "the space between the planned and the providential, the engineered and the 'lived,' and between official projects of capture and containment and the popular energies which subvert, bypass, supersede and evade them."⁵ Desire lines violate intended uses of public places by engaging in vernacular acts of space making. During that same summer of 1990, residents of the Squamish community of Xwemelch'stn formed picket lines on Vancouver's Lion's Gate Bridge, distributing information about Oka and Squamish land claims to rush-hour commuters. The blockade

was a salient reminder to commuters that the bridge connecting North Vancouver to the rest of the city runs through Squamish territory.⁶ The modes of vision conditioned by roadways rely on a particular “geometry of perspective,” to borrow Lawrence Barth’s words, that is not just a way of seeing but also a form of blindness.⁷ At their most effective, blockades task people to see roads differently. As stoppages in the flow and circulation that roads putatively enable, roadblocks perform the road as a border: that is, they make legible the regulation, discipline, and control of road spaces that are less recognizable when such practices are exercised by the state. *The Rez Sisters* is about conceptual borders that are no less real for the women: their immobility tells a counternarrative about the spatialization of race, class, and gender identities in a cultural moment otherwise feted for its increased circulation of people, capital, and information.

Far from being neutral spaces, roads might be seen as sites of social memory, evoking not only histories of political contestation but also personal and collective experiences of trauma. The disappearance of several Indigenous women along British Columbia’s Highway 16, colloquially known as the Highway of Tears, and along numerous other roads and highways in Canada creates a topography of violence where roads come to signify, among many things, immobility. It is impossible not to consider these disappearances in relation to Zhaboonigan’s horrifying experience in *The Rez Sisters*: a young, mentally disabled character, Zhaboonigan was sexually violated by two white men who lured her into their car for a ride—a crucial aspect of the play that I will discuss later in this paper. One might link ongoing instances of such violence to the racialization of space in settler-colonial history. In Sherene Razack’s theorization, roads can constitute frontiers “on the edge of civilization,” a “no-man’s land” where “violent acts can be committed without meaningful consequence.”⁸ Yet I would argue that roads are not entirely spaces of exception that suspend the legal order; rather, they are thresholds where social categories are thrown in high relief. As Achille Mbembe instructively points out, the “subjugation of life to the power of death” is not solely the provenance of the modern state.⁹ Instead, this power diffuses itself throughout society in insidious categorizations of “who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not.”¹⁰ Zhaboonigan’s violation points to the racist ontological typologies inherited by the settler state by revealing the vulnerability of mobility for racialized

women. It is likely for this reason that the women in *The Rez Sisters* choose to travel collectively to Toronto.

Rerouting a reading of *The Rez Sisters* through a focus on mobility opens a different purview on the forms of violence experienced by the characters and their reserve community of Wasaychigan Hill (a place whose name translates as “window”). The women’s confinement on the reserve and lack of transportation options are, as many critics have noted, symptomatic of gender inequalities on their reserve. Highway’s play is unequivocal in identifying those gender inequalities as the legacy of colonialism. Yet once the women set out on the road, a curious relation between mobility and violence emerges: cars and roads become associated with personal experiences of violence through characters’ individual accounts of motor accidents, death, and rape. Roads are not only the spaces of such violent acts, but they also are implicated in a larger colonial (and postcolonial) history of expropriated territory—a remaking of physical and social landscapes that involved ecological destruction, uprooted communities, and entrenched geographies of segregation. What meanings are at play in Highway putting seven Indigenous women as drivers on those very roads? What civic agency is at work? What democratic illusions?

“Philomena. Park your tongue.”

Pelajia Patchnose, *The Rez Sisters*

In making the road trip the prerogative of seven Indigenous women who embody a different kind of mobile subject than the (white) questing male figure, *The Rez Sisters* brings racialized and gendered experiences to bear on the road narrative. Given the women’s lack of means, it is intuitive to read their accessing of automobility as empowering. Yet the assumed equation between automobility and agency must be carefully examined in light of the unsettling experiences around roads and cars explored in Highway’s play. There remains much more work to be done in understanding the automobile’s complex symbolic and social power as well its indexical relationship to agency in both literature and lived experience. “Automobility,” as James Flink coined the term, connotes the industrial and spatial worlds built around automobiles as well as their influence on social life. Recent critical explorations by Stephanie LeMenager, Mimi Sheller, Eric Avila, Nigel Thrift, John Urry, and Cotten Seiler have contributed foundational insights on the social and

affective dimensions of automobility. My analysis of *The Rez Sisters* furthers this line of inquiry by acknowledging the place of roads within a wider circuitry of industrial networks and administrative power as well as their affective entanglement in the fantasies and disenchantments of Highway's characters. If representations and practices of automobility in mainstream cultures have been taken for granted, there have been even fewer analyses of the automobile's idiosyncratic meanings in non-white communities, as Paul Gilroy points out.¹¹ *The Rez Sisters* fills in some of these gaps by providing an audit of mobility in Wasaychigan Hill Reserve, the community that Highway makes his window into a particular experience of modernity. Highlighting the social bonds as well as solitudes that roads, vehicles, and motor travel engender, *The Rez Sisters* ultimately reveals an ambivalence about automobility and the freedom associated with it.¹²

