

Rez Theory: Aesthetics of the Everyday in Native American Literature and Television

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(American Culture)
in the University of Michigan
2021

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Dedication

For—

My parents, Judy and Glenn

and my husband, Rod.

Acknowledgements

The ideas presented in this dissertation were brought to fruition through many spirited conversations with my brilliant and generous committee members, Dr. Scott Richard Lyons, Dr. Gregory Dowd, Dr. Sidonie Smith and Dr. Bethany Hughes. It would have been impossible to imagine rez theory without the office, coffee shop and email exchanges from year one with my advisor and mentor, Scott Lyons. Our discussions comparing (and laughing about) rez stories helped me realize that theorizing the rez was not only possible but would make for an endlessly fascinating research project. His deep engagement with my work, kind words of encouragement, challenging questions and wealth of Native American literary knowledge helped make this project what it is. Greg Dowd has been a champion of mine since I arrived in Michigan to visit the campus. His office in American Culture and his classrooms have been a place of intellectual exploration into the depths of Native American history. No matter how busy things got, Greg's commitment to this project and my career development never wavered. I feel incredibly grateful to have had my words read, edited and my ideas engaged by Sid Smith. Her life's work on life writing guided much of my writing style and approach. Thank you to Bethany Hughes for opening doors for me that changed my path. Her energy and enthusiasm for our field is a source of inspiration.

Thank you to my writing group, Megan Rim and Hanah Stiverson, who provided emotional support, lively discussion and profound friendship through the program and beyond. To Kat Whitely for the guidance, friendship and many Native studies chat sessions. To my

fellow members of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Interdisciplinary Group (NAISIG) through the years: Kris Klein Hernández, Emily Macgillivray, Matthew Villeneuve, Janice Feng, Zoe Waldman, Sophie Hunt, Stefan Aune and Tom Klemm. Thank you to my cohort mates, Robert Ramaswamy, Belquis Elhadi, Sergio Barrera, Irene Inatty and Pau Nava. Finally, thank you to the many upper-year American Culture graduate students who were always ready and willing to share their advice and experience along the way.

During my time at Michigan, I had the supreme pleasure of teaching and learning alongside Professor Philip J. Deloria. I also want to thank the faculty in American Culture and beyond who supported my intellectual growth and professional development at Michigan, including Drs. Megan Sweeney, Tiya Miles, Peggy McCracken, Amy Stillman, Michael Witgen, Joseph Gone, Stephen Berrey, Kristin Hass, Colin Gunkel, Scott Larson, Cherry Meyer and Native American Studies faculty member, Alphonse Pitawanakwat.

Thank you to the current and former staff in American Culture. Katia Kitchen, Marlene Moore, Judy Gray, Mary Freiman and Andrew Reiter ensured I had an answer to every question about graduate school I ever asked. Thank you also to librarians Jasmine Pawlicki, Charles Ransom and Sigrid Anderson.

Thank you to my new colleagues at Vassar College whose feedback on my research when I visited helped shape it. And thank you to my mentors and friends at my former institution, Carleton University, who encouraged me to pursue this academic journey: Dr. Allan J. Ryan, Dr. Donna Patrick, Dr. Jennifer Adese, Smita Bharadia, Karen Green, Linda Capperault and Dr. Zoe Todd.

The research in this dissertation was made possible by the generous financial support of several fellowships and organizations, including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research

Council of Canada (SSHRC) Doctoral Fellowship, the Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship, the University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School and Department of American Culture Fellowship, the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Education Sector, the National Indian Brotherhood Trust Fund and the Indspire Foundation.

As a dissertation that centers the rez, I close by acknowledging the rez folks in my life—my family, my community and my nation—for lifting me into the position I stand on this day. Thank you to my husband, Rod Jacobs, who is my number one supporter. To my parents, Judy and Glenn Whiteduck, who raised me to believe I could do anything. My grandparents, Daisy Cayer, Josée Dewache and Ronald Whiteduck; my grandmother, Daisy, was always there afterschool and my grandparents, Ronald and Josée, bribed me for good grades in elementary school and I've been hooked ever since. My brother, Dion Whiteduck, for being on procrastination patrol. Finally, thank you to my community, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, to the teachers and administrators at Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan and to the post-secondary support officers at the Kitigan Zibi Education Sector, all of whom had a hand in my education journey.

Kitchi mìgwech kakina ni-dodemeg ashidj ni-kekinàmàgedj.

Preface

My first “job” as a ten-year-old was working at Josée’s Native Arts and Crafts, my grandmother’s shop on our rez in Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. It was located along Highway 105 in the old house my dad and his siblings grew up in. My “work” involved playing in the shop with cousins and friends and running up the hill to my grandparents’ new house to let them know a customer had arrived. My grandmother, Josée Dewache, is a master craftsperson and the shop sold many of her own creations: moccasins were her specialty, but she also made jewelry, clothing, dreamcatchers, purses, painted items and Native-style home decor. The shop sold hand-carved paddles and birch bark moose callers made by family members or others on the rez. She sourced Native crafts from external companies for resale and also sold craft supplies, like beads, hides, needles and thread. Big-ticket items in the shop included a black bear skin rug and a feathered headdress; but there were also small, kitschy items for sale, like brown Indian dolls in braids and buckskin dresses and safety-pin headdresses to hang from a rear-view mirror.

As a 90s rez kid with this kind of “Indian stuff” all around me, I eschewed Indian things in favor of the novel, the new and the unfamiliar. I wanted *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*, not *Pocahontas* (which, to this day, I still have not watched). When I moved to the city as a teenager, however, I had the opposite experience. I encountered precious little “Indian stuff” outside of the home I shared with my parents and my brother. When I was no longer swimming in it, I understood more of the richness in everyday Algonquin life on the rez—so much so that I developed a deep interest in Native history, literature and politics when I reached college.

My academic pursuits brought me home: back to my grandparents' house next to my first "place of work" at Josee's Native Arts and Crafts, which had since closed. I spent one winter driving up to the rez from my new apartment in the city every Friday to work on an oral history project with my grandfather, Ronald Whiteduck. When I pulled up to the house, my grandfather was often returning from his daily walks in the bush on snowshoes, the old Indian kind made from ash wood and sinew that my uncles on my mom's side of the family used to make. My grandfather and I would sit by the fireplace in the living room, which was always alight in the cold months, drinking tea and eating cookies, and I would listen to his stories about our rez in the old days. He shared oral history told by his grandmother, Maryanne Brazeau, about Jean-Baptiste Whiteduck, who was one of the first heads-of-family and the first Whiteduck to settle on our reserve in 1853. Often, the things that most interested us and that we'd end up chatting about longest were the small, everyday things: the person on the rez who made the best bear grease and how people used it; the practice of hanging certain types of wreaths when a family member passed away; the "muskrat savings account" trappers would keep, holding onto a beautiful fur that could be traded for a high rate in an emergency; and, of course, the bits of community gossip left unwritten when I published this work in a 2013 paper titled, "'But it's our story. Read it.': Stories My Grandfather Told Me and Writing for Continuance."

My research interests landed somewhere in the middle: I was no longer the rez kid uninterested in "Indian stuff," but I wasn't clamoring to write grand narratives about Indians, either. Instead, I was thinking about the small things that make up everyday life on the rez: the items sold in my grandmother's craft shop, the skunk medicine and deer hides my grandfather talked about in his stories and the contemporary things that seemed so ingrained into ordinary rez life to be missed. Why did practically half the people I knew on the rez go by a nickname? What

did it mean that I had grown up with a rez accent that I never noticed until I moved to the city? Why did certain combinations of seemingly random things—like baloney, bingo and ball caps—shout “REZ” even though there is nothing inherently “Indian” about them? In essence, I had basic questions about the world—or the rez—I saw around me and a sneaking suspicion that there was more there than meets the eye, that these “basic questions” might reveal significant insights about the place where I grew up and the people who lived there. It was out of this intellectual curiosity in ordinary objects, everyday language and the people I know that *rez theory* was born.

Take, for instance, one of those ordinary objects sold in my grandmother’s shop that you may or may not have heard of: the safety pin headdress. Made of dyed feathers (the brighter, the better) and large, plastic beads assembled on safety pins in the shape of a Plains-style headdress, this kitschy item dangled from many a rez car’s rear-view mirror. This popular item, which probably peaked in the 1990s, is a representation of war bonnets worn by some chiefs and tribal leaders. It is an assembly of “artificial” materials that references the original war bonnet. While outsiders might think an item like this plays into assumptions, for example that “Indians love beads and feathers,” what is remarkable about the safety pin headdress is that rez folks made the decision to adopt the artifice for themselves. In doing so, they destabilized outside attempts to impose clear associations between Native people and stereotypical items like beads and feathers. Rez folks drive the meaning and significance behind this particular representation because they have decided, simply, that they like it, and they want to use it in their everyday lives. They keep the representation of the headdress in *motion*, to use one of Gerald Vizenor’s preferred terms, by approaching it playfully. The safety pin headdress is invested with meaning because of the journey it travels through the rez to dangle on a rear-view mirror. Rez people have decided for

themselves that this kitschy item is the one they prefer, to the extent that it has become a massively popular item sold on the powwow trail, one of the greatest sites of Indian aesthetics and ephemera, and at Josée's Native Arts and Crafts.

The time is ripe for theorizing the rez, especially alongside the proliferation of Native American and Indigenous cultural productions, including those studied in the chapters of this dissertation and referenced in the Conclusion. Although there is plenty of literature and art set on the rez, there is relatively little scholarship intended to guide our understandings of the rez and its appearance in original works of art. *Rez Life* by David Treuer springs to mind as a text that weaves together personal narrative and historical information about the rez. Because the rez comes to life, partly, through aesthetics and sensibilities, it can be challenging to theorize certain intangible processes beyond noticing and naming them. As Treuer writes of life beyond the reservation boundary: "something is different about life on one side of it and life on the other. It's just hard to say exactly what" (1). Rez theory takes on the task of articulating what is different and how it works.

In the dissertation that follows, I contribute to the literature that continually seeks to put into words what exactly is special or extraordinary about everyday life on the rez. Although it can be difficult for those of us who come from the rez to explain, we recognize when representations miss the mark, as they might in a Disney film, or provide an incomplete picture, as certain news stories do. Treuer writes: "A lot of people (this includes Indians and non-Indians) don't think of the story of rez life as a story of beauty. Most often rez life is associated with tragedy. We are thought of in terms of what we have lost or what we have survived. Life on the rez is usually described as harsh, violent, drug-infested, criminal, poor, and short" (5). Treuer goes on to name things on his rez, Leech Lake Indian Reservation, that this negative portrayal

overlooks, and they are similar to things you'll find in this dissertation: “we’re funny” (9), “[w]e have people who know and practice traditional Ojibwe lifeways—trapping, hunting and fishing for substance, who are Catholics, and we have lawyers and lobbyists who follow Ojibwe ceremonial traditions... We are known for making beautiful things,” such as “the birch bark canoe, a true engineering feat” (8).

Some scholarly texts center the rez or organize their analysis around it. There are histories of certain communities, such as *My Grandfather’s Knocking Sticks* by Brenda J. Child, *Our History Is the Future* by Nick Estes and *The Clay We Are Made Of* by Susan M. Hill. Others mix historical information with personal narrative and oral traditions, like *Storyteller* by Leslie Marmon Silko and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by N. Scott Momaday. Authors of monographs in Native American and Indigenous studies fold their own life histories of living on the rez into their scholarship, offering political and social commentary, including *Mohawk Interruptus* by Audra Simpson, *Tribal Television* by Dustin Tahmahkera and *X-Marks* by Scott Richard Lyons. Perhaps the rezziest books of all are those that never make it to university or public libraries beyond the borders of the rez. The commitment of rez folks to the preservation of Native culture, language and history is incredible and each rez has that person or persons whose energy and life’s work is dedicated to researching, recording and sharing their own community-based histories and knowledge. On my rez, there is a cultural center where any community member can receive our rez’s self-published Algonquin culture and language books, including: *Since Time Immemorial: “Our Story” The Story of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg*; Algonquin Lexicon dictionaries, which are updated periodically as the language changes and develops (my grandmother is on the committee that creates new words); and *Mī Iyo Ejikenindameng Chīnāgo, Nongom ashidj Wābang (Our Knowledge Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow)*, a collection of

Algonquin material culture housed in museums across North America. History, literature, interdisciplinary Indigenous studies and community-based projects have approached the study of the rez from various perspectives, and this dissertation adds yet another: the theorizing of the rez.

The rez is a place that speaks through material culture, ephemera and aesthetics. Everyday rez folks are the makers of the rez as this dissertation describes it. What I study in this dissertation is not the reservation or reserve—that is, the history of physically bounded places where Indians were herded onto lands picked out for them by settler colonial governments—but the rez as it is imagined, depicted and represented by the people who call the place home. Rez theory puts ordinary rez life into perspective using theoretical models and methods that scholars, critics and writers can use to direct their attention toward what makes a piece of literature, art or other cultural production particularly *rezzy*. The term “rez” in rez theory is used in equal measure as a noun (its original form) and an adjective (a newer iteration) because of the way it not only names a place but describes the aesthetic and the sensibilities of that place. Once transformed into an adjective, the rez moves more freely, for example, in the language and through the actions of people who are connected to that place and bring it to life. I propose that there are three primary thematics one can look for to illuminate how something is rez—language, politics and humor—and that existing theoretical models, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *bricolage* and Michel de Certeau’s tactics versus strategies, help shed light on how rez people make meaning out of their everyday lives and the ordinary materials they encounter.

Native arts and crafts stores. Community history books. Rez accents, Indian car decals, ball caps with Indian logos. Rez theory brings all of this together and tries to make sense of it. This “Indian stuff” is so ingrained in everyday rez life that it must be excavated to be studied. Michel de Certeau articulates his goal in *The Practice of Everyday Life* as theorizing that which

goes unnoticed: “This goal will be achieved if everyday practices, ‘ways of operating’ or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity” (xi). As I write this Preface in my home office, my writing desk is dotted with miniature Indian ephemera I’ve amassed over the years: turtles made out of sweetgrass that my grandmother-in-law bought from a neighbor who sold them for bingo money; a tiny birch bark canoe I made at a family reunion on my rez a couple of years ago; a soapstone inukshuk, no bigger than a deck of cards, made by a member of an Inuit prisoners program and gifted to me at a conference. These are the objects that make up everyday Native life and they tell a tale worthy of greater study.

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Abstract

This dissertation proposes *rez theory*, a model for the study of everyday aspects of life on the rez in Native American and Indigenous literature and cultural production. I argue that three thematics form rez theory—language, politics and humor—and that consideration of these areas in critical analysis of cultural productions by Native people and about the rez reveals how rez folks use tactics, aesthetics and sensibilities to intervene in structures of power. What I study in this dissertation is not the reservation or reserve—that is, the history of the physically bounded places demarcated by settler colonial governments—but the rez as it is imagined, depicted and represented in text by the people who call the place home and bring it to life. This project examines and applies rez theory to Native American and Indigenous fiction, memoir and television. Beginning with the Native American Renaissance, I argue that Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* uses an array of mundane objects and characters’ attitudes to illustrate her rez aesthetic. I show how Terese Marie Mailhot redeems markers of Indian-ness typically deemed unsavory in the memoir, *Heart Berries*, by revealing their ambiguity and complicating fixed definitions of rez life. I propose related concepts within the wider framework of rez theory, such as rez vernacular and rez gothic, and illustrate their usage on two Canadian television series, *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster*. The conclusion issues an invitation to rez theory and points to contemporary Native American and Indigenous cultural productions worthy of consideration.