While all road narratives may be protests, as Katie Mills proposes, in that they "construct an alternative way of living" away from "the existing social order," the particularities of that protest and the conditions that incline departure are obviously subject to significant variation.¹³ What motivates the women's journey in *The Rez Sisters* is their confinement, the material and social constraints that make leaving the reserve an exploit in itself. The women's first protest, then, is against the perceived impossibility of their undertaking. The meager resources holding back the women are attributed to their poor conditions on the reserve and, more specifically, to a negligent administration. Their identification of the barriers working against them forms a critique of larger problems in their community, a critique that Pelajia launches with her repeated mention of the dirt roads on the reserve and the chief's broken promises.¹⁴ Pelajia's fantasy of paved roads is more than a preoccupation with the material. The women's autonomy, potential for self-realization, and activism, all of which constitute a vision for improving life on the rez, rely on material means of movement as well as on the women's social mobility. The characters' dignity is tied to the economic, social, and spiritual challenges facing their community, and it is on all three fronts that Pelajia challenges the chief's leadership. Promising to use her bingo winnings to pave the roads on the reserve, Pelajia imagines such improvements as restoring the spiritual vitality of the community. In her words, "Nanabush will come back to us because he'll have paved roads to dance on."¹⁵ The immiseration and neglect characterizing life on the reserve have not just a spiritual but a gendered element as well: the

chief's failure to pave the roads, Pelajia notes, is an injustice to all her "sisters," because it is the women, particularly, who are confined to the reserve.¹⁶ The men's jobs take them away from their home:

PELAJIA: . . . My old man has to go the hundred miles to Espanola just to get a job. My boys. Gone to Toronto. Only place educated Indian boys can find decent jobs these days. And here I sit all broken-hearted.¹⁷

Since none of the women themselves own automobiles, their psychic, social, and physical confinement is intensified. With few other options, they are reliant on hitchhiking, a means of travel with a notorious history for putting Indigenous women in extremely vulnerable and dangerous situations.¹⁸ Zhaboonigan's sexual violation is a haunting reminder of the danger of getting into unknown cars.

Mimicking the political process that has shortchanged them, the seven women hold a meeting to determine their plan for getting to Toronto. This moment serves as an instance of the women exercising their right to (self-)govern and modeling their participation in a political process that has excluded them on the basis of their gender.¹⁹ Yet the barriers to the women's political empowerment in *The Rez Sisters* are more than external. In a dramatization of their internalized misogyny, the women turn on each other with petty hostilities and long-standing resentments. At several points in the play, the women exhibit disturbingly violent behavior toward each other. Annie exhorts Pelajia to strike Veronique with a hammer: "Hit her. Go on. Hitch the bitch. One good bang is all she needs."²⁰ Emily joins in: "Yeah, right. A gang-bang is more like it."²¹ This particular image of violence shows that Emily is either disturbingly insentient to or disturbingly forgetful of the fact that Zhaboonigan traumatically survived a "gang-bang"; instead of a hammer, her assailants used a screwdriver to violate her, a detail that Highway writes into the play in reference to Helen Betty Osborne, a young Cree woman who was similarly picked up along a road and violated by four white men in 1971. Moments like these abound in the play, where the women unleash almost astonishing reserves of vitriol on each other. Revealing the extent to which their external surroundings have become part of their emotional and psychic worlds, the women's treatment of each other mirrors the indignity that each of them has been made to suffer and from which they seek to escape.

Yet the women's fantasies of a better life off the rez ring hollow; many of the notions precipitating their road trip are misguided from the outset. Just as paved roads cannot transport them to their ideals any more magically than dirt ones, their departure alone cannot change the extent to which each woman has been defined by her home and her struggles in it. Neither asphalt nor escape, that is, can bring about the fulfillment of their fantasies. Their unrealized expectations, which are part of the trajectory of the road-narrative genre, stem from their misconceptions of the outside world. Their view of white men, for instance, is based on specious abstractions: "ANNIE: Aw, these white guys. They're nicer to their women. Not like Indian guys. Screw you, drink all your money, and leave you flat on your ass."²² This depiction of white male chivalry is, of course, disproved by Zhaboonigan's experience. Annie's ideas about white men are based on her daughter Ellen's marriage to a Francophone man, Raymond; the couple lives off the reserve in Sudbury. Raymond is a car mechanic and an automobile dealer, a vocation that is particularly propitious in a text where automobility figures so profoundly in its characters' yearnings. Annie's idealizing of white men and their notional generosity is cut short, however, by Veronique's disenchanted observation: "These Frenchmen are forever selling us their used cars."²³ Veronique's assessment turns out to be accurate given reports that Raymond has just sold a used car to someone they know. That their acquisition of automobiles consists of used, cast-off cars suggests an experience of modernity that is secondhand, a relegation to material culture without its luster. While the car may offer a form of "automotive citizenship," a material means of modeling inclusion within civic society, it leaves residents of Wasaychigan Hill Reserve in a solitude that is not quite part of mainstream social life—a place in which one can never be sure if the car will make the drive.²⁴ When the women in *The Rez Sisters* summon the means to travel to Toronto, it is in Marie-Adele's husband's van, a "rez-beater," as it would be called in local idiom, with bald tires. How they travel is as important as the trip itself.

On the road, however, they adopt a different bearing toward one another, confessing their fears, sharing painful memories, and witnessing each other's vulnerability with greater involvement and compassion than in the preceding two-thirds of the play. Driving creates a caesura from the women's workaday lives that allows them to reflect on painful, defining moments of their pasts and to break from the habitual forms of



Fig. 1. The Belfry Theatre's 2014 production of *The Rez Sisters* in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Cast (left to right): Tasha Faye Evans (as Marie-Adele Starblanket), Tiffany Ayalik (as Zhaboonigan Peterson), Renelita Arluk (as Emily Dictionary), Tracey Nepinak (as Philomena Moosetail), Cheri Maracle (as Veronique St. Pierre), Tantoo Cardinal (as Pelajia Patchnose), and Lisa C. Ravensbergen (as Annie Cook). Photo by David Cooper. Reprinted with permission.

denigration that have come to characterize their treatment of each other. But while the road may offer a type of therapeutic space for the women to revisit painful moments in their lives, it is also the very site of traumatic experience for some of the characters. In a late-night conversation at the wheel, Emily tells Marie-Adele about her time with an all-women motorcycle gang and about her relationship with Rose in particular:

Cruisin' down the coast highway one night. Hum of the engine between my thighs. Rose. That's Rosabella Baez, leader of the pack. We were real close, me and her. She was always thinkin' real deep. And talkin' about bein' a woman. An Indian woman. And suicide. And alcohol and despair and how fuckin' hard it is to be an Indian in this country.²⁵

Emily encountered Rose after Emily's dramatic departure from Wasychigan Hill years back, when she left an abusive relationship with

Big Joey and boarded a bus for San Francisco. There, she met five other “Rez Sisters,” a gang of tough women bikers who “could weave knuckle magic.”²⁶ Mills’s earlier characterization of road trips as protests is particularly resonant here in capturing the radical significance of this all-women biker gang. The group drew inspiration from a collective culture of protest coalescing in the 1970s, but the preceding passage also suggests that their politics were formed out of the women’s lived experiences of racial and gender oppression. The gang’s restless, even violent, energy could be traced to the forms of oppression that queer and racialized women like Emily and Rose would have experienced—the everyday life of trauma, as Ann Cvetkovich calls it, that often went unrecognized in larger cultures of protest. For Rose, the weight of this experience turned out to be too great to bear. While riding down the coast, Rose committed suicide by hitting an eighteen-wheeler head-on. Emily recalls this moment:

I swear to this day I can still feel the spray of her blood against my neck. I drove on. Straight in the daylight. Never looked back. Had enough gas money on me to take me far as Salt Lake City. Pawned my bike off and bought me a bus ticket back to Wasy. When I got to Chicago, that’s when I got up the nerve to wash my lover’s dried blood from off my neck. . . . I never wanna go back to San Francisco. No way, man.²⁷

Automobility, emblemized iconically here in the female motorcycle gang, turns into tragic and violent associations for Emily. Recognizing that their aspirations are as chimeric as they are irretrievable, Emily renounces her claims to mobility when she pawns her bike and returns to the rez.