This project intervenes in narratives that position the reservation as a place defined by poverty, tragedy and socioeconomic difficulties by providing a model that promotes Native

agency and self-determination. The radical intervention of rez theory is to suggest that such a thing exists at all; that it is possible to understand rez life as critical, tactical and theoretically significant. As a “theory from below,” it looks to everyday Native language, politics and humor to inform understandings of how everyday rez people intervene in strategic processes that seek to determine Native life. Cultural theories, such as Michel de Certeau’s practice of everyday life and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *bricolage*, elucidate rez theory. De Certeau’s theories about users versus producers and tactics versus strategies offer a framework for interpreting how rez people operate within systems imposed upon them using tactical interventions. Lévi-Strauss’ *bricolage* explains how an assembly of objects and attitudes form a rez aesthetic and identifies everyday Native people as the architects of it. Rez theory foregrounds overlooked pieces of ephemera and off-the-cuff attitudes as the material that forms a rez aesthetic. It asks critics to turn their lenses toward the rez as an important site of meaning-making in studies of Native American and Indigenous literature and cultural production.

Introduction to Rez Theory

“I felt smallness, how the earth divided into bits and kept dividing.”
-Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*

In Louise Erdrich’s first novel, *Love Medicine*, there is brief mention of a person on the rez with the nickname Wristwatch: “I got to thinking quite naturally of the Lamartine’s cousin named Wristwatch. I never knew what his real name was. They called him Wristwatch because he got his father’s broken wristwatch as a young boy when his father passed on. Never in his whole life did Wristwatch take his father’s watch off” (239). No greater plotline develops about Wristwatch in the novel, but his presence signals the ubiquity of nicknames on the rez. In television series set on the rez, like *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster*, we meet the likes of Hat Girl, Butterhead and Crashpad. For a long time, the only Native people I knew were from my own reserve, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, an Algonquin community located in Quebec, about an hour and a half north of Ottawa, Canada’s capital city—and so many of them had nicknames. When I met my husband, who was from another reserve, I was finally able to ask the burning questions I had about life on a different rez, beginning with:

“What kinds of nicknames do you have on Walpole Island?” My husband’s reserve, Bkejwanong or Walpole Island First Nation, is on the Michigan-Ontario border. It felt at once familiar and slightly different the first time I visited.

“Do you have anyone named Beans?” I asked, thinking of a friend of my grandparents whose nickname stuck out to me.

“We have a *Beansie*,” he answered.

“What about a Soup?” I asked, remembering one of my late great-uncles.

“Yeah, we have a Soup. Blizz?”

I laughed. “No Blizz. But we have a Chubbs.”

And on the conversation went, as we tried to outdo one another with the funny nicknames that make up the fabric of day-to-day life on our respective reserves. When I started my PhD program, one of my professors, Scott Lyons, told a story of a guy from his rez nicknamed Pidge in a graduate seminar. That one might have outdone us both. Blizz, Pidge, Wristwatch. These are all rez people whose nicknames came to them through stories, events or features, some of them funny and others, like Wristwatch’s, sad. Storytelling is central to Native people’s lives. Plenty of scholarship in Native American and Indigenous studies focuses on storytelling and we often write about the grand narratives: the creation stories, the community histories, the oral traditions. But what becomes of the seemingly trivial and often unrecorded stories that led to a nickname like Blizz?

Nicknames are so pervasive on the rez that Gerald Vizenor writes of them alongside sacred dream names in *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories*: “with each nickname there were stories to be told” (13). In the academic journal, *Names*, Theodore J. Holland performs a taxonomy of nicknames. When they are not derived from first names or middle initials, Holland explains, they are often based on one’s “physical or personality traits, events in one’s life, or from one’s occupation or geographic location” (256). Holland also outlines several purposes of nicknames: to distinguish or identify individuals with common names; identifying members of a community; concealing one’s identity; creating social solidarity; and maintaining boundaries between groups, for example, friends and non-friends. The nickname Chubbs, to take one example, extends from the physical trait of him being

heavysset at one brief point in his childhood. Although he leaned out as a teenager, the nickname stuck with him forever. These nicknames are funny, a little insulting and they tell a story of some sort; many of them are in English, emerging from time periods on the rez when English was the first or main language spoken at home, but others are based in Indigenous languages. And although a nickname like Chubbs, which belongs to my cousin, seems a little mean, everybody who calls him—Adam—by that nickname loves him. While it might sound offensive to outsiders, his family and friends on the rez understand the context behind the nickname and give it new significance by using it endearingly. As Holland writes: “The actual use of such names, however, demands social competence in order to evaluate the offensiveness of such names - a knowledge of social structure which is available only to ‘insiders.’ The use of nicknames, especially offensive ones, takes on social significance in that their covert usage can occur only in the company of like-minded people” (258). Insiders, in this case rez people, understand that nicknames create a sense of social solidarity and signify belonging to the rez.

Nicknames are not a bad analogy with which to introduce the central object of study in my dissertation: the rez. Nicknames allow Native people to recognize the rez in one another. My husband and I initially bonded by comparing the nicknames we heard when growing up. I recognized the rez in my advisor during a grad seminar at the University of Michigan through his mention of a funny nickname. Nicknames are rezzy. One question that drives this chapter, and this dissertation, is: why? Why are certain signifiers, like nicknames, characteristic of the rez? And what role do they play in creating a portrait of rez life? The rez is recognizable to people who have a relationship to the place, and I’m sure those readers have their own shortlists of nicknames to toss into the ring. But how do we come to know and understand these rez signifiers? In other words, is it possible to theorize how the rez functions or do, as the title of this

introduction and dissertation suggests, *rez theory*? When comparing the details of life on a rez, an overall shape is discernible, like the fact that nicknames abound, yet there are inevitable differences, such as whether the nickname Blizz is common (it's not). We recognize things like the frequent use of nicknames as a common feature that exists across multiple reservations. I am interested in what we share and in the intersections that create an overall sensibility and aesthetic of the rez. In this introduction, I offer some theoretical considerations for how we might conceptualize the rez and use it as a lens in the study of Native American life, literature and cultural productions.

Following a literature review that examines how the rez appears in key pieces of Native American literature and scholarship to date, I consider the rez through the lens of Michel de Certeau's theory in *The Practice of Everyday Life* and suggest three key thematics to define rez theory. Then, I trace the aesthetics and sensibilities of the rez, offering a point of entry for those less familiar with rez life and holding up a mirror to those who know it well. I also consider the question of how we come to know the rez and use the theory of *bricolage* to explain how people on the rez assemble and make meaning in their everyday life. I conclude by considering the rez beyond its spatial boundaries and through the perspective of lived experience and practice-based processes of being or becoming. Ultimately, I argue that looking at the ordinary, the everyday and the quotidian alongside the bigger questions that occupy our field—the spiritual, the conceptual and the profound—reveals elements of rez life that might otherwise slip under the radar. Investigating what makes up everyday rez life is critical because, more than anything, the things we do every day are the things that make up our lives.

The Reservation

Multiple forms of terminology have already come up in the short introduction to this

chapter: rez, reserve, reservation, First Nation, community, Anishinabeg. Others, like band and tribe, are in the mix as well. It's no wonder students, among others, struggle to find the best possible terminology to use in this discursive landscape. Some of these terms refer to peoples, others to places, and some refer to both. Let me begin with the low-hanging fruit: the term "reservation" is widely used in the U.S., where the shorter "reserve" is common in Canada. And when we discuss situated-ness, whether in the U.S. or Canada, we are always "on the rez" and never "in the rez," perhaps because the people who are of that place consider themselves to be treading *on* the land that comprises the reservation. The term "First Nation" is specific to Canada, although it is being adopted in Australia as well, and it describes both a people and a place. *First Nations* (plural) is an umbrella term, describing the people the U.S. refers to as *Native American* or *American Indian*. And a *First Nation* (singular) is the common descriptor of the peoples who govern their reserves in Canada, as in the case of my husband's community, Walpole Island First Nation. That name, Walpole Island First Nation, describes both a people, in the ideological sense that they belong to a sovereign nation, and the government, as it operates on a practical level with a chief, councilors and administrators who maintain the infrastructure of the reserve. Although many reservations and reserves are similar in size to small places on the mainstream settlement hierarchy—villages, for instance, with populations around 2,000—the contrasts are greater. Sovereignty and peoplehood, treaty history, cultural traditions and the slippery concept of nation are unique to the rez. This results in a relationship between economy and social services that is rather unique to reservations. As David E. Wilkins and K. Tsianina Lomawaima explain in *Uneven Ground: American Indian Sovereignty and Federal Law*: "On many reservations, direct tribal governmental action is the only way economic development can, or will, happen on Indian lands. Tribal governments are unique in the American political

landscape in this and other regards” (226). The authors draw on Vine Deloria Jr., who wrote: “They [tribal governments] are the only governmental or corporate entities in this society which have two entirely conflicting sets of responsibilities: providing social services for people... and running profitable and competitive businesses” (qtd. in Wilkins and Lomawaima 226).

The terms “band,” “tribe” and “nation” also enter this discursive terrain. Legal scholar Matthew L. M. Fletcher writes that, “Tribal leaders and advocates prefer using the term ‘nation’ to describe their political entities over terms like ‘tribe,’ ‘band,’ or ‘community’” (14-15). Band is, perhaps, the least salient of the terms. Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle, in *American Indians, American Justice*, refer to the various groups that can compose a tribe as: “a village, a league of tribes, or a simple hunting band” (xi). Stephen L. Pevar points to one reason for the plethora of terms when he writes, “The terms *nation*, *tribe*, *community*, *rancheria* and *band* have been used interchangeably in Indian treaties and statutes” (20). In the U.S., bands of Indians are smaller groups that can co-exist on one reservation. In Canada, the terms “Indian band” and “First Nation” are used interchangeably in everyday language, because one band generally makes up one First Nation (except in a few rare cases). Tribes in the U.S. and Canada exist at the highest order and represent the conglomerate of reservations or reserves; tribes conjoin the political interests of a group of reservations or reserves. The term “tribe” is part of everyday vernacular in the U.S., while Native people in Canada will more commonly refer to their “band.” While many terms, like Anishinabeg, extend from Indigenous languages, the English terms “tribe,” “band,” and even “nation” were developed in nineteenth century anthropology practice and became enshrined through legal usage. Ikenna Nzimiro’s chapter, “Anthropologists and Their Terminologies” in *The Politics of Anthropology*, provides anthropologist Ralph Linton’s definition of “tribe” and its relation to the term “band”: “In its simplest form the tribe is a group

of bands occupying contiguous territories and having a feeling of unity deriving from numerous similarities in culture, frequent friendly contacts, and a certain community of interest” (qtd. in Nzimiro 78). Regardless of these origins, terms like tribe and band become part of the vernacular on the rez.

In this chapter and throughout the dissertation, I use the term “rez” in two ways. First, I use it as an informal shorthand to refer to reservations and reserves as places. Second, I use the term as an adjective, a word that describes characteristics of the place, but might equally describe its people, material culture, language, narratives, politics and places. Related terms with suffixes that more readily identify them as adjectives are *rezzy* and *rezziness*. In his book, *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*, Scott Richard Lyons describes the term *rezzy*, and some of its limitations, while referencing a popular scene from the film, *Smoke Signals*: “I suspect that the word *rezzy* is now deployed in a similar manner to conflate ethnicity and class in a way that risks nostalgically erasing class difference ‘on the rez.’ To be *rezzy* is to be tacky but in a humorous, endearing way. Lovable losers are *rezzy*, and so are cars stuck in reverse” (21). I will delve deeper into his idea of tackiness as it relates to camp in a later section but, at this point, I simply want to mark the ways the terms *rez*, *rezzy* and *rezziness* are used in my dissertation at different times to describe aesthetics, sensibilities and characteristics attached to the place of the rez.

The final term I want to explore in relation to the rez is *Indian Country*. Like the term *rez*, *Indian Country* is also used colloquially to describe both the literal spaces of reservations and the ideologies that emanate from those spaces. The legal term *Indian country* (distinguished by a lowercase “c”), as Pevar writes, “was first used by Congress in 1790 to describe the territory controlled by Indians” (16). Contemporary legal usage of the term refers to the criminal jurisdiction of Indians, which is a tribal or federal responsibility, and is limited to three varieties:

1) reservations within the U.S., 2) dependent Indian communities, and 3) Indian allotments. The term shed this level of specificity when it was eventually adopted by Native people and transformed to refer, in an equally broad manner, to the multiple reservation and non-reservation places where Native people live and think. On one hand, the term refers generally to the spaces where Indians reside, whether on reservations or otherwise (as in: “the rate of diabetes is high in Indian Country”), and on the other hand, it is used to describe Native people in broad strokes regardless of where they live (for example: “Indian Country is resilient”). The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) describes the multifaceted nature of the term in a statement released in 2019: “Indian Country takes on a powerful meaning, legally and symbolically, for all tribal nations. Indian Country is wherever American Indian spirit, pride, and community are found. It resides not only in law books, legislation, and historical treatises, but also on ancestral homelands, within our homes, and in the hearts of American Indian and Alaska Native people everywhere.” In their articulation, Indian Country is as much a “spirit” as it is a physical location and this mutability between space and spirit, place and attitude is at the center of theorizations in this chapter. This capaciously conceived NCAI description returns to the 1790 usage of the term that included all territory controlled by Indians. Using the term rez, however, highlights Native people as the makers of the rez, rezziness, rez life. My preference for the term rez extends from its frequent everyday usage by Native people in both the U.S. and Canada, and its power is derived from its malleability, its informality and its ubiquity. For the same reasons, I most frequently employ the simple terms “Native” or “Native people” rather than the more common and formal terms, “Native American,” “First Nations,” or “Indigenous peoples.” The rez is a place where Native people make the rules.

I conclude this introductory section with a brief consideration of two major ways

reservation spaces and boundaries are shifting. First, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, only 22% of the American Indian and Alaska Native population lives in tribal statistical areas, but a follow up survey by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) found that a much higher proportion, 68%, of American Indian and Alaska Natives live on or near their tribal territories when surrounding areas are accounted for (Deweese and Marks 6). This preliminary interpretation of census data, Sarah Dewees and Benjamin Marks claim, results in a misinterpretation of where Native people live: “There is a commonly-cited but inaccurate statistic that claims that 72% of AIAN [American Indian and Alaska Native] people live in urban areas. The more accurate statistic is the opposite – a majority (54%) of AIAN people live in rural and small-town areas, and 68% live on or near their tribal homelands” (1). The pervasive idea that Native people live either on reservations or in urban areas in the U.S. makes invisible rural Native people who are “[r]eferred to as ‘Asterisk Nation’ by the National Congress of American Indians” (2). I draw out this demographic information to emphasize the fluid nature of reservation boundaries. If Indian Country is “wherever American Indian spirit, pride, and community are found,” as the NCAI put it in their statement, then it might be worthwhile to consider how the rez and rezziness manifests in non-reservation places, like the rural areas that Dewees and Marks point out.