Roads are also the scene of tragedy for Zhaboonigan, Veronique’s mentally disabled adopted daughter who lost her parents in a fatal automobile collision.²⁸ Zhaboonigan’s unremitting misfortune is concentrated around roads and automobiles; later in her life, two white men lured her to their car, where they physically and sexually assaulted her. She returns to this memory with Nanabush as her interlocutor:

I was walking down the road to the store. They ask me I want ride in car. Oh, I was happy I said, “Yup.” Took me far away. Ever nice ride. Dizzy. They took all my clothes off me. Put something up inside me here. (*Pointing to her crotch, underneath her dress.*) Many,

many times. . . . It was a Screwdriver. They put the screwdriver inside me. Here. Remember. Ever lots of blood. The two white boys. Left me alone in the bush. Alone. It was cold.²⁹

While the extent and redoubling of tragedy in Zhaboonigan's life set her apart from the rest of the community that cruelly treats her as a figure of difference, her experiences are not as singular as they might seem: next to the stories of abuse and abandonment that many of the other female characters relate, Zhaboonigan's treatment exists on a continuum of violence. Nor is Zhaboonigan's experience unique when one considers the real instances of sexual and racial violence that provide a context for Highway's play, a context in which the disappearances of Indigenous women and girls along stretches of highways in Canada have become so frequent that Amnesty International investigated the problem in 2004.³⁰ Like the other moments in the play where trauma is localized around roads and cars, Zhaboonigan's experience points to a troubling relationship between mobility and violence.

This violence not only figures in Zhaboonigan's and Emily's individual intimate experiences, but it is also inscribed on the landscape through which the women travel. En route to Toronto, the women's van gets a flat tire at the Lost Channel. Since the Lost Channel is sharply off their route of Highway 69, either the women are lost at this point, or they have taken a detour. It would seem significant, then, that Highway incorporates this particular place into the play's narrative. A long-abandoned lumber town, the Lost Channel was founded around 1917 by the Toronto-based company Lauder, Spears, and Howland, who used their clout to build an unnecessary railroad to their mill. (The area already had sufficient roads and rivers for log transport.) One of many ghost towns in the area, the Lost Channel stands as a reminder of a colonial history that involved the incursion of enterprisers, the commandeering of territory, and the (mis)use of natural resources.³¹ Not unlike the several defunct quarries that now scar the landscape of Manitoulin Island or the estimated 2 million scrap tires dumped there, these sites are part of an indelibly changed landscape linked to industries of mobility.³² Perhaps not coincidentally, it is at Lost Channel where Marie-Adele, who is ill with cancer, begins to die.³³

In *The Rez Sisters*, the violence that inheres in highways and automobiles—a violence attributable not just to their speed but to their alteration of physical and social landscapes and their blurring of public

and private space to allow lawless acts to be committed with apparent impunity—is rendered legible in ways that seldom have been approached in mainstream or scholarly discussions. While the impact of automobiles and roadways on built and natural environments is indisputable, as is the indivisibility of roads from the production and consumption of petroleum-dependent economies, the automobile’s saturation throughout various aspects of social life has received disproportionately modest attention.³⁴ Yet so far-reaching is this power that Henri Lefebvre identifies the motorcar as the “Leading-Object” of modern life. The automobile, observes Lefebvre, “directs behavior in various spheres from economics to speech.”³⁵ Lefebvre further emphasizes that the car figures in a system of substitutes where its practical function is but a small part of its wider significance. The car, transformed into a fetish object in which it is “consumed as a sign,” substitutes for other aspects of social experience like economic status, citizenship, eroticism, and freedom.³⁶

A type of symbolic violence also takes place, then, in this economy of substitutions where the car trades for other forms of experience. For the characters in *The Rez Sisters*, this symbolic experience proves to be more illusory than real. The women’s disenchantment with what mobility offers them accumulates with the other forms of violence associated with cars and roads to reveal a widening gap between the car’s symbolic promise and the characters’ realities. Often, the appeal of automotive citizenship—one of the “signs,” to gloss Lefebvre, under which the car is “consumed”—resonates powerfully for people who have been disenfranchised on the basis of race, class, and gender. Fixing a steady gaze on the car’s material and symbolic currency in black American communities, Paul Gilroy offers a trenchant examination of how automobility figures in the yearnings of subaltern cultures. As Gilroy ponders “the uniquely intense association of cars and freedom in black culture,” he reads back into this history a critique of consumer capitalism.³⁷ While the car has typically been regarded as a democratizing force—a crucial agent, for instance, in civil rights organizing in rural communities during Jim Crow—Gilroy argues that the car reentrenched segregation through new racially drawn and class-based geographies.³⁸ Using post-war “white flight” from urban areas as his example, Gilroy insists that such migration “was not just accomplished by means of the automobile, it was premised on it.”³⁹ Against the grain of predominant historiciza-

tions of the automobile as offering a form of democratic inclusion, Gilroy characterizes cars as “the most destructive and seductive commodities around us.”⁴⁰ Perhaps it is cars’ seductiveness, their symbolic power, that makes them so destructive. For all that automobiles are associated with escape, freedom, and the good life, they are equally the negation of all those values for the seven women in *The Rez Sisters*.

The road is not just a site of traumatic experience in *The Rez Sisters* nor a space of pure freedom. The road occasions a shift during which the women are unmoored from time and place, an untethering that allows them to find an intimacy with each other and to imagine their lives differently. Suspended between the rez and elsewhere, this moment of the play exceeds the bifurcated spatial categories of the reserve and the city. For example, Emily’s invoking of her time in San Francisco at the height of Red Power and the occupation of Alcatraz is important because it represents an alternative mapping of self and community away from the polarities of city and rez. Renya Ramirez theorizes this transported belonging as a key function of “Native hubs,” places that “support Native notions of culture, community, identity, and belonging away from tribal land bases.”⁴¹ Inherent within Ramirez’s notion of Native hubs is mobility, the resistance to being tied to “an ecological niche such as the reservation,” which Ramirez argues “incarcerates as well as romanticizes” Indigenous people.⁴² Ramirez challenges opposing depictions of city and reserve by emphasizing the cultural circuits within urban spaces that nurture Indigenous identities. As *The Rez Sisters* makes evident, the city is powerfully present in the cultural imaginary of those living on the rez, just as reserve-based cultures spill over into urban life in the Native hubs documented by Ramirez and found in most American and Canadian cities. The two places exist relationally.

At the time of *The Rez Sisters*’ writing, Toronto was an artistic center and home to some of the most prominent Indigenous theater companies, including Native Earth Performing Arts. Native Earth, where Highway was artistic director from 1986–92, staged *The Rez Sisters* as well its follow-up play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Toronto not only looms large in the minds of the women in *The Rez Sisters*, then, but it was an important hub for artists like Highway. In an illustration of the cross-pollinations between the city and the rez, Native Earth influenced the work of De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group, located on Manitoulin Island’s Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve; Highway him-

self worked with the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig theater company from 1984–85, during which time he got the inspiration for *The Rez Sisters*.⁴³ He returned to Toronto the following year with a script for the play, which he workshopped with De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig before taking *The Rez Sisters* on the road across Canada where it did “amazing business.”⁴⁴ These artistic collaborations, as well as the *The Rez Sisters*’ travel as a performance work, suggest a widening geography that challenges a view of reserve life as ossifying or dying off in the inexorable march of urbanization. Indeed, the uptake that *The Rez Sisters* achieved through its subsequent staging in Toronto, Tokyo, Edinburgh, and New York City reveals not just the play’s relevance to the rez but its critical appeal to metropolitan audiences as well.⁴⁵ On a related point, Ramirez faults prevailing depictions of Indigenous urban migration for seeing such movement “in relatively impotent terms . . . , instead of [as] a means to increase knowledge of political power, or connect Indian community across large expanses of geographical spaces as does the hub.”⁴⁶ Ramirez urges a rethinking of what Indigenous urban migration might signify away from pathologizing readings that regard such movement as a symptom of dislocation or placelessness.

While the play ponders the possibility of the city and the rez existing in dynamic relation to each other as Ramirez proposes, the city is fraught with unsettling associations for the characters in *The Rez Sisters*. Emily’s and Philomena’s earlier times in the city coincide with turbulent moments in their lives. Emily returns to the rez following the paralyzing trauma of Rose’s suicide and, with it, the death of the political ideals that had motivated her travels with the female biker gang. For Philomena, Toronto holds the memory of rejection by the man she loved and the loss of the love child she gave up for adoption. Philomena’s homecoming is similar to Emily’s, less an empowered choice and more likely the outcome of immobilizing grief. The limitations felt by the rest of the women as they contemplate their road trip suggest an almost unbridgeable gulf between the city and the rez. The fluid interplay imagined between the two spaces has not been the outcome of the characters’ experiences. Rather, their incomplete encounters are reminders that the two spaces are unevenly inscribed with power.

Their road trip confronts these limitations and offers Philomena the opportunity to return to the city beset with difficult memories. Curiously, the women’s time in Toronto constitutes a very compressed por-