Second, the Supreme Court decision in *McGirt v. Oklahoma* (2020), which ruled that a massive portion of eastern Oklahoma is considered reservation land belonging to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, also shows how reservation boundaries are transforming. Robert J. Miller and Torey Dolan describe the impacts of the case:

On July 9, 2020, in a 5-4 decision, the Court held that the boundaries of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation (or MCN) Reservation, as defined in its 1866 treaty with the United States, remain intact. Overnight, the Creek Reservation was reaffirmed and re-recognized as covering three and a quarter million acres, and thus the entire area is “Indian Country” as

defined by federal law. Consequently, one million Oklahomans found out they live on an Indian reservation, including 400,000 in the city of Tulsa. Now, Oklahoma will have to deal with the issue of MCN jurisdiction over an expanse of land and population twenty-five times larger than had been previously assumed. (1-2)

The census data cited above shows how Native people spill out into rural areas, effectively widening the space of the community beyond reservation boundaries; *McGirt v. Oklahoma* offers an example of a landmark case that does the opposite, where reservation lands widen to include people—Native and non-Native—who were not formerly “on the rez.” While it may be a shock for residents of Tulsa to suddenly learn they are on the rez—at least as far as spatial boundaries are concerned—part of the reason for that reaction could lie in the assumption that life on the rez is somehow “worse.” However, as legal scholar Bethany Berger explains, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation already leads a trend where reservations provide essential services to non-Native residents:

Across the United States, tribal governments are partnering with federal, state, and local governments to improve services for all people in their territories. They are powerful engines of economic development, numbering among the largest employers in many areas. By clarifying tribal territorial sovereignty, affirming reservation boundaries facilitates these trends in ways that serve everyone’s interests. *McGirt* not only holds the United States to its word and corrects a century of lawbreaking, it may engender a renaissance for both tribal nations and eastern Oklahoma as a whole. (4-5)

In her optimistic approach, Berger emphasizes the potential for “a renaissance,” as she puts it, in collaborative efforts between tribal nations and federal, state and local governments. Both the expanded view on census data about where Natives live and the ripple effects a case like *McGirt v. Oklahoma* may have on reservation boundaries illustrate how the rez continually reshapes itself. Rez theory responds to those transformations.

Uncle Steve

In his seminal article, “Towards a National Indian Literature,” Simon J. Ortiz writes about his Uncle Steve who “was not a literate man and he certainly was not literary.” He describes his uncle’s work as “a subsistence farmer, and he labored for the railroad during his working years.” Ortiz also remembers his uncle’s “grimy working clothes,” later contrasted by his fine fiesta outfit of “a clean, good shirt and a bright purple or blue or red neckerchief knotted at his tightly buttoned shirt collar.” He recalls how his uncle “would wave his beat-up hat” (Ortiz 7); as I show in the next chapter on *Love Medicine*, a hat is not just a hat. With his Uncle Steve taking center stage, Ortiz made the earliest argument for nationalism in Native American literature, a point that has since been taken up by scholars, including Craig S. Womack in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999), Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior in *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006) and a large assortment of Native literary critics in the collection *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective* (2008). In this chapter, I am interested less in the central claims of nationalism and more in what the presence of Uncle Steve in that landscape tells us. What gives Native American literature its character, authenticity and voice, Ortiz argues, is its inclusion of the Uncle Steves in our families and communities; coincidentally, my husband and I each have a literal Uncle Steve of our own. Ortiz writes: “This voice is that authentic one that my non-literary Uncle Steve, wearing a beat-up cowboy hat and bright blue neckerchief, expressed at Acqu as he struggled to teach history, knowledge of our community, and understanding of how life continues” (12). The desire for “vitality from within the hold of our Acqumeh Indian world,” (7) as Ortiz conceives of it, or whatever our respective Indian worlds may be, forms the basis of a large segment of Native literary criticism that ultimately extends from the daily rez life of our uncles and aunties. Rez

theory, as I conceive of it, stands on the shoulders of writers like Ortiz who first demanded room for their Uncle Steves in the pages of their writing.

David Treuer writes of his uncle, too, Bob (Bobby) Matthews, who welcomes Treuer to his “office” among “the white spruce towering over our heads near Rabideau Lake just off the Leech Lake Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota” (283). Treuer’s book, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, is a comprehensive history of Native America from the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 to the present with the reference to the heartbeat appearing in rebuke of the dire claims of Indian decline in Dee Brown’s popular *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. When discussing the Red Power era, Treuer contrasts his uncle with popular leaders of the American Indian Movement (AIM), such as Dennis Banks. He writes: “Although Bobby was around the same age as the activists who came up in the 1960s and 1970s, he didn’t have much to do with them or their movements.” Uncle Bobby is one ordinary, everyday rez person who lived during the Red Power era but is not one of the “main characters” in the AIM historical narrative. Treuer’s Uncle Bobby was not a protesting Indian televised on the nightly news, but Treuer understands his uncle’s work as equally important, just in another way: “Yet, at least to me, he has a similar kind of wildness, a similar intensity [as Dennis Banks]. And to my mind he took his own path toward the activists’ goals of becoming Indian and reminding America of its promises to us—not through protest and politics, but through learning to live a life on the land, an Indian life” (288). Treuer contrasts protest and activism with living on the land, Dennis Banks with Uncle Bobby, in ways crucial to rez theory. The strategy of public protest and the tactic of living off the land represent two different approaches that will be further elucidated in the following section.

In Treuer’s signature style, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* discusses the history of

Native America with memoir and journalistic narrative braided throughout. Using these different approaches, he communicates the complexities that characterize some Native peoples' relationship to their home, the reservation. Reservations are not the home of our making, yet they are the home we have. Treuer recounts the way some primarily and initially non-Indian political organizations vehemently opposed the reservation system, attributing Indians' poor socioeconomic circumstances to its existence:

the Indian Rights Association (IRA), the Women's National Indian Association (WNIA), and the Lake Mohonk Conference were united in railing against the reservation system, the government service and Indian agents who regularly defrauded Indians, the lack of access to education and courts, and the whole treaty-based set of relationships: 'The reservation shuts off the Indians from civilization, and rations distributed unearned tend to pauperize them,' wrote one conference regular. The reservation system, wrote a strident member of the WNIA, 'keeps the Indian more dependent upon the Government and less able to help himself.' It was 'fatal to the Indian.' Another observed: 'Treating the black man as chattel created a "caste," a social separation... Treating the Indian as an Indian and not as a person is as false as slavery; it has created a separation, by way of the reservation system.' (131)

The reservation system that early Indian rights organizations condemned is the same place that is spoken of fondly by Native people today, including Treuer and Ortiz. This is one reason the relationship to the rez can be described as complicated. It is the reason Treuer recalled his feelings about leaving the rez for the first time to go to college in the following manner: "I was homesick—for the northwoods, for my reservation, for the only place on earth I truly loved. I was only just beginning to understand what it was I was missing, and it wasn't squalor and hopelessness and poverty. This book is, in part, an attempt to communicate what it was that I loved" (11). The rez is understood differently by insiders and outsiders, experienced differently between households, generations and genders. One of the goals of my dissertation is to communicate more about the rez, including its ordinary beauty and the poetry of its makers, so that overly simplistic portraits of it as oppressive or squalid may be overcome.

Rez Theory

Rez theory proposes three thematics—language, politics and humor—for the study of the everyday aspects of life on the rez in Native literature and cultural production. Rez theory asks scholars to turn their lenses toward the rez as an important site of meaning-making as they consider Native literature, arts, politics, philosophy, culture and history. It foregrounds the thoughts and actions of the everyday, ordinary people who live there and are makers who turn space into place. Theorizing the rez—that is, taking seriously the contours and complexities of rez life—is part of the work required to, to quote Christopher B. Teuton, “become who we want to become” (201). His essay, “Theorizing American Indian Literature: Applying Oral Concepts to Written Traditions” in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, outlines three critical modes of interpretation for Native American literature. I see rez theory operating firmly within mode three, although, as Teuton explains, the boundaries between modes are fluid:

Mode one criticism has its roots in ethnographic and anthropological discourse and is inevitably concerned to some degree with issues surrounding the implications of Native American cultural authenticity and cultural identity... “Who and what is an Indian?” Mode-two criticism attempts to correct the misrepresentation of Native peoples and cultures... “Who can say who and what is Indian but an Indian?” Mode-three criticism bypasses questions of representation to theorize how academic work can be made accountable and put in dialogue with Native people, communities, and nations... “How are we Native people and nations to become who we want to become?” Although each mode asks different types of questions and addresses different audiences’ concerns, they often exist side by side; the borders between each mode are potentially fluid. (200-201)

It is important to look at the rez because it is an under-studied and under-theorized site that contains a large proportion of Native life. It is a significant site of everyday Native life and knowledge production that deserves attention all its own. Positioning the rez at the center of an analysis brings the everyday into focus in ways other theories do not. For example, studies that make *sovereignty* central, by nature, veer more toward the political and the legal, whereas centralizing *the rez* turns our attention to the everyday and the cultural; the latter comes from the

bottom up rather than top down.

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* is one of the cultural theories that most accurately describes the dynamics of rez life. The main components of de Certeau's *practice of everyday life* that relate to rez theory are his conceptualization of users versus producers and tactics versus strategies. De Certeau's work shifted part of the focus in cultural studies from producers and products to users and aimed to make visible the ordinary parts of life that had heretofore been overlooked. "This goal," de Certeau wrote, "will be achieved if everyday practices, 'ways of operating' or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity, and if a body of theoretical questions, methods, categories, and perspectives, by penetrating this obscurity, make it possible to articulate them" (xi). Rez theory aims at a similar target, elucidating and explaining parts of everyday life on the rez that often go unnoticed but hold significance and make meaning out of the ordinary. The routine practices de Certeau draws upon are those things we do that seem unimportant because they are so embedded into everyday life; "reading, talking, walking, dwelling, cooking, etc." (xvii). De Certeau refers to the star of his theory as the "Everyman (a name that betrays the absence of a name)" (2) and rez theory centers the rez Everyman. The EveryIndian. What differentiates the Everyman, or users, from his counterpart, producers, are the actions he takes and the access he has (or doesn't have) to loci of power. Producers are in positions of power and use strategies, maneuvers that occur at a high level and organize the masses and the world; a user moves within the system created by producers and exercises tactics as modes of resistance, transforming his environment in surface-level, yet significant, ways. De Certeau's theory shifts theoretical importance to users, whom he refers to as "poets of their own affairs" (34), rather than the systems that are constructing the world around them. A key marker of users is their lack of access to power and

its mechanisms. The *Indian Act* is a prime example of a strategy where producers, in this instance the Canadian federal government, seek to organize the lives of its users, everyday people on the rez. One of the many controversial policies in the *Indian Act* was one that revoked Indian status from Native women who married non-Indian men and gave Indian status to non-Native women who married Indian men. The policy, or strategy, was changed in 1985. This was a gendered strategy and Native women employed tactics to get around it by “shacking up” (a rez terminology) with their non-Native partners on the rez and out-of-wedlock. Producers’ strategies seek to create conformity and structure, while the tactics of users do not obey laws of place, although users’ resistance takes place within the system producers create. Strategies rely on space and tactics on time. Reservations are systems not of our own making, yet through tactics everyday people on the rez transform those systems and make them their own. The practice of everyday life provides a foundation upon which I illustrate rez theory.

My dissertation puts a name to rez theory as a lens that can be applied to studies of Native life, and it extends the work of scholars before me who have theorized the rez and Native space. For example, in *X-Marks*, Lyons theorizes the rez through ideas about Indian Time and Indian Space. He begins by naming misperceptions about Indian space and time, before offering analyses that clarify and complicate those meanings. On Indian time, for example, Lyons points to the common refrain, and what he ultimately perceives as a misinterpretation, that Indian time is circular: “we’ve all heard the stereotypical line that Indian time is ‘circular’ rather than ‘linear’... I object to that particular variant on the grounds that Indian time isn’t any more circular or less linear than anyone else’s sense of time, and why would we expect it to be?” (9). Here Lyons targets misguided notions that, however well-intended, have the effect of othering Native people. He clarifies “the older meaning of Indian time,” which is about “doing things

when the moment is right,” such as harvesting wild rice when it is neither unripe nor fallen from the stalk (9). I’ve also heard of how Indian time has an older meaning that is the opposite of showing up late; it actually meant leaving for your appointments and events early, so that if you got sidetracked with a visit or task along the way, you had the time to accommodate it. So, Indian time is less about the outcome, “always being late,” than it is about acknowledging existing connections to people and place. Both older meanings are about approaching time with consideration—whether it is directed toward the people in your community or the rice you’re harvesting. This approach to Indian time means always being at the ready, which is perhaps why rez people make such excellent users in the way Michel de Certeau defines them. De Certeau’s users must be attuned to “the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation” (38) and perhaps this attention to timing has something in common with what we have long referred to as Indian time. Indian time, though not one of the core features of the rez theory I introduce, is an example of what one might search for in cultural productions to illuminate rez life.

Language, politics and humor are the three fundamental themes at the heart of rez theory. Searching for these thematics in literature, art and cultural productions is a method that directs critics’ attention to ways rez folks construct rez life. Being rezzy relies on humor, but with an Indian twist. Rez humor shares its motivations with Susan Sontag’s description in “Notes on ‘Camp.’” She writes: “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (2) and that Camp aesthetic “proposes a comic vision of the world” (11). The aesthetic of the rez couldn’t be more different from that of camp. Rez aesthetics look blue-collar but with an Indian twist, while the camp aesthetic is all about glamor

and exaggeration. And yet, the two emphasize artifice and stylization in ways that draw attention to the constructed nature of their respective environments. Like camp, rez theory similarly rests upon a foundation of the light-hearted, humorous and trivial aspects of everyday life. The goal of camp, Sontag writes, is to “dethrone the serious.” I can hardly think of a better way to describe the way humor functions on the rez and will return to this phrase in a later section.

While the rez is often thought of as a place of tragedy and poverty, rez folks know that it is first and foremost a place where humor abounds. Although a good amount of scholarship has since arrived to fill the gap, Vine Deloria, Jr. in an essay on “Indian Humor” from his seminal work, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, pointed out the oversight when he noted “[i]t has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian Affairs” (146). This is a rez sensibility. Sontag wrote about a “sensibility (as distinct from an idea) one of the hardest things to talk about” (1); the term rez, in its form as a descriptor rather than a place, also endeavors to put a sensibility into words. Lyons’ account of Indian space is a good starting point where the rez becomes *felt*; his descriptions help readers see, smell and even taste Indian space. He describes how “[i]t is always pungent: smoky and sagey in a manner that evokes the past”; it is “spiritual and stoic” (15); there are “dogs” and “[w]omen work quietly with children”; “[a] pot of food is simmering”; “litter is strewn in the ditches”; and, in my favorite part of the description, “[s]tuff hangs in Indian space; it may be drying, it may signify some religious meaning, or maybe it is just hanging” (16). Although this passage originally described the rez from the experience of the outsider, it hits many of the “campy” or constructed elements in rez life. The upcoming section, “Rez Aesthetics,” picks up where Lyons left off, delving further into the material culture and attitudes that create the campy look and feel of the rez.

Language is another place to look for rezziness. *Mino pimadiziwin*, in the Algonquin language, translates to “the good life” or even “the art of living the good life” (it is also spelled *mino bimaadiziwin* in the Ojibwe language; both are versions of *Anishinabemowin*). It can be used as a reply in conversation: when asked “Aaniin eji pimadiziwin?” (“How are you doing?”) an appropriate response would be “ni-mino pimadiziwin,” which means “I am living the good life, living well” or the more casual, English-style translation, “I am doing good.” The key linguistic difference is that the former, conceptual *mino pimadiziwin* is a noun, while the casual, conversational *ni-mino pimadiziwin* is a verb.¹ The distinction between these two forms of use—what I think of as conceptual versus casual—is one example and analogy for how I see rez theory operating in language. When discussed conceptually, in its intricate translated form as in “the art of living the good life,” the term appears loaded with history, spirituality, epistemology, traditions, even ceremony. Returning to de Certeau’s strategies versus tactics, *mino pimadiziwin* is a strategy often evoked by Native people in places where knowledge is exchanged, such as in academic conferences or healing programs. *Ni-mino pimadiziwin* is the opposite of that: the everyday, the micro, the quotidian. So, the conversational usage where people remark, in passing or greeting, “ni-mino pimadiziwin,” that they are “living well,” is more reflective of the quotidian rez life that appears in this dissertation: what it looks like, what it sounds like, how to theorize it and where it appears in literature. These are tactics. There is plenty of scholarship that focuses on the conceptual *mino pimadiziwin*, thinking through weighty ideas about how our relationship to the land, ceremony, culture and Indigenous epistemologies operate in Native life, but less that considers everyday ways of living well.