tion of the text, with the bingo palace taking front stage as the sole setting for the three pages devoted to their time in Toronto. This almost exclusive focus on bingo suggests a reterritorialization of Toronto, an Indigenization of this space that resignifies Toronto with the women's worlds and priorities. The social life formed around bingo calls to mind Ramirez's discussion of Native hubs. Like Native hubs, bingo games operate as a circuit for Indigenous collectivities to come together across different regions. The women's pilgrimage to the bingo game in Toronto suggests the vastness of this circuit. Bingo's importance as an economy within Indigenous communities bears mentioning here as well. With the decline or absence of other forms of industry in reserve communities, bingo has become a vital form of revenue. In an otherwise reprov-ing discussion of high-stakes bingo on tribal lands, Gerald Vizenor underlines the money that gaming enterprises have generated for paving roads, providing child trust funds, and funding dental care at a time when federal funding to tribal communities has declined.⁴⁷ Pelajia similarly imagines herself using her bingo earnings to provide for her community in ways that the administration and the state have failed to do. The right to operate gaming establishments on reserve lands, Vizenor further points out, is underwritten by federal recognition of tribal sovereignties.⁴⁸ So read, bingo's significance goes well beyond social functions to have serious economic and political implications. In an inversion, however, of the flow of traffic in Vizenor's discussion, the women in *The Rez Sisters* follow high-stakes bingo to Toronto, off tribal lands (at least de jure). Their disappointment with the dwindling size of their home bingo, which is overseen by the local priest, contrasts with the colossal gaming establishments of Vizenor's discussion. A vestige of the church's purchase over the community, the priest's control over their home bingo is an obvious juxtaposition to the exercise of tribal sovereignties illustrated by Vizenor's examples.

As the object of the women's quest, "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD" opens up onto the text's parody of the road narrative. The bingo's association with consumerism and the Catholic Church is a playful nod to the road-narrative tradition, a genre conventionally structured around the quest for transcendental meaning.⁴⁹ This scene suggests a satire not only of consumerism and Christianity but of the road-narrative tradition as well. Perhaps all road narratives are auto-satires in a sense, since the disappointment of the fantasies driving the quest is al-

most always prefigured in the narrative's arc.⁵⁰ *The Rez Sisters* ends anticlimactically with Philomena winning \$600, a net loss after the women fundraise \$1,400 for the trip. As a mock epic, the work pokes fun at the truth or transformation sought in the road narrative. Indeed, the play mocks the whole business of structural conformity as the women chase after fallacious notions of white, middle-class happiness ideated in the form of Toronto. Highway's reinscription of the road narrative prompts us to take the genre and its values less seriously, if only because its ideals are less attainable for some. The text is a parodic response to the fantasies and yearnings of mainstream cultures, but it also highlights the intensified struggles for mobility that racialized, underclass women like the seven characters of this play experience. The epic journey in *The Rez Sisters* is not the road trip; the real exploit is their getting on the road at all. The women's mobility occurs in spite of, or perhaps more accurately, out of, multiple ambivalences—tragedy and parody, oblivion and self-realization, alienation and alliance in poverty. Highway invokes the road-narrative tradition and mystifies it at the same time. It is this irony that distinguishes *The Rez Sisters* from touchstone examples of the road narrative.

“What kind of stove you gonna buy, Veronique St. Pierre? Westinghouse? Electrolux? Yamaha? Kawasaki?”

Emily Dictionary, *The Rez Sisters*

Previous discussions of *The Rez Sisters* have addressed its depiction of the women, its representation of the trickster, its introduction of Cree-Anishnaabe cosmologies to the stage, and its challenging of Western dramatic forms. My concerns are of a different order. I have pulled into focus a part of this play—the literary and literal contexts of roads and their bearing on the content of Highway's text—that is so central and obvious as to be taken for granted. As with the other dramatic forms and generic conventions absorbed into his play, Highway annexes the road narrative and inflects it with the experiences of an unexpected group of characters driven by different desires and constraints. If there is one thing on which almost all critical studies of road narratives agree, it is that the road narrative is the territory of no one. This characteristic seems fitting for a genre that is so keenly interested in space, mappings, and the desire to traverse separated geographies. Given this antiterrestrial orientation, it would also seem fitting that certain details in *The*

Rez Sisters reappear in later road narratives. Emily's female biker gang anticipates Erika Lopez's *Flaming Iguanas*. The van that the women take to Toronto returns in Louise Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace* as Lipsha's bingo van. Entering a tradition that is the territory of no one, Highway's writing absorbs and is reabsorbed by other inscriptions of the genre.

That Highway would choose the road narrative as one of the genres for this play warrants closer critical reflection than it has received. In making mobility a central preoccupation of its characters, *The Rez Sisters* offers a profound window onto the subjectivities and imaginaries mediated by the road and by road travel in postcolonial landscapes. Framing this work are colonial and postcolonial histories where roads have played a key role in experiences of relocation, expropriated territory, and sexual and racial violence. *The Rez Sisters* challenges its audience to think about the function and meaning of roads in relation to a larger political context and history. Writing itself into the very surname of the author, this history adumbrates a single, inexorable route of being. Highway, it turns out, was born along a remote trapline in northern Manitoba a good distance from any highway. This naming, like a highway that covers over older paths and trails, covers over other stories, conditions a way of seeing that is also a form of blindness.

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NOTES

1. Idle No More's emergence is credited to four founding women: Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon, and Sheelah McLean.

2. Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 27. The play's exuberant reception heralded a prodigious period for Indigenous Canadian drama, setting the stage for playwrights like Daniel David Moses, Monique Mojica, Drew Hayden Taylor, Margo Kane, Ian Ross, Marie Clements, and many others who followed. Much of the play's critical reception has focused on its challenge to normative and culturally coded understandings of tragedy and comedy, its incorporation of Cree-Anishnaabe cosmologies, and its depiction of disquieting realities of life on the rez. Barbara Pell underlines Highway's "comic revisioning of Native tragedy" that "neither trivializes it with romantic sentimentality nor transcends it

with Euro-Christian paradigms” (“George Ryga’s ‘Hail Mary,’” 255). While most scholarly analyses of *The Rez Sisters* discuss the road trip and the women’s struggles for mobility, since both are central to the play, only Heather Macfarlane’s dissertation, “Road Work: Theorizing the Road Trip Narrative in Anglophone, Québécois and Indigenous Literatures in Canada,” to date, has addressed Highway’s handling of the road-narrative genre.

3. The pass system restricted Indigenous people’s movement in western Canada. This practice was formalized (though never legalized) following the 1885 North-West Resistance, in which the Métis people and Indigenous allies waged a five-month insurgency against the Canadian government. Under this practice, which remained in effect until the 1940s, Indigenous peoples were required to obtain the permission of the Indian agent to leave the reserve. The process involved an application, and passes explicitly outlined when the individual would leave and return. Individuals without passes were often arrested or turned around to their assigned area. Every movement was restricted, including the visits of parents who had children in residential schools. See Barron, “Indian Pass System”; Carter, “Controlling Indian Movement”; and Smith, *Liberalism, Surveillance, and Resistance*.

4. The Oka conflict consisted of a seventy-eight-day standoff between Mohawk protestors from Kahnawake and Kanasatake reserves in Québec (joined by Indigenous supporters from across the country) and the Sûreté du Québec, who were reinforced by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian military. The dispute began when the neighboring municipality of Oka approved the development of a golf course and luxury condominiums on traditional burial grounds sacred to the bordering Kanasatake reserve. The protestors erected barricades along major routes leading into Montreal, inciting one of the most momentous acts of resistance by Indigenous generations living today and drawing equally memorable hostility from non-Indigenous constituencies in Canada.

5. Shepherd and Murray, *Desire Lines*, 1.

6. For further information, see Blomley, “Shut the Province Down,” 12.

7. Barth, “Immemorial Visibilities,” 482.

8. Razack, “Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice,” 142.

9. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 39.

10. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 27.

11. Philip Deloria’s “I Want to Ride in Geronimo’s Cadillac,” which examines the relationship between automobility and indigeneity, is another felicitous exploration of the different cultural coding and uses of the automobile. Proceeding from the recognition that Indigenous people were often seen as incompatible with modern technologies of mobility, Deloria traces the genealogy of, and historical exceptions to, these constructions.

12. These ambivalences are constitutive of the road narrative, a literary form that has availed itself to much more multiple and conflicting significations than often acknowledged. Recent authors like Oscar Zeta Acosta, Erika Lopez, Sherman Alexie, Les-

lie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston have rewritten the “open road” in ways that reveal its powers, perils, and inequities. This rich diversity of road narratives unsettles the “presumed territoriality of the genre” (Mills, *Road Story*, 31) while challenging any easy views of this literary form as the provenance of “White America’s dream” (Dunaway, “Route 66, John Steinbeck, and American Indian Literature,” 25). Some of the genre’s most iconic and celebrated inscriptions to personal freedom like Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” “invite readers to move against the grain and to challenge dominant values,” Ronald Primeau points out (*Romance of the Road*, 21). The gendering of the road narrative as a largely male quest also has been reevaluated by critics like Alexandra Ganser, Janis Stout, Virginia Scharff, Deborah Clarke, Katie Mills, and Deborah Paes de Barros in their recent studies of automobility and women. These critical reappraisals cast a different light on the road narrative by revealing a neglected archive attesting to women’s experiences of mobility. I want to be cautious, though, of reading this archive in a way that puts too soft a focus on the real and continued existence of gendered and racial spatialities. Indeed, the works comprising such an archive confront the spatialization of difference and expose the often-painful experiences for many—women, racialized subjects, queer individuals—who cannot wear their bodies lightly in certain spaces. Two characters in *The Rez Sisters*, Zhaboonigan, who is mentally disabled, and Emily, who is queer, make this latter point painfully clear.