For example, Deborah L. Madsen’s essay, “Louise Erdrich: The Aesthetics of *Mino Bimaadiziwin*,” introduces the concept in all of its weightiness rather than its quotidian form:

“Underlying Erdrich’s concern with place and specifically with the indigenous lands that, historically, have become reservation lands, is awareness of the profound connections among land, family and *mino bimaadiziwin*, or the living of a good life” (12). Madsen’s essay argues that *mino bimaadiziwin* (the “good life”) is the core theme of Erdrich’s writing and that Erdrich’s characters strive to live well in the wake of colonization and “a history of physical and cultural genocide” (9). Many of the examples Madsen draws on from Erdrich’s stories and novels emphasize the way ordinary rez people use tactics to survive and intervene in strategies aimed at structuring their lives, such as Indian boarding schools and the *Indian Reorganization Act*. Madsen recalls the storyline of Fleur Pillager, who, in a revenge plot, marries the man responsible for clearcutting her family land. I read this action as a tactic on Fleur’s part, but Madsen’s analysis, with its reliance on what I consider the conceptual version of *mino bimaadiziwin*, remains focused on strategies:

Fleur’s land is then violently cleared of timber by the Turcot Lumber Company and part of that timber is used to build the mansion in Minneapolis of John Mauser, the owner of the company. So Fleur leaves the reservation to pursue her revenge against Mauser, placing her daughter Lulu in a government boarding school. Thus, the original trauma of land loss and family severance is passed on to the following generation: Arwun (John James Mauser II), the dysfunctional child born from Fleur’s marriage to Mauser, and Lulu, who endures the assault on tribal cultural identity that was the project of US Indian boarding schools. (13)

Madsen pays attention to “the profound connections” Erdrich makes, while my interest is in how the things considered less profound—things like bingo, Pepsi and rez dogs—operate in Native life, as well as Erdrich’s canon. My argument is not that bingo, Pepsi and rez dogs are more important than land, ceremony and epistemology; it is that they deserve serious consideration because they have the power to transform and intervene in power structures that seek to organize Native life. As I show in the next section, being attentive to the everyday not only shows us how processes work on the rez, an understudied site, but more importantly, demonstrates how Native

people make meaning out of their circumstances and are, to quote de Certeau, “the poets of their own affairs” (34). It makes room for the ordinary alongside the sacred or “the sacrit” as some people on the rez pronounce it; this is yet another way everyday language, in this case the English language, is transformed when spoken on the rez. The everyday *ni-mino pimadiziwin* recognizes the people on the rez who may or may not practice ceremony, tradition or consider themselves to be in relationship with the land; they, too, are practicing *mino pimadiziwin*, although what it looks like, in their cases, is different.

The way the English language is used marks certain phrases and vernacular as rez. In his chapter, “Habitus and Rethinking the Discourse of Youth Gangs, Crime, Violence, and Ghetto Communities” in *Habitus of the Hood*, Tamari Kitossa shows the way language singles out people of color and intersections of class where “‘I ain’t’ versus ‘I am not’ are symbolic codes as solid as the side of tracks denoting what part of town one comes from” (126). The term “skoden” has become a popular marker of rez vernacular. As a term that blends together the words “let’s go then,” it represents the imprecise pronunciation that marks the rez accent and also includes the way the “th” is sometimes pronounced with a “d,” where the word “then” sounds like “den.” To my ear, the rez accent has inflections of a French accent, even when the speakers don’t speak French. Kalina Newmark, Nacole Walker and James Stanford studied the accent in their article, “The Rez Accent Knows No Borders.” The authors provide details of the many ways the rez accent is constructed:

Examples from our study include different tense and agreement patterns (*I gots some, I gots that*), negative concord (*I don’t have nothin*), preterite-*had*, copula absence, presumptive pronouns, *do*-absence (*How you say hello in Slavey?*), and forms like *I seen that; I seen her yesterday; Somebody else gonna catch it*. We also find structures like *My mom and them went to....* Speakers are also observed using double comparatives (e.g. *more better*). (641)

The study was conducted by observing Native students on the Dartmouth College campus and

the authors describe how Native people who meet one another in contexts outside of the rez use the rez accent to “index Native identity” (641) and, ultimately, they argue that the rez accent is a modern Native form of usage of the English language: “Among diverse tribes and across vast distances in North America, Native people are using English in a resilient and distinctive way, countering the assimilationist efforts of the past, and creatively building their own modern Native American future” (655). This accent is an example of how language that originates on the rez moves with people as they traverse boundaries and can be used to create community in new spaces.

Being rez is political. Although the reservation carries with it all of the political nuance outlined at the outset of the chapter, the day-to-day life on the rez doesn’t always take that historical background into account as it is lived. Indian life is *highly* political and politicized, but reading Native politics with an eye toward camp emphasizes how Indian politics intersect with humor and draw attention to artifice. Sontag notes, “[i]t goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized — or at least apolitical” (2). While the initial performance of camp might be apolitical, it can have political effects. (A drag show might be apolitical, for example, but the impact it has on gender politics is enormous.) I assert that rez politics can be “campy,” not in its aesthetic, but in its humor and exaggeration. As Deloria wrote in “Indian Humor” teasing is used as a political device among Indians: “people used to tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. In this way egos were preserved and disputes within the tribe of a personal nature were held to a minimum” (147). In this essay, Deloria does an inventory of the variety of jokes Native people tell—from Columbus jokes to Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) humor to one-liners—and at one point he states: “Frequently, without intending any humor, Indians can create a situation that is so funny that it is nearly

impossible to believe” (159). Politics, humor and artifice intersected in one recent story I heard of Native politics.

Most of my adult life was spent in Ottawa, a hub of Native politics, and a story was recounted to me that combined humor and politics in a uniquely rezzy way. The city is home to the big five national Indigenous organizations in Canada, as well as a number of other Indigenous nonprofits specializing in various interests and issues. Many of these organizations hold big annual meetings and political assemblies that draw hundreds, if not thousands, of people. The organizations combine standard rules of order with Indigenous political protocols and practices, one example of which is to open and close the meeting by instating an eagle staff; official meeting business would only be in session when the eagle staff was raised. At one meeting, the politics became so heated between two sides that an individual absconded—yes, ran away—with the eagle staff to delay a vote so they could get their way. When I heard this story, I thought it was almost beyond belief. The gentle teasing Deloria described was clearly not enough to settle the dispute in this case, yet both teasing and stealing an eagle staff are examples of politics made rez or rezzy. The politics thematic of rez theory helps unveil and understand these moments.

Life lived on the rez has some of the same kind of “small-town charm” where everyone knows everyone—and knows everybody’s business. This combination of personal politics and interpersonal relationships fosters an ethic of community care and a sense of responsibility for your neighbors especially when, as is often the case on the rez, your neighbors are also your parents, grandparents, brothers, aunties and cousins. But along with this small-town charm, or rez charm, comes a lack of privacy. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic on the average rez, it was possible for community members to identify who caught the virus, pinpoint

where the outbreak happened and track its spread based solely on conversations with family and friends. While it may not seem like the rez has much in common with the Scottish Highlands, an article by Philo, Parr and Burns in the *Journal of Rural Studies* names “the rural panopticon” as a mode of surveillance that when considered in a rez context might become the “band office panopticon” or “tribal office panopticon.”

Philo, Parr and Burns argue that the idyllic image of the friendly small town where neighbors look out for one another poses problems for vulnerable members of the community, such as people living with mental illnesses who were the subjects of the study and whose lives are made more difficult by their rural circumstances. Their claim is that rural areas are susceptible to diffuse forms of panopticism that occur in discreet ways when compared the paradigmatic panopticon typically associated with prisons, asylums and other carceral settings in cities and urban centers (230). Historically, reservations where Indian agents surveilled and determined community members’ actions operated in a panopticon closer to the Foucauldian original, but the argument advanced by Philo, Parr and Burns illustrates how forms of surveillance take place on the level of the everyday. The authors show how the rural panopticon creates an intimate form of surveillance as activities like gossip and disclosure, visibility and observation harm vulnerable populations by limiting their privacy. They write: “There are significant nodes in this geography of local knowledge, the springs and wires of the rural panopticon. The public house, the GP surgery, the shop, the sheep tank (pen), the street, the church and the garage are all key points of exchange in rural Highland life” (235). The same sites that contain friendly exchanges between caring neighbors can also be home to personal observation and gossip. The band office or tribal office is the nexus of individual, family and community business on the rez, and would be the sensible stand-in for a towering panopticon,

but the rez is also vulnerable to the kind of dispersed panopticism that occurs in rural areas. In addition to the band office panopticon, sites like the gas station, the store, the senior center, the cultural center, the powwow grounds, the youth center and the baseball diamond are all viable examples of rez spaces where community information is observed and exchanged. The moccasin telegraph is an existing metaphor for the way information circulates on the rez. Applying a concept like the band office panopticon, or the rural panopticon, allows us to be more precise about the kinds of information that is exchanged, where we look for it and who it empowers or disempowers.

I conclude this section with a brief example of how rez theory works in practice using one line in the book, *Like A Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*, by Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior. The book is an historical account of the victories and mishaps that took place in the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the late 1960s and 1970s, but this beloved line of mine brings everyday rez people into focus: “that is what the old people called them, the AIMs” (200). This line brings together the language, politics and humor that ground rez theory. The pluralized “s” on AIMs signals the rez to readers who recognize elders and rez people who add an unnecessary “s” to some words. “The AIMs” is the language and the sound of the rez and its use instantly brings into focus, not Russell Means, John Trudell and Dennis Banks, those leaders whose images are typically associated with AIM, but the people on the rez who are hidden from sight in the grand narratives that make it into the pages of most history books and textbooks. Suddenly, we see not only the young, urban, male Native leaders of the movement, but the grandparents and aunties and uncles at home on the rez, watching those young guns on their television sets or reading about them in the newspaper. We see Uncle Steve. The added “s” on AIMs signals not only a rez way of speaking or perhaps an offshoot of the rez

accent, it also reveals a certain level of distance between the actions of the leaders at Alcatraz and Wounded Knee and the homes of everyday rez people. That distance could also account for political differences among people who agree or disagree with the form AIM activism took. One might consider the AIM leaders' television appearances strategies and the rez folks' watching on the other end of the television signal tactics. Even this brief, one-line reference to "the old people" who "called them the AIMs" widens the lens and provides a more complete picture of the diversity of Native people. Rez theory simply asks that we look.

Rez Aesthetics

What makes the rez recognizable is its aesthetic, what it looks like, as well as its overall sensibility, which can include what it sounds like, its tactile nature, the attitudes of its people, even its tastes and smells. Two theoretical frameworks, Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" and Claude Lévi-Strauss' *bricolage*, help explain and understand the inner- and outer-workings of rez life. In addition to Michel de Certeau's tactics and strategies from the previous section, *bricolage* and camp turn critical attention toward everyday Native life. Native people and their concerns are and always have been central to the field of Native American and Indigenous studies, of course, but the metanarratives of its subfields sometimes veer toward the epic. For example, Native American history considers borderlands and empires, while Native American literary studies is tied closely to the politics of nationalism. This chapter, and this dissertation, searches for the right kinds of theories and works of literature and cultural productions that provide insight into Native people at the level of the ordinary and the everyday. I am drawn to theorists who have also considered the democratizing site of the everyday to formulate their theories about and understandings of the world. *Bricolage*, for example, examines how people living within a system or a structure designed to control them (like a reservation) use the

materials at-hand, the odds and ends of the everyday, to make meaning, and how the results of that encounter can look like art and sound like poetry. By considering existing theories of the everyday alongside my own experience and understanding of the rez, then testing those theories on rezzy literature and cultural production by Native writers in subsequent chapters, I move the conversation about theoretical analysis and literary criticism to the rez.

On a research trip early in my PhD program, I noticed the difference between strategies and tactics through the aesthetics on one rez in Michigan. I was working on a paper about the material culture of nineteenth-century Potawatomi writer Simon Pokagon's birch bark and deer hide books. I saw Pokagon's miniature birch bark books in the University of Michigan's archives, but to get my hands on his deer hide-covered novel, *Ogimawkwe Mitigwaki (Queen of the Woods)*, I had to travel to the Ziibiwing Center, the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe's museum and archive in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. Examining the book took the better part of an hour, less than half the time it had taken me to make the drive. So, I lingered in the library, chatting with the visitor services rep, the research center coordinator and the director. The director invited me to accompany her to a chili lunch at "Seven Gen" and, before I knew it, I was hopping into the passenger seat of her sedan for the short drive to the heart of the rez. We pulled into a single-story building, which couldn't have been more than 2000 square feet, with a small community garden near the front entrance. Inside, fluorescent lights brightened the already white walls in the nondescript, open-space room, where a buffet of the day's food was lined up against one wall and long rows of fold-out tables sat waiting to be filled by community members and guests. The official name of the building is the Elijah Elk Cultural Center for Living Culture and Traditions and when I was invited to "Seven Gen," the reference was to its hallmark Seventh Generation Program. The Ziibiwing Center was impressive in its grandeur and architecture, but

Seven Gen felt familiar in its rezziness. The Ziibiwing Center was resplendent yet quiet on the day I was there, and Seven Generations burst with rez life. If the Ziibiwing Center is a rich cedar plank, Seven Gen is white drywall postered with community flyers and ad campaigns targeted to Indians. Ziibiwing is what outsiders might expect a Native-run museum should be (strategy), while Seven Gen is how people actually live in their day-to-day (tactic).

When we walked into Seven Gen, people were already lined up to be served chili, salad and fry bread. As it turned out, the event was lunch with an Anishinaabemowin (Anishinabe language) lesson. When we sat down with our food, helpers handed out loose-leaf sheets of paper with translations of various words and phrases from Anishinaabemowin to English. The room was filled with laughter and conversation. We ate chili as the teacher, a middle-aged woman with short black hair, stood at the front of the room and pronounced the words on the worksheets. It was the kind of beginner's Anishinabemowin class I'd sat in more times than I could count, repeating numbers and colors and conjugating verbs with a teacher who was a first language speaker but may or may not have formal teacher training. The day's lesson was basic Anishinaabemowin commands, and when she taught us to say *aanhsana biinchigen* ("please clean up"), a little girl's voice rose above the others: "That's what my teacher says!" And, in typical rez humor, the group had a hearty laugh when repeating the command *taga giiskonyen* ("please take off your clothes"). The look of the community center, the generosity of the invitation, the taste of chili and frybread, the roar of laughter: these are the sights, sounds, tastes and feelings that marked this as not just any archival research trip, but a *rez* experience.