13. Mills, *Road Story*, 33.

14. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 7–8.

15. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 7–8.

16. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 8.

17. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 7.

18. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 29.

19. The patriarchal bias of the Indian Act, which entrenched patrilineal descent and promoted male political leadership in Indigenous communities, created gender inequities between men and women. Martha Flaherty, president of Pauktuutit Inuit Women’s Association, summarizes the compounded discrimination that Indigenous women experience: “Women have suffered doubly for we lost status in our own society and were subjected to the patriarchal institutions born in the south” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, vol. 4, chap. 2, sec. 7). Philomena refers to this gender-based exclusion when she tells Pelajia, “You’ll never be chief. . . . Because you’re a woman” (Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 114).

20. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 43.

21. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 43.

22. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 86.

23. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 20.

24. Clarke, *Driving Women*, 166.

25. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 17.

26. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 51.

27. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 97.

28. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 26.

29. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 47–48.

30. See Amnesty International's 2004 report, *Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*. In 2011 the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women also contacted the Canadian government about the deaths and disappearances of approximately five hundred Indigenous women. That many of these cases have not been fully investigated nor have they received priority attention has been a frequent concern voiced by organizations like the Native Women's Association of Canada. In December of 2011 the Native Women's Association of Canada issued a press release stating that the UN intended to conduct an inquiry into the disappearances and deaths ("Missing Aboriginal Women Prompt UN Letter").

31. Similarly, the Ontario Lumber Company dumped so much sawdust into waterways that they were fined into bankruptcy. See Taim, *Almaguin Chronicles*, 92.

32. See Bruser, "Ontario Piling Up Millions of Tires," and the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency's report, "Zhiibaahaasing First Nation Tire Removal."

33. Highway, *Rez Sisters*, 92.

34. Dant, "Driver-Car," 61.

35. Lefebvre, *Everyday Life*, 100.

36. Lefebvre, *Everyday Life*, 102.

37. Gilroy, "Driving while Black," 82.

38. Writing about herself as a young woman growing up in Kentucky during Jim Crow, bell hooks describes the car as offering an experience of "racelessness," a prosthetic sense of democratic equality (hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, 47). She recalls riding in "a sleek long white convertible" driven by "the white girl from across the tracks" (hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, 47). For hooks, this moment evokes the possibility of intimacy and the formation of social bonds against the logic of segregation. She writes, "Its leather seats, the real wood on the dashboard, the shiny metal so clear it's like glass—like a mirror it dares us to move past race to take to the road and find ourselves—find the secret places within where there is no such things as race" (hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, 47). Yet the imagery of mirrors in this passage, combined with the fact that the car is a "white convertible" driven by a young white woman (rather than by hooks herself), invites a different reading than the transcendence of racial structures.

39. Gilroy, "Driving while Black," 94.

40. Gilroy, "Driving while Black," 82.

41. Ramirez, *Native Hubs*, 1.

42. Ramirez, *Native Hubs*, 22.

43. Drew Hayden Taylor writes of Highway's work with the De-Be-Jeh-Mu-Jig theater group in "Storytelling to Stage: The Growth of Native Theatre in Canada."

44. Taylor, "Storytelling to Stage," 150. See also Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 11.

45. In a further illustration of Native hubs of artistic collaborative circuits, two of the actors in Highway's 1986 production of *The Rez Sisters* were Muriel and Gloria Miguel, cofounders of the famous Spiderwoman Theatre based in New York (Taylor, "Storytelling to Stage," 146).

46. Ramirez, *Native Hubs*, 22.

47. Vizenor, *Crossbloods*, 18.

48. Vizenor, *Crossbloods*, 50. See also Jessica Cattellino's *High Stakes: Florida Seminole Gaming and Sovereignty*.

49. In Kerouac's iconic inscription of this genre, Sal and Dean refer to this quest as the search for "it"—what Primeau describes as a "theological displacement of Kerouac's French-Canadian Catholic upbringing" (Primeau, *Romance of the Road*, 38). *The Rez Sisters'* parodic iteration of this quest for "healing grace and apocalyptic vision" (Primeau, *Romance of the Road*, 6) ends up at a bingo palace in a scene resembling both *The Last Supper* and *The Price is Right*.

50. As J. N. Nodelman notes, some of the genre's most well-known examples unfold around unfulfilled expectations. *The Grapes of Wrath* follows Route 66 "to a promised yet never quite reached salvation" (Nodelman, "Reading Route 66," 170). This quest also comes up empty for Sal in *On the Road*, where, Nodelman observes, what begins as "the promise of experience turns only into self-absorption" (171).

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