Rez camp has a preference for blue-collar aesthetics and signifiers, such as worn-out baseball caps and pickup trucks. Where Sontag's camp relies on glitz and glamor to draw attention to artifice and exaggeration, rez camp draws on Indian aesthetics in its formation. On

pickup trucks on the rez, one is likely to find Indian ephemera dangling from the rear-view mirror (feathers, medicine wheel air freshener, beadwork and sweetgrass crafts) and bear paw decals on the bumper. And on rez boys' baseball caps one might be surprised to see logos for the Chicago Blackhawks or Cleveland Indians, even as they and their relatives rally against racist Indian mascots. I read these rez aesthetic formations as tactics. While some Native activists organize strategies—for example, petitions against Indian mascots—the presence of the Chicago Blackhawks' logo on ball caps on the rez is a tactic that draws attention to the artifice and the unnatural symbol in the hands of a real rez kid. Through tactics that rely on aesthetics, signs and the “odds and ends” of everyday life on the rez, the people's use of these items seizes the narrative that associates Indians with feathers in an essentialist way and turns it on its head.

Rez folks who use tactics and the rez aesthetic this way qualify as *postindian warriors* by Gerald Vizenor's definition. In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor's concepts of postindian warriors, manifest manners and survivance map onto many of the processes discussed in rez theory. A version of the strategies that seek to structure rez life from the outside, Vizenor defines manifest manners as “the course of dominance, the racialist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as ‘authentic’ representations of *indian* cultures. Manifest manners court the destinies of monotheism, cultural determinism, objectivism, and the structural conceits of savagism and civilization” (vii). Manifest manners rely on static notions of “the Indian” to promote absolute truths and naturalized identities, as Vizenor explains: “*indians* are immovable simulations, the tragic archives of dominance and victimry. Manifest manners favor the simulations of the *indian* traditionalist, an ironic primitive with no cultural antecedence.” Postindian warriors, on the other hand, are like rez folks who use tactics, what Vizenor names survivance in his theories, to destabilize these processes and prevent them from taking root in

Native life. Vizenor writes “[t]he postindian warrior is the simulation of survivance in new stories” (11) and “postindian warriors hover at last over the ruins of tribal representations and surmount the scriptures of manifest manners with new stories” (5). Those new stories, as I suggest in rez theory, are composed using tactics and *bricolage*, everyday rez folks’ acts of survivance. Along with de Certeau, Vizenor’s *postindian* shares some of its theoretical thrust with the other theorists in this chapter, such as Sontag. She writes: “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (1), which is nearly the opposite of the dominant image of the naturalistic Indian that Vizenor critiques. Postindian warriors draw our attention to forms of artifice, to the many ways rezziness is *unnatural* in the sense that it is not associated with nature, as well as how rez aesthetics have power to intervene in the problematic, dominant narratives he calls manifest manners.

Rez camp doesn’t take itself too seriously. It is an approach to serious matters on the rez that uses humor, and even play, to draw attention to things that become naturalized in problematic ways and to prevent strategies from taking root. Sontag writes of the motivations of camp: “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (10). So, when rez folks approach serious matters with their own brand of humor, they have the (sometimes political) effect of narrowing in on a problem without imposing a top-down strategy. Rez people often joke about their body types, for example, using the term “long back” which refers to Native people who have flat bottoms. In her memoir, *My Body Is a Book of Rules*, Elissa Washuta refers to nuanced features of Native bodies when she writes of her “belly’s swell that my mother told me was an Indian thing while I battled it with Weight Watchers point counts” (4). Several years ago, I went to a

hockey tournament to watch an all-Cree hockey team compete in a provincial championship. When one of the star players missed the net his dad or relative, maybe his Uncle Steve, laughed and yelled at him from the stands: “That’s what happens when you play with a hickey!” People often joke about accidentally dating a cousin and on *Mohawk Girls*, one series at the center of my last chapter, the main conflict in the pilot episode involves one of the main characters learning she is dating her cousin when she brings her “dream man” home to meet her father. The scene is followed by a brief dream sequence where the character imagines marrying the man and having children—who are furry. All three of these examples approach issues that are serious in one way or another—bodies and health, a hockey championship, kissing cousins—and are used in a way that “dethrones the serious,” treating moments gone wrong with a dose of humor. Rez people enliven ordinary moments in their lives with humor and their own version of rez camp.

Rez theory and rez aesthetics rely on the designation of “sensibilities” as loosely defined but deeply felt responses. Sontag calls camp a sensibility, and rez, in addition to being a place, is also a sensibility and an attitude. Rez sensibility is somewhat esoteric because it endeavors to describe what people feel and how they think. I distinguish the term “rez sensibility” from the more widely used “Indigenous epistemology.” Rez sensibilities include behaviors that can be identified and pointed at, such as the teasing Vine Deloria, Jr. wrote about in the essay “Indian Humor,” rather than epistemologies that suggest hard-wired or culturally ingrained ways of understanding the world. In this dichotomy, Indigenous epistemology is a strategy that seeks to distill a uniformly Indigenous way of knowing the world, whereas a rez sensibility is a tactic that describes the kinds of approaches that organize the ways Native people relate to one another and the outside world. Gossip, like the equally beloved and maligned “moccasin telegraph,” is a rez sensibility, while relationality or collectivity is an epistemology.

In her piece, “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” Leslie Marmon Silko outlines the precise ways gossip—or, as she more eloquently refers to it, family stories—operates in Pueblo families as a tradition that can help people through tough times or warn others about potential dangers. She writes that anthropologists “tended to rule out all but the old and sacred and traditional stories and were not interested in family stories and the family’s account of itself. But these family stories are just as important as the other stories—the older stories” (58). In this case, ethnographers were searching for frameworks they assumed organized Indigenous knowledge (strategies) and, in the process, completely missed the everyday stories (tactics). Silko explains:

this process of keeping track, of telling, is an all-inclusive process which begins to create a total picture. So it is very important that you know all of the stories—both positive and not so positive—about one’s own family. The reason that it is very important to keep track of all the stories in one’s own family is because you are liable to hear a story from somebody else who is perhaps an enemy of the family, and you are liable to hear a version which has been changed, a version which makes your family sound disreputable—something that will taint the honor of the family... Keeping track of all the stories within the community gives a certain distance, a useful perspective which brings incidents down to a level we can deal with. If others have done it before, it cannot be so terrible. If others have endured, so can we. (58-59)

And as a practical example of how the telling and retelling of these everyday moments and events relates to people living in real-time, Silko offers this story of a man whose red Volkswagen Beetle, which he was proud of and saved up for, rolled away and was wrecked:

He felt very bad about it, but within a few days everybody had come to him and told him stories about other people who had lost cars to that arroyo... So everybody was saying, ‘Well, at least your mother-in-law and kids weren’t in the car when it rolled in,’ and you can’t argue with that kind of story... He and his smashed-up Volkswagen were now joined with all the other stories of cars that fell into that arroyo. (60-61)

Other rez sensibilities might include: initial suspicions about outsiders who, if they eventually become insiders, are treated like family; wanting to leave the rez because of the feeling that success is impossible there, as David Treuer describes of some: “Growing up I was never one of

those people who wanted to get the hell out” (102); leaving the rez then missing it and wanting to go back; being a rez kid visiting the city for the first time and feeling amazed at its sights and sounds (this might be a pre-internet era sensibility). Rez sensibilities, more than gut feelings and intuition, are common experiences that can be identified, named and interpreted, as Silko does in her explanation on gossip in Indian communities.

When searching for a theory that could help decipher how the seemingly disparate items we associate with the rez, like baloney, Pepsi and rez dogs, create something all its own when assembled together, one theory that came to mind was *bricolage* by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Already alluded to, it is time to define it. The dictionary definition of *bricolage* is “construction or creation from a range of available things” (“Bricolage”). Lévi-Strauss’s original text, in addition to theorizing the concept of *bricolage*, makes a progressive argument for what we refer to today as Indigenous knowledge and its “comparable intellectual application and methods of observation” (3). After providing examples of the depth of specific tribes’ information about plant life, he states “there is no doubt that all these achievements required a genuinely scientific attitude, sustained and watchful interest and a desire for knowledge for its own sake” (14). This was an interesting aside, but I was ultimately more interested in how his concept of *bricolage* related to what I see happening on the rez in modern times, rather than his observations of Indigenous knowledge. Specifically, I think *bricolage* describes the rez aesthetic and the attitudes of those constructing it, whom Lévi-Strauss calls *bricoleurs*, through a combination of everyday objects, humor and language, which Lyons characterizes as “tacky but in a humorous, endearing way” (21). The central feature of *bricolage* is that it is something new made from a plethora of everyday and available objects. Lévi-Strauss also considers who is doing the making and under what conditions as part of the tradition of

French cultural theorists who study power dynamics. One of the core conditions of the *bricoleur* is that he exists within a system, like the reservation, put upon him by those in power. Although the land itself is often a tribe's traditional territory, the boundaries placed upon it following the process of becoming a reservation transform the space. Two prime examples of how settler colonial governments controlled and manipulated reserves and reservations were the Indian pass system in Canada and allotment in the U.S. The Indian pass system "required reserve residents to secure a pass from their Indian agent before leaving their reserve for any reason" (Smith 60), while the General Allotment Act "gave the secretary of the interior almost dictatorial powers over the use of allotments since, if the local agent disagreed with the use to which the lands were being put, he could intervene and lease the land to whomsoever he pleased" (Deloria and Lytle 10). Both the pass system and allotment were strategies designed to control Native people, who were under the surveillance of literal agents who determined their autonomy and sovereignty. *Bricolage* points our attention to the ways they gained some of their power back.

There are many examples of *bricolage* on the rez: There are little kids running around at community events, which might be fiddling at the community hall or a holiday gathering, under the eyes of elders in ballcaps and cowboy hats with specially carved canes (think: the handle is an eagle's head or a loon). Rez dogs roam free, and I've even seen a rez goat and several rez pigs. Gaming is part of rez life, as are sports: softball, hockey, basketball, lacrosse. Sounds of the rez include Native languages and rez accents. Aunties throwing their heads back as their laughter roars is a rez sound, and the cause of their laughter could be dirty jokes, potty jokes or mean jokes. The sound of the drum is a rez sound, and so is Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR) and Hank Williams and rap music, depending on the generation and taste. The literal tastes of the rez are traditional foods—moose meat and walleye where I'm from—but also baloney, Pepsi and

potato salad. Similar feasts might be prepared for weddings and funerals. Rez borders are delineated by big signs welcoming passersby in a Native language that is completely unfamiliar to outsiders but that rez people see everywhere and, sometimes, speak. The rez boundary could also be marked by a draw bridge or a ferry if the community was herded onto swampy island land in their history. Everyday ephemera on the rez are not so different from that of the nearby town, city or “mainland,” Indians just put their own spin on things: police cruisers don tribal logos and stop signs are marked with a mix of Native languages, as well as English and sometimes even French or Spanish. During powwow season, in what might be the pinnacle of a rezzy *bricolage*, the sun shines over family, friends, community members and spectators who gather around the drum. Dancers don their handmade regalia, drummers (often wearing the Chicago Blackhawks baseball caps described above) clear their throats to sing. Food stalls sell wild rice soup, Indian tacos and lemonade or strawberry drink. The outer ring or clearing on one side becomes a rez shopping center for the weekend, where customers browse the many booths selling handmade and collected Indian items.

Rez life is created and creative. But it is not politically neutral or without complex power dynamics. To explain how control and power differentials operate in *bricolage*, Lévi-Strauss uses the analogy of the engineer juxtaposed against his *bricoleurs*, who are those constructing the objects or art. When an engineer sets out to work, they are free to choose the tools and objects for their specific project. However, a *bricoleur*'s “universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’” (17). While both processes are creative, the *bricoleur*'s artistic creativity comes from their access to limited options. Lévi-Strauss further explores the difference in the motivations of the engineer and the *bricoleur*:

The difference is therefore less absolute than it might appear. It remains a real one, however, in that the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the ‘bricoleur’ by inclination or necessity always remains within them. This is another way of saying that the engineer works by means of concepts and the ‘bricoleur’ by means of signs. (19-20)

In the context of rez theory, we can think of *bricoleurs* as the everyday rez folks. Because they are the people living within the reservation system, rather than the ones who created it, their primary concern is with day-to-day life and work and getting things done for the community. In present day, the attitude that the reservation is an imposed, problematic system is largely abandoned. Living on a reservation, or even simply visiting a tribe’s or First Nation’s website, will reveal a plethora of community programs and services, such as Seven Gen that I described at the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. The reservation is no longer a system that people who live there are railing against; it is a place we make our own through tactics, *bricolage*, day-to-day life and community programs and services.

Bricoleurs, like de Certeau’s users, are not responsible for wielding power in the systems in which they live and this position, essentially working from the bottom up rather than the top down, provides a form of freedom. This lack of concern for the upkeep of complex power systems, or strategies, makes way for inventiveness in areas such as language and conversation: “Bricolage doesn’t worry about the coherence of the words or ideas it uses. For example, you are a bricoleur if you talk about penis envy or the Oedipus complex without knowing anything about psychoanalysis; you can use the terms without acknowledging the validity or ‘truth’ of the system that produced these ideas” (Klages 61). As I show in Chapter 1, Nector Kashpaw, one of Louise Erdrich’s characters in *Love Medicine*, makes this precise maneuver when he nonchalantly misattributes the famous quote, “the only good Indian is a dead Indian,” to the infamous commanding officer George Armstrong Custer rather than the historically accurate, but

lesser-known figure, General Philip Sheridan. Nector Kashpaw is a *bricoleur* unburdened by “being correct” in the account of the historical figures and events that attempted to annihilate a group of Native people.

The fun begins when uncovering the magic and revealing the work of the *bricoleurs* on the rez, those everyday folks whose ordinary lives make distinct meaning out of otherwise limiting circumstances. This is the task of the subsequent chapters in this dissertation. The final point I draw out from Lévi-Strauss is his discussion of the outcomes of the *bricoleur*'s work:

Further, the ‘bricoleur’ also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he ‘speaks’ not only *with* things, as we have already seen, but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The ‘bricoleur’ may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it. (21)

Lévi-Strauss claims the *bricoleur*'s life as a form of poetry itself. It is creative, it creates beauty out of ordinary, available objects. Rather than a concern for “accomplishment and execution,” growth and results, the *bricoleur* leaves an account of his life and his circumstances and how he “made do” with limited possibilities. This is the poetry of rez life. This is rez theory. People on the rez have assembled materials and language, places and stories in ways that give an account of their lives using distinct combinations that make a rez aesthetic appear almost random, for example, moccasins, hickies and Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR). These are the “odds and ends” or the “leftovers” that Lévi-Strauss names as the raw materials of *bricolage*. He writes that *bricoleurs* pick up “a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors” (19) and use “the remains and debris of events: in French ‘des bribes et des morceaux’, or odds and ends in English” (21-22).

Growing up in the 1980s and '90s, I heard a lot of CCR and now associate it with rez life. It wasn't until I learned “[t]he rock group Creedence Clearwater Revival donated a boat to the

cause [at Alcatraz] but failed to donate a skipper” (Treuer 299) that I learned the rez affinity for CCR’s music could extend from their taking on Alcatraz as a *cause célèbre*. I don’t know whether the rez people in my life who were playing CCR—my parents and aunts and uncles and their friends—knew of the band’s donation to Alcatraz, though they would have been coming-of-age in that era, or whether they were part of a resulting pan-Indian celebration of CCR’s music. In either case, my associating CCR with the rez is an example of how *bricolage* translates across time and generations. “Previously, then they were part of other coherent sets,” Lévi-Strauss writes of the raw material of *bricolage*, the odds and ends, “they possessed the rigour which they seem to lack as soon as we observe them in their new use” (36). The coherence of CCR being associated with the rez might stem from their support of Alcatraz, but it remains rez outside of that initial event and continually takes on new meaning as generations like mine absorb it in new ways. This almost describes the kind of passing down of information, the much more serious “intergenerational knowledge” we talk about in Native American and Indigenous studies, but on the level of the everyday. We sometimes worry about loss on the rez, of language and culture especially, but rez theory and the rez aesthetic show us a *bricolage* not of what is lost but of what remains.

Being All Rezzed Out

I conclude this chapter by suggesting rez as an action-oriented process or a way of being. I’ve already proposed that the term rez, which is most used in its familiar form as a noun describing the place, also be thought of predominantly as an adjective that can describe an aesthetic or attitude. When I was growing up, people used the phrase “being all rezzed out” to describe moments when someone did or said something rezzy when they were out-of-place. For example, in the 1990s my rez discovered uranium in its groundwater and rez-idents made the

switch to using bottled water for drinking and cooking for decades (Jefferys). When I later moved to the city and would visit friends' houses, I'd ask, "Is your water okay to drink here?" before pouring myself a glass from the tap. I am not the only one of my rez peers who did this and now, in retrospect, we laugh about how we were "all rezzed out" and at how strange our non-Native hosts must have found the question. The phrase "being all rezzed out" is constructed this way because it's how young people spoke at the time, but the portion of the phrase I want to narrow in on is "being rez." When people fry baloney while listening to CCR they perform a rez way of being regardless of whether they are physically located within the boundaries of the reservation. Being rez is an action that describes an attitude and aesthetic.

Each of the frameworks that helped describe the contours and nuances of rez life were action-oriented: Michel de Certeau's practice of everyday life, camp as described by Susan Sontag, Gerald Vizenor's *postindian* and *bricolage* by Claude Lévi-Strauss. De Certeau's users employ tactics, everyday actions that manipulate the strategies, surroundings and circumstances designed to control them, like in Chapter 3 when a Native grandmother uses an oil company's survey stakes for firewood in *Trickster*. The rez has a camp aesthetic, where humor is omnipresent and there is a preference for blue-collar aesthetics and material culture. A rogue Indian absconding with an eagle staff to delay a meeting is rezzy, "[I]ovable losers are rezzy, and so are cars stuck in reverse" (Lyons 21). These things come together in the form of *bricolage*, an assemblage of attitudes, humor, materials and sensibilities that mark certain combinations as rezzy. Rather than trying to escape or upend the reservation system, rez folks, whom Lévi-Strauss would call *bricoleurs* and de Certeau would call *users*, make beauty from within structures imposed upon them. These are actions and processes that are performed. So, in the context of rez theory, the term rez signals something that is acted out as opposed to ideas about

something that is fixed or that one is born into. As I discuss in the last chapter, this distinction builds on Lyons' theorizing in the same vein in *X-Marks* when he writes of need for "the recognition that Indian identities are constructed" and "Indian identity is something people do, not what they are" (40). Like gender theory where seminal works like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* theorized and adequately convinced many that gender is a performance rather than a biological assignment, I suggest we, as scholars of Native American and Indigenous studies, think through the many ways that we enact our rezziness and bring that into conversation with existing debates around Indian identity.

This introductory chapter defines rez theory as a lens that brings the everyday aspects of life on the rez to the forefront in studies of Native life, literature and cultural productions and offers frameworks for their analysis. Rez aesthetics describes the sensuous elements of rez life: what it looks, sounds, tastes and smells like, and what kinds of attitudes and sensibilities emerge from the place. I consider the ways that the rez aesthetic shares its sense of humor with camp and creates a *bricolage*, where people make art of their everyday life. In the chapters that follow, rez theory guides my analysis of the appearance of the rez in Native American literature, memoir and television. I begin with the piece of literature in the Native American Renaissance that I suspect offers a wide array of the campy, *bricolage*-variety of rez aesthetic that is at the heart of rez theory: Louise Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine*. Chapter 1 begins in the "dim, warm kitchen" that is the soul of the Kashpaw family home on the rez. The first chapter of her novel drives readers to the house in rez cars to witness how ball caps and bowls of potato salad demonstrate the ways rezziness is campy and how rez folks combine the materials that make up their everyday lives to form *bricolage*. For example, when Erdrich writes that one of her characters "pointed at me with her chin" (23), she is one of the earliest authors to commit to

writing one of the most ubiquitous forms of rezzy embodiment, the lip point. *Love Medicine* captures the plurality of rez life with a cast of characters that illustrate rez politics, old ladies' gossip and the longings of youth. Although there have certainly been hallmark pieces of Native American literature set on the rez before *Love Medicine*—notably, D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*—I argue that Louise Erdrich offers a wide array of examples of the specific form of rez aesthetic central to this dissertation.

Chapter 2 examines how the memoir *Heart Berries* by Terese Marie Mailhot experiments with the unsavory, positioning the book's protagonist as a self-described ruined Native woman. Mailhot allows her memoir's protagonist and the rez signifiers in the pages of her book to stand firmly in their complexity, occasionally appearing unsavory but always worthy of attention. Mailhot writes a redemption arc for these characters and simultaneously restores those rezzy, "Indian things"—like black eyes—others deem imperfect or unsavory. In one scene of the book, Mailhot writes about the things that make her feel "more Indian" when she is out-of-place, that is, off the reservation. When she arrives at her MFA program, she writes that her pregnant belly and her boyfriend's black eye provide some sense of comfort in new surroundings. At first glance, these things might appear to readers as unsavory and, in some ways, they are. But they are also rezzy. The proximity to rezziness in the form of signs and *bricolage* offer comfort to Mailhot in some moments and scenes because they are markers of home and tether her to the rez. Mailhot's text is an example of how a piece of literature can be rezzy and be just as "rezzed out" as other works that include an actual rez setting. Working in signs and symbols, as *bricoleurs* are wont to do, makes elements of the rez portable in *Heart Berries*.

The last chapter takes readers off the page to examine depictions of the rez on television.

Centering two Canadian television series, *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster*, viewers are treated to representations of two reserves that are quite different: a version of Kahnawá:ke, located next to Montreal, Quebec, on *Mohawk Girls*, and Kitamaat Village, a remote community on the northwest coast, on *Trickster*. Touted as a version of *Sex and the City* set on the rez, *Mohawk Girls*' comedy is derived from nuanced aspects of rez life, such as the linguistic codes that define speech communities and social groups, and its dramatic thrust comes from themes of identity, conformity and belonging extending out of real-life news stories in Kahnawá:ke. While *Mohawk Girls* takes the opportunity to surprise its viewers with unexpected ingredients of the rez, like mansions and monster trucks, *Trickster* presents a view of the rez that might look more familiar. As a fantasy drama series, viewers are most likely to be taken with its epic magical scenes where we see, for example, a man transform into a raven. However, my chapter argues that it is the show's everyday moments and ordinary depictions that are most remarkable and create a category I call rez gothic. By taking a woman who could be someone's auntie and turning her into a terrifying villain, *Trickster* is making something new of the rez aesthetic.

The Conclusion extends "An Invitation to the Rez" to readers and points toward Native cultural productions that make compelling sites for the application of rez theory. The literature and television series studied in this dissertation are "all rezzed out" in their own way. Some of the questions that come out thinking of the rez as an adjective, an aesthetic and an attitude, as well as a way of being, are: Is it possible to become rez? In other words, is it possible for someone or something to *be rez*, in the descriptive sense, without being physically located within boundaries of the reservation? Rez theory points to the ways the rez manifests through culture, in language and via experience in addition to its regular treatment as a land base. Rez theory is additive; it suggests another way we might use the term rez and considers the possibilities that

theorizing the rez create in our studies of Native life, literature and cultural productions.

Understanding the rez in a capacious and action-oriented way widens the possibilities for the way Native people, and our culture and traditions, continue into the future.

Note

¹ Thank you, Dr. Cherry Meyer, for information on the suffix -win as a nominalizer that transforms verbs into nouns in Anishinaabemowin.

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Chapter 1

Rez Life in *Love Medicine*

At the time Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* was published in 1984, mainstream audiences were only beginning to get acquainted with the rez in literature. With her debut novel, Erdrich found her place among a cohort of novelists whom literary critic Kenneth Lincoln would later proclaim ushered in the Native American Renaissance. Beginning with N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968)—which was the only novel by a Native American author to win a Pulitzer Prize until Erdrich won with *The Night Watchman* in 2021—and followed swiftly by James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), Native American fiction writers introduced their readership to the rez. The novels established a set of core themes and plot points for the Native American Renaissance: many of them feature broken male protagonists who find healing once they reunite with homeland, ceremony and family. This trajectory was named “the homing plot” by literary scholar William Bevis. Contrasted against the white American protagonist's tendency of leaving home to find himself, the characters in Native American novels find resolution by looking to their past, their kinship and their home. Bevis writes: “These novels are important, not only because they depict Indian individuals coming home while white individuals leave but also because they suggest—variously and subtly and by degrees—a tribal rather than an individual definition of ‘being’” (585).

In *Love Medicine*, however, we find that most of the characters are already home on the rez. Erdrich's novel lacks a single protagonist, a point made by Richard Stock in the article,

“Louise Erdrich’s Place in American Literature: Narrative Innovation in *Love Medicine*.”

Instead, *Love Medicine* features a cast of characters who descend from a handful of families and live on a reservation that is unnamed in this first novel, but is based on Erdrich’s home community, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in North Dakota. The focus on a community of characters and the amorphous reservation set the stage upon which an aesthetic of rez life is constructed. *Love Medicine* is one of the most rez-focused novels in Native American literary history and it effectively depicts the array of ephemera and sensibilities that constitute rez theory.

Love Medicine is a family saga, the story of how the lives of a few families on a reservation braid together and unravel over time in what Connie A. Jacobs describes as “linked stories, linked lives, and linked landscape” (145). The chapters are told through the perspectives of various characters. While the period of the storytelling shifts back and forth in time, the novel is set in the years 1934, 1957, 1973-74 and 1980-1984. The action in the book primarily revolves around or connects to three central female figures: June (Kashpaw) Morrissey, Marie (Lazarre) Kashpaw and Lulu (Nanapush) Lamartine. The book opens not on the rez but in the city with a chapter that follows June to a bar, then to “a sexual fumble,” as David Treuer describes it (“Native American Fiction” 29), with a man she meets there and, finally, to her death by exposure during an Easter storm. The book also follows the lives of June’s two sons, King Kashpaw, whom she claims as her own, and Lipsha Morrissey, who was adopted by Nector Kashpaw and Marie and doesn’t learn the identity of his biological mother and father until the end of the book. Readers also witness Marie’s experience as a young girl living in the convent on the rez, her eventual marriage to Nector Kashpaw and the lives of their children and grandchildren. We meet Lulu, Nector’s first love, as she has eight children, all of them boys, by different fathers. Woven throughout the novel is a love triangle between Marie and Nector and

Lulu that follows them from young adulthood into old age, when a blind Lulu and senile Nector attempt to have sex in the Senior Citizens home. Other memorable storylines include a return from war, a prison escape and a failed attempt at love medicine. Throughout the episodic narratives, the diverse characters leave and return, leave and return to the rez. And so too, as Erdrich has described, *Love Medicine*'s characters insist on the continuation of their stories by returning to her imagination: "That they keep returning, insistent and surprising, is a strange gift. Indeed, they have not finished with me yet" ("Author's Note" 6). She honored their continual return and the *Love Medicine* series consists of *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *Four Souls* (2001), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) and *The Painted Drum* (2005); some minor characters in the *Love Medicine* series, like Dot Adare, can also be found in books outside the series, such as *The Beet Queen* (1986).

With its focus on a multiplicity of characters, humor, politics, language and everyday ephemera the rez aesthetic of *Love Medicine* comes spectacularly to life. In this chapter, I examine precisely how *Love Medicine* successfully paints its portrait of rez life and what it tells us about Erdrich's characters and themes. While the reservation and its importance as a homeland is a key setting for all the novels of the Native American Renaissance, *Love Medicine* has a wide array of humorous, rez camp and *bricolage* elements I describe in the Introduction. *Love Medicine* is successful in this regard because its emphasis on the many ordinary people who make up the rez and descriptions of the basic ephemera of the place, like food and clothing, give readers a feel for what it's like to sit at these families' kitchen tables and hear the laughter, anger and longings that surround them. This chapter aims to fill a gap in the criticism about *Love Medicine* by discussing how the symbols and themes often considered in scholarship, for example the theme of survival and the symbol of pies, work together to form a rez aesthetic. By

painting this fictional portrait of rez life, Erdrich uses the most mundane objects and attitudes, things like washing machines and half-understood histories, to demonstrate a wide array of the aesthetics and sensibilities of rez life. While the characters sometimes long for external worth and validation, as I show in my analysis, I argue that reading *Love Medicine* through rez theory reveals the many ways that everyday rez life is profound. By weaving together the small, in-between moments—the clothes characters wear, the sound of their laughter, the gestures they make—*Love Medicine* is a key starting point for using rez theory in Native American literature. The rez aesthetic of *Love Medicine* is one we will see repeated in literature and cultural productions by Native American storytellers and artists in years to come.

The following scene in *Love Medicine* shows how devoting critical attention to the details between the novel's "big moments" is one method that brings rez life to the forefront. The chapter, "The Good Tears," begins with a fierce monologue by Lulu Lamartine, who declares: "No one ever understood my wild and secret ways" (273). This is a powerful line that shows Erdrich's prowess as a writer and demonstrates her ability to create compelling characters. By this point, Lulu is bald, following an incident where the married man she loves, Nector Kashpaw, burned down her house. She has eight sons from different fathers. Lulu is unapologetic about her various relationships and her appearance, and she silences a community meeting when she threatens to publicly name each of the fathers of her boys. Erdrich's ability to create strong female characters through remarkable lines like these could blind readers to the small in-between moments that rez theory asks us to direct our attention toward. For example, later in this same passage, Lulu tells readers: "After some time I'd swing my door shut and walk back into the house with my eyes closed. I'd sit there like that in my house. I'd sit there with my eyes closed on beauty until it was time to make the pickle brine or smash the boiled berries or the boys came

home” (272-273). In an instant, Erdrich switches from an epic declaration and major character insight to an ordinary moment where the same character is simply making the pickle brine. These are the things that readers might gloss over because they don’t contain the same poeticism of her other lines or reveal key plot points. But it is in these moments when characters are brining the pickles and boiling the berries that Erdrich depicts the human faults and longings, actions and consequences that tell a wild story, all in all, made of up of ordinary Native people on an ordinary reservation. The focus of this chapter is uncovering those secret ways and their wild consequences, and understanding how Erdrich uses them to construct a rez aesthetic.

A Short History of *Love Medicine*

Scholars of *Love Medicine* have generally focused on themes of survival and authenticity, as well as questions about character and form. Early scholarship on *Love Medicine* revolved around the theme of survival and how Erdrich accessed the subject through humor, resilient characters and voice. Some book reviews at the time of its release in 1984 characterized the novel as a dismal portrayal of reservation life (Gleason 51), resulting from Erdrich’s refusal to romanticize her characters or to exclude certain issues, such as alcoholism, that could be interpreted as reinforcing negative stereotypes about Native American people. Initial scholarship on the novel talked back to these reviews by explicating the nuances of Erdrich’s characters and plot lines. William Gleason’s article “‘Her Laugh an Ace’: The Function of Humor in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*” offers an analysis of the types of humor at work in the novel. Far from being a book about the pain and suffering of its characters, Gleason argues, *Love Medicine* teems with humor and play. Gleason writes: “Laughter leaks from phrase, gesture, incident, situation, and narrative comment equally” (51). Gleason’s ultimate claim is that humor is employed as a

means of survival; it is often gritty, and sometimes so fleeting that it is missed, but it is how the characters in *Love Medicine* cope and endure following years of colonization and oppression.

In Louis Owens' *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, the chapter "Erdrich and Dorris's Mixedbloods and Multiple Narratives" picks up this tread on the theme of survival. Rather than a cast of victims of circumstance, Owens highlights how Erdrich's characters endure in spite of the cards they've been dealt: "The seemingly doomed Indian or tortured mixed-blood caught between worlds surfaces in Erdrich's fiction, but such characters tend to disappear behind those other, foregrounded characters who hang on in spite of it all, who confront with humor the pain and confusion of identity and, like a storyteller, weave a fabric of meaning and significance out of the remnants" (194). Owens points out the nuance of Erdrich's writing and how her presentation of common themes in Native American literature, such as colonization, is not immediately visible because her approach utilizes fine points and details (Owens 203-204). Kathleen M. Sands' essay, "*Love Medicine: Voices and Margins*," argues that Erdrich's combination of multiple voices, time periods and humor demonstrate how community gossip works in real life. When Erdrich embeds gossip throughout the novel, its being incomplete and funny mirrors the way gossip functions in the day-to-day lives of the characters. This is a form of everyday storytelling that contrasts sharply with the sacred storytelling in ceremony that Native American Renaissance writers, like Momaday and Silko, portray:

the storytelling process [Erdrich] draws upon is not the traditional ceremonial process of the reenactment of sacred myth, nor is it strictly the tradition of telling tales on winter nights, though there is some reliance on that process. The source of her storytelling technique is the secular anecdotal narrative process of community gossip, the storytelling sanction toward proper behavior that works so effectively in Indian communities to identify membership in the group and ensure survival of the group's values and its valued individuals. (36)

Sands points out that Erdrich differs from earlier writers in the Native American Renaissance because she doesn't include oral traditions and sacred ceremonies, instead focusing on everyday people, their emotions and actions, and the consequences they produce.

Critics also considered Erdrich's use of character. The abundance of characters is mapped out in a genealogical family tree in the front matter of the book. Different lines indicate whether characters are connected by traditional Ojibwe marriage, sexual affair or Catholic marriage, a representation of the messy but real ways families connect and community is made on the rez. We hear from nine named and one anonymous character throughout the novel. A key difference between *Love Medicine* and the other novels that shaped the Native American Renaissance is that Erdrich's book features Native women as central characters. Robert Silberman, in the essay "Opening the Text: *Love Medicine* and the Return of the Native American Woman," points out that Erdrich's centralization of Native women in *Love Medicine* is markedly different from authors like Momaday, Silko, Welch and D'Arcy McNickle, whose texts revolve around the crises of young Native American men (138). Although critics like Richard T. Stock argue that *Love Medicine* has no protagonist or main character, but rather a number of secondary characters ("Erdrich's Place" 129-136), the book's opening with the death of June Kashpaw, whose story frames the novel, and the prominence placed on the storylines of Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine make the lives of Native women more central than in other Native American Renaissance novels. Critics, like Sands and Stock, both point out the centrality of June Kashpaw and how her death is used by Erdrich to organize the novel (Sands 38; Stock, "Erdrich's Place" 133-134). Others, like Karen Janet McKinney in the article, "False Miracles, Failed Vision in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," have made the case for the centrality of Lipsha Morrissey (153).

Issues of form have been central to literary criticism on *Love Medicine*. One of the most enduring questions is: Is *Love Medicine* a novel? Although the book's cover declares itself "a novel" and Erdrich's late husband and collaborator, Michael Dorris, stated that it is a novel (Wong 85), it diverges from some of the traditional aspects of the novel in several ways, forgoing a clear protagonist and chronological narrative. Adding fuel to this debate is the fact that versions of eleven of the book's sixteen chapters appeared originally as short stories in literary magazines. Hertha D. Sweet Wong applies Forrest L. Ingram's concept of the "short story cycle" to *Love Medicine*, a form where each chapter is able to stand on its own, as a short story would, yet "the reader's experience of each story is modified by the experience of all the others" (Wong 86), which operate like chapters in a novel. In one thought experiment as to how *Love Medicine* becomes a novel, Stock makes a case for reading the book as if it were a fictional ethnography. Stock proposes that the characters in *Love Medicine* are telling their stories to an imaginary ethnographer, who assembled the oral histories and stories they tell into the text readers hold in their hands. This explains, according to Stock, how the first-person narration that dominates *Love Medicine* strikes a similar, lyrical tone throughout the book. He writes: "One of the messages that comes from telling the story in this way is that all of us in human society belong to such groups and participate in creating such stories in our everyday lives, and creating, recreating, telling, and retelling such stories serves both individual purposes as well as a larger cultural preservation and vitalization" ("Native Storytelling" 192).

The study of *Love Medicine* is enriched by literary criticism that widens interpretations of what "counts" as Indian or rezzy. In his article "Actually Existing Indian Nations: Modernity, Diversity, and the Future of Native American Studies," Lyons calls on scholarship in the field to allow our communities to exist in their complexity and modernity, even when those histories and

facts complicate an otherwise tidy narrative of Native American people. Embedded in this call is a critique of the nationalist turn in Native American studies, where complexities around modernity and diversity are stifled in favor of presenting a unified front that builds on authenticity and tradition. This involves widening, rather than limiting, the possibilities for the things we consider “Indian.” Lyons writes: “I am interested in dealing with what *is*, in an actually existing sort of way, without the discourses of assimilation or authenticity attempting to discredit it. Assimilation and authenticity have always been language games designed for Indians to lose” (303). In a related argument, James H. Cox makes a case for expanding our understandings of what counts as a political maneuver in his book, *The Political Arrays of American Indian Literary History*. Cox focuses on impacts of the nationalist tradition in Native American studies and argues that it limits which Native American writers can be called “political” by practically requiring a nationalist perspective and pro-sovereignist agenda. By attending to political arrays, Cox suggests that literary criticism is better positioned to elucidate “the nuances, ambiguities, and ambivalences of the politics of Native American and Indigenous writing” (3). According to Lyons and Cox, then, if we want to provide a comprehensive view and understanding of Native American life in our writing as scholars, then we should allow for a broader range (more “diverse and modern” to draw on the language of Lyons or “an array” to use Cox’s term) of signifiers of Native life than what is currently the trend of our field.

Finally, a lively debate around issues of authenticity frames *Love Medicine*’s inclusion of Ojibwe language. David Treuer’s chapter, “Smartberries,” from his book *Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual* takes *Love Medicine* as its case study in the argument against the search for “cultural treasures, some kind of artifact or sensibility that, if they are non-Indian, is different from their own and, if they are Indian, is a part of their tribal patrimony” (31). Treuer

argues that the singular focus on a search for cultural treasures or artifacts—those things that demonstrate “real” or “authentic” Indian-ness—obfuscates Erdrich’s craft, particularly her use of symbols, that Treuer writes is “almost unequalled and only surpassed by Toni Morrison’s symbolic strokes” (38-39). Analyzing the opening chapter, where the “half-understood passions and grudges” of *Love Medicine* characters culminate in a violent dispute that sends pie guts flying across the kitchen, Treuer shows Erdrich’s portrayal of “[t]he longing for culture... linked to the project of self-recovery and self-discovery” (62), rather than something essentially Indian, authentic or traditional. But Treuer draws boundaries around what is authentic Indian literature (oral traditional tales, which he later explains in point form) and what is not (Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*). Lyons takes up this debate in his book *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent* using the example of Erdrich’s use of the Ojibwe language. While Treuer is fast to point out mistakes in the spelling and use of Ojibwe words, stating that “the characters don’t know what to say in their language and are much more adept at talking in English about it” (57), in *X-Marks* Lyons asks readers to think more capaciously about the reality and meaning of authenticity in contemporary usage of Native languages. What if broken Ojibwe is authentic? Lyons wonders:

because it seems true to me that our cultures, like all cultures, are constantly changing, adapting, and evolving as time goes by... From that perspective, we might insist that Louise Erdrich’s Ojibwe language mistakes in *Love Medicine* aren’t ‘incorrect’ at all, but to the contrary, a remarkably accurate portrait of Ojibwe language usage in the late twentieth century, a time when the majority of actually existing Ojibwe in the United States were screwing up their verb conjugations with stunning regularity. (104)

Lyons demonstrates here that language can morph and change as we do the same.

Literary scholars circled around rez life in *Love Medicine*—its jokes and gossip and language errors—but this chapter narrows in on it. My argument also relies on Erdrich’s use of symbolism and nuance, but I claim that *Love Medicine* uses them to demonstrate a wide array of rezziness, touching on each of the thematics of rez theory: language, politics and humor. Erdrich

paints a portrait of the rez aesthetic and conveys rez sensibilities. Gleason took on the task of demonstrating the many ways Erdrich employed humor in the novel; in my section “Dis or Dat,” I explore how the humor is rez in highly specific ways. This scholarship provided a solid foundation for understanding *Love Medicine* and this chapter extends it to consider the many colors *Love Medicine* uses to paint a literary portrait of rez aesthetics.

Quilting the Rez: A Bricolage of Rez Attitudes and Ephemera

Louise Erdrich establishes the rez aesthetic of *Love Medicine* through the inclusion of a plethora of objects and descriptions of everyday ephemera. By incorporating material culture, along with actions, habits, attitudes and other sensuous elements, Erdrich draws a portrait of the rez. Once assembled, these descriptions build a *bricolage* of rez life, as discussed in the Introduction. The material that forms a *bricolage* is spread throughout the entire text, but there is a density in one passage from the chapter, “Resurrection.” In this chapter, Gordie Kashpaw is detoxing from alcohol at his parents’, Marie and Nector Kashpaw’s, home and his mother is taking care of him. The passage begins with a literal collage, a quilt, that Marie uses to cover her son: “The quilt was brown, mustard yellow, all shades of green. Looking at it, Marie recognized the first coat she had bought Gordie, a faint, tough gray patch, and the blanket he had brought home from the army. There was the plaid of her husband’s jacket. A thick skirt. A baby blanket half turned to lace by summer moths. Two old blue pants legs” (257). The quilt contains within it the Kashpaw family history: pieces of herself, her husband, their children, their work. Some pieces are more meaningful than others, but once sewn together they create a new history that, in this instance, plays a role in Gordie’s healing from alcoholism and the grief over the death of his wife, June Morrissey. While waiting for her son’s system to clear out, Marie dreams and the stuff her dreams are made of is, again, everyday and domestic items that make up rez life. Things like:

“Potatoes,” “Milk,” “Bread,” “Sweetgrass,” “a horse.” When she awakens, she finds her son in the kitchen, making himself a rezzy meal of leftovers including, “the stew, the chili, the uncut pie she had been saving to take to the nuns, bringing out the bread, the butter, pouring himself a cup of Kool-Aid” (258). The food gathered in a scene like this one, assembled on the kitchen table, tells the story of the relationships between mother and son, husband and wife, a man and his grief.

The game of bingo might be among the top three rezziest activities and Erdrich is sure to include it. As we follow Lipsha Morrissey in the last chapter of the book, he points out some rez sights: “as I walked here and there on the reservation, swept the bingo hall, cleaned up pop-tops in the playground, I could not help but dwell on the subject of myself” (303). In this line, Erdrich makes a direct connection between the people and their place as Lipsha “could not help” reflecting on himself when he encounters signifiers of the rez, such as the bingo hall and scattered pop-tops, the tabs used to open cans. In another scene, when Lulu Lamartine recalls where she was when she learned her house was burning down, she describes leaving her son behind “in town hanging at the outskirts of a large jackpot bingo” then going to see a friend who trades “some commodity rice... for cigarettes and powdered eggs” (282). Generally, the rezzy ephemera Erdrich writes of in the novel are not typical “Indian stuff,” with the exception of the occasional mention of sweetgrass in Marie’s dream or when a character lights “his pipe of kinikinnick” (70), an Anishinabe word for tobacco. The kinds of things Erdrich draws on to create her rez aesthetic are also associated with rural areas and blue-collar households. This suits *bricolage*, which focuses on the process of transformation and how a specific combination of objects creates something new. That new *bricolage*, in this case, is the rez aesthetic.

The thoughts and outlooks of Erdrich's characters are examples of what I refer to in the Introduction to my dissertation as rez sensibilities, identifiable attitudes or ways of relating to one another on the rez, such as teasing or assigning nicknames or gossip. In *Rez Life*, David Treuer writes simply that Indians are "funny. We really are" (9). I would add that we love to laugh, just as Erdrich describes Gerry Nanapush, a character multiple scholars think is partly based on Leonard Pelletier even though Erdrich denied the comparison (Cox 4): "He laughed at everything, or seemed barely to be keeping amusement in" (113). We also see the diffuse sort of gossip that makes up the "band office panopticon," where there is a sense that everyone knows everyone else's business and the information is exchanged in unremarkable places like the tribal office or the gas station. In the case of *Love Medicine*, the site of gossip and family secrets is the Senior Citizens building and the conduits are two women who have seen it all: Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine. Erdrich writes: "If you'll just picture them together knowing everybody's life, as if they had hotlines to everybody's private thoughts, you'll know why people started rushing past their doors. They feared one of them would reach out, grab them into their room, and tell them all the secrets they tried to hide from themselves" (300). Folks on the rez are also the narrators of their own personal histories and events that might appear insignificant to outsiders become battles and victories for insiders. Lyman Lamartine begins the chapter, "The Red Convertible," by claiming: "I was the first one to drive a convertible on my reservation" (176). His personal triumph instantly reminded me of the time my own grandfather, Ronald Whiteduck, told me: "I was the first one to grow a beard on the reserve." My grandfather wanted to set the record straight that the title belonged to him, not the other well-known white-bearded man on our rez. Although the designation of first-to-drive-a-convertible or first-to-don-a-beard seem inconsequential, they are a way of narrating personal and community histories on the level

of the everyday. Perhaps even more micro than microhistory, these kinds of narrative details impress upon readers how people on the rez create “refuge history,” a term John Brewer describes as “close-up and on the small scale.” It is a history of place rather than space and one where pleasures “derive not from a sense of control of history but from a sense of belonging, of connectedness – to both persons and details – in the past.” Brewer also describes its emphasis on “interdependence, on interiority and intimacy” (89). It is a form of microhistory that recognizes and “records” the intimate details of ordinary rez life that are made meaningful by their relationship to place and their role in the making of that place.

The final rez sensibility I draw out relates to the push-and-pull between pride and humility. The rez, like anywhere else, has people who are boastful. We get a sense of that pride in the twin phrases from lovers Lulu Lamartine and Nector Kashpaw who describe, respectively, their abilities to attract members of the opposite sex. Lulu says: “I could have had any damn man on the reservation at the time. And I could have made him treat me like his own life. I looked good. And I looked white” (48-49). And Nector, in a similar line from the very next chapter, says: “Just to set the record clear, I am a good-looking boy, tall and slim, without a belly hanging in the way. I can have the pick of girls, is what I’m saying” (61-62). There are rez sensibilities that temper these self-important attitudes and have yet to be formally named. The Norwegians have a term called *janteloven*, which Gayle R. Avant and Karen Patrick Knutsen write, “expresses and communicates both this essential fear of individualism in Norwegian culture and values and the Norwegian awareness of this fear” (452-453). The authors describe the “10 commandments” of *janteloven*, two of which sound as if they could be lifted from Erdrich’s novel or from the everyday speech of rez folks: “2. Thou shalt not believe that thou art as good as *us*” and “3. Thou shalt not believe that thou art more than *us*” (453). The rez version of

janteloven might be the phrase: “He thinks he’s *too good*.” Being accused of thinking you’re “too good” or “better than me” is a cardinal rez sin. As one of *Love Medicine*’s characters, King Kashpaw, says of his own son who, at a young age, changes his name from King Jr. to Howard: “‘He won’t claim his dad no more,’ said King, standing in the doorway. ‘He’s too good’” (310). People on the rez leverage the accusation of one’s thinking they’re too good—often by teasing, but sometimes in all seriousness as King Kashpaw does here—to promote maintaining one’s humility.

“Dis or Dat”: Rez Accents and Language

When I first moved from the rez to the city, I was the only Indian in my new school. While my light skin protected me from racism, my non-Native peers pointed out the difference in the way I talked. “You say the number ‘three’ weird,” a new friend told me. I had no idea I even had an accent. I pronounced it like “tree.” In the chapter, “The Plunge of the Brave,” Erdrich writes a phonetic rez accent that involves hardening the “th” sound in the way where “three” becomes “tree” or “this” becomes “dis.” In one scene from “dis” chapter of *Love Medicine*, Nector banks on his rez accent when he wants to avoid the requirements of his gig as a nude model. When the artist directs him to “disrobe,” Nector pretends to misunderstand her: “‘Dis robe or dat robe?’” (119). For the most part, Erdrich writes her characters’ dialogue in proper English, often in short sentences, which Robert Silberman describes as “plain talk—kitchen-table talk, bar talk, angry talk, curious talk, sad talk, teasing talk” (146). But here we get a glimpse at her portrayal of the rez accent, whether spoken by rez folks who grew up in Quebec, like me, or in North Dakota (presumably), like Nector Kashpaw. Erdrich uses language, words and dialogue to augment the rez language of *Love Medicine*.

Gleason focuses on Nector's intentional misunderstanding as one of the variety of ways humor is employed in *Love Medicine*. He writes: "Words play games in this novel, too" (53). In another example, teenaged Nector is reading *Moby Dick*, which his teacher assigns every year through his high school career, when his mother, Rushes Bear, accuses him of "always reading that book" (120) then asks what it is about. When he tells her it's about a great white whale, she responds: "'What do they got to wail about, those whites?'" (121). Taken on its own, this is funny of course, but it is also rez; the misunderstandings that stem from the disconnect between what happens on the rez and what goes on in the outside world create funny moments like these. The sometimes-myopic focus on rez happenings fuels these kinds of endearing misunderstandings. There is also a critical element to it, recognizing white privilege. In Rushes Bear's question, we are also treated to one of the many examples throughout the novel of Erdrich embedding the rez accent in dialogue when she says: "What do they got." According to Kalina Newmark, Nacole Walker and James Stanford in the article, "The Rez Accent Knows No Borders," this is a linguistic tense and agreement pattern that is common in the accents of people across multiple reservations in the U.S. and Canada (641). In addition to accents and misunderstandings, interjections are another way Erdrich's writing conveys common usage of the English language on the rez. Other examples found across the novel include phrases or parts of phrases that are tacked onto more important dialogue and act as a bridge between sentences: "Oh, so what" (267), "Just go on and try it" (245) and "...is what I'm saying" (248). Erdrich scatters a collection of interjections throughout her characters' dialogue, and they add texture to her representation of the way storytelling and conversations happen on the rez.

Beyond language and accents, Erdrich also includes intentional misspeak to illustrate some rez attitudes toward colonial history. In one conversation, Nector, asks: "Remember

Custer's saying? The only good Indian is a dead Indian?" (120). The quote to which Nector refers is infamous in Indian Country. But in repeating it, Nector makes a mistake. He misattributes the quote to Custer, the flashy and widely known commanding officer, when the famous words were, in fact, believed to have been uttered by General Philip Sheridan. Its ubiquity is largely owed to Dee Brown's 1970 publication *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Meider 38-39). It is interesting that Erdrich would include an intentional piece of misinformation and its inclusion deserves critical attention. A basic reading might lead readers to wonder whether the author is trying to say something about anti-intellectualism on the rez. That could be the case, but I am inclined to read this line as a demonstration of the ways everyday Native people on the rez absorb and recite their "own" colonial history. The misinformation or partial correctness (the quote itself is, at least, accurate even if it is misattributed) is indicative of the way Native people living on the rez have a general idea of the colonial history of oppression and suffering as it relates to Indians, but as a day-to-day practice, they are not living under the shadow of that history. The fact that Nector knows that an important historical figure said something nasty about Indians, but gets the details wrong, is itself a rez sensibility. The people living on the rez, whose ancestors have borne the brunt of colonial ideologies like these, know *something* happened and know *someone* said something wicked. They are living out the effects of colonial history. But the precise details of what happened and who said what, and when, are less crucial, or at least more arm's length, to the everyday lives of Erdrich's characters. The misattribution is an accurate portrayal of the ways people on the rez filter colonial history.

Nector's approach in this passage demonstrates the freedom the *bricoleur* enjoys and he passes that maker's spirit along to his adopted grandson, Lipsha. *Bricolage* is generally thought of as a tangible process, the creation of something new out of materials that are available at hand.

The *bricoleur*, the person doing the making, brings to the task an attitude of improvisation; this is, according to literary scholar Mary Klages, made possible by a lack of “regard as to whether these materials are right, correct, or appropriate for the task at hand.” The beauty of *bricolage* is its ability to make something out of limited material, whether a tangible item, like a quilt, or an intangible one, like a story or a recipe for love medicine. “Lévi-Strauss describes mythmaking as bricolage,” Klages writes, “as cultures use their odds and ends of ideas and stories to create myth” (210). By this definition, arguably, there is no better *bricoleur* in *Love Medicine* than Lipsha Morrissey. Lipsha makes myths of his own people’s grandeur when he tells readers: “I know the feeling when your mental power builds up too far. I always used to say that’s why the Indians got drunk. Even statistically we’re the smartest people on the earth” (227). His greatest act of *bricolage* comes in the chapter where *Love Medicine* gets its name and where Lipsha conjures up a plan to reignite the spark between his grandparents, Marie and Nector Kashpaw. In this scene, Lipsha explains his plan: “It hits me, anyway. Them geese, they mate for life. And I think to myself, just what if I went out and got a pair? And just what if I fed some part—say the goose heart—of the female to Grandma and Grandpa ate the other heart? Wouldn’t that work? Maybe it’s all invisible, and then maybe again it’s magic” (238). His goose hunt fails, so he buys frozen turkeys from the grocery store instead. He tries to get the turkey hearts blessed by a nun and when she refuses, Lipsha gives them a makeshift benediction: “as I walked out the door I stuck my fingers in the cup of holy water that was sacred from their touches. I put my fingers in and blessed the hearts, quick, with my own hand” (244). The ultimate result of Lipsha’s love medicine is that his grandfather chokes on the heart and dies. It’s not a happy ending. But, as an attempt at Indian medicine patched together with grocery store turkey hearts and appropriated holy water, it is a *bricolage*.

The Dim, Warm Kitchen: The Meaning of Family and Home

Erdrich establishes a rez aesthetic through her setting at the Kashpaw family home, particularly the kitchen, and a rez sensibility through the abundance of people and plurality of interpersonal dramas at play in this family. The first chapter, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” is where Erdrich does much of this heavy lifting. The chapter begins with June’s death, off the rez. The perspective then shifts to that of Albertine Johnson, a young woman who is studying at college in the Twin Cities, when she learns that her aunt June has passed away and begins her travel home to the rez. As Albertine returns to the rez, readers are also introduced to the place and its intricacies. When Albertine arrives and slips into the Kashpaw family home, she is hardly noticed because a plethora of characters are arriving or already present: her mom, Zelda, and aunt, Aurelia Kashpaw; grandparents Nector and Marie Kashpaw; great-uncle Eli Kashpaw; her cousin, King Kashpaw, his wife, Lynette, and their son, King Kashpaw Jr.; and her cousin, Lipsha Morrissey. Although the introduction of so many characters all at once can be disorienting, it is reflective of large, extended families on the rez. Their home is, of course, the reservation, but more than that, it is this one house: the house Marie and Nector Kashpaw raised their children in, which “[a]lthough Aurelia kept the house now, it was like a communal property for the Kashpaws. There was always someone camped out or sleeping on her fold-up cots” (29). My grandparents’ house on the rez operates similarly as a home base or touchstone home with grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, children, babies and even pets convening and coming-and-going.

Inviting readers into the intimate space of the Kashpaw family home is a direct contrast against representations of rez housing in the media. News articles with headlines like “Cold, poverty make life bleak on reservation” by CNN in 2017 (Gulledge) and “Life at the Bottom—

America's Poorest County" by the New York Times in 1992 (Kilborn) made the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota the poster place for dilapidated housing on reservations. The photos of falling-apart houses in Attawapiskat First Nation are part of what would lead to the Idle No More movement in Canada in 2012 (Stastna). In fact, there is a range of housing on the rez, dilapidated to upscale, and the Kashpaw home might be about average. Erdrich describes it through Albertine: "The main house, where all of my aunts and uncles grew up, is one big square room with a cooking shack tacked onto it. The house is a light peeling lavender now" (12). The house functions as semi-communal property because people on reservations don't tend to move around or do much buying-and-selling of properties. Because land- and property-ownership are limited on the rez, as populations continue to grow and expand, a family's home could remain their only rez house for a long time. In the U.S., Native Americans' land base is further affected by allotment. But, like anyone else, the people living in rez houses like to improve and expand their homes, even if they aren't buying an entirely new property. This is where additions come in. Both my parents' and my in-law's houses on their respective reserves, which they have lived in since they were married, have received additions, new parts of the house that were built onto the original frame. Erdrich captures this subtlety of rez life: "Aurelia's new green Sears dryer was still huffing away in the tacked-on addition that held toilet, laundry, kitchen sink. The plumbing, only two years old, was hooked up to one side of the house. The top of the washer and dryer were covered with clean towels, and all the pies had been set there to cool" (24). With this, Erdrich welcomes her readers not only onto the reservation but into one of its homes; we open the front door (or perhaps the side door where family members know they're supposed to enter) and witness the extraordinary lives of the ordinary people into whose home we just happened to enter.

Describing older characters through the metaphor of the house recognizes the wisdom and experience of ordinary seniors on the rez who aren't designated traditional elders or knowledge keepers. Erdrich uses the metaphor of the house to describe Lulu and Marie, whose lives we follow from youth into old age. In this line, Lulu Lamartine and Marie Kashpaw—Grandma to the narrator, Lipsha—are compared to houses following their decades-long love triangle with Nector: “Lamartine was jacked up, latticed, shuttered, and vinyl sided, while Grandma sagged and bulged on her slipped foundations and let her hair go the silver gray of rain-dried lumber” (234). This refers, most evidently, to the women's looks; how Lulu's keeps up her appearance, while the weather of age shows up on Marie. (Although note that neither woman is a marbled mansion from Lipsha's perspective.) But I assert that the house metaphor is used by Erdrich as an honor, a way to recognize the significance of the lives of ordinary senior citizens on the rez—the majority of older people in our communities who, while still treated kindly and cared for by the community, don't earn the same level of attention as traditional elders. We see the house metaphor, again applied to Marie, in the sad scene when Lipsha and Marie realize Nector is choking to death: “Grandma got back into the room and I saw her stumble. And then she went down too. It was like a house you can't hardly believe has stood so long, through years of record weather, suddenly goes down in the worst yet” (248). Erdrich's comparisons to houses show that the people they represent are fallible, as are all human beings. But because Erdrich reserves the house metaphor for the women in their old age, the metaphor is a recognition of the wealth of knowledge and experience gained through years of everyday, ordinary life on the rez.

The house is the hub of Kashpaw family life and the kitchen is its heart. The kitchen is full of warmth and noise: it is the place where grandmothers, nieces and nephews, and babies

come and go. It is so bursting with food, bodies and kitchen ephemera—saltshakers and sugar bowls that carry old hurts and grudges—that when Albertine arrives, she is barely noticed: “when I walked into the dim, warm kitchen they hardly acknowledged me, they were so involved in their talk” (12). The kitchen table is the place where stories are told, gossip is exchanged, food is cooked and consumed, and—as we will see—fights erupt and settle. Erdrich introduces readers to the food of the rez in this chapter. When Albertine arrives, she directs our attention to Aurelia, whose “hands [are] buried in a dishpan of potato salad” (12). Albertine is given the task of chopping “pickles, all diced into little cubes” (15). We also see “bread and butter” and “expensive canned ham,” (20) “ground liver from a little jar” (25) and, of course, the pies, which I will discuss below. “They were going to be beautiful pies” (13), Albertine remembers. The description of food in this chapter signals something about the people on this rez and in this family home. They are not preparing the trappings of a traditional feast of wild game that was caught by men exercising their traditional hunting rights, although that doesn’t stop the men from, later, talking over beers about who is the best hunter or, as the title of the chapter suggests, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman.” Instead, we get potato salad, canned ham and pie. Erdrich’s characters are not living off a diet of lean meats and berries as their ancestors from generations ago might have; they are subsisting off the (sub)standard American diet. In other places throughout the novel, Erdrich references other processed food items that are, still to this day, emblems of rez life. Lipsha Morrissey is often eating or thinking about food. Before doing his love medicine, he “ate a few of these soft baloney sandwiches” (239), and later he recalls being threatened by cousins to “hand over your Kool-Aid” (308) or having someone “steal my chunk of Spam” (308). He also eats “the hot dish” (239), a North Dakota/midwestern specialty, and “commodity beef” (304). The mention of these foods brings the rez aesthetic into focus and

shows readers that it is as often—if not more often—composed of Spam and potato salad as it is traditional foods.

I conclude this section by offering some thoughts on the pies in *Love Medicine*. Albertine, the chapter's narrator, is awakened by "the clanging sound of struck metal, pots tumbling in the house" (40). It's a fight. The first chapter in the novel ends with a physical fight between King and his wife, Lynette, in which Albertine tries to intervene. The fight is represented literarily in the form of freshly baked pies destroyed and smeared across the Kashpaw family kitchen. When the scuffle ends, what upsets Albertine is the ruined pies. In his essay, "Smartberries," Treuer claims that the pies represent the relationships between the family members, which are left damaged by these moments of violence (38). While I agree with that interpretation, I would add that we also need to pay attention to the ways that the women in the family, to borrow a phrase from the title of Ojibwe historian Brenda J. Child's book, "hold our world together." The pies were carefully constructed and the fruits in them were preserved by Grandma Marie Kashpaw and her daughters Zelda and Aurelia; the three women share the labor. Before she leaves the Kashpaw family house and it begins its slow decent toward this chaos, Marie declares: "Them pies are made special for tomorrow" (28). And on her way out the door, Marie once again gives the instructions that "'They can eat!' Grandma yelled once more. 'But save them pies!'" (29). If the pies represent relationships, then the love and care the women put into baking the pies must also be considered. Marie's emphasis on the importance of the pies, or the relationships, and how they are "special" and must be "saved" show the unseen labor that women in Native families do to hold things together. People behave better when they have the eyes of their grandmothers watching them, as Terese Marie Mailhot writes and as I will explore in the next chapter of this dissertation. Leaving behind delicate objects like pies is not only leaving a piece of herself

metaphorically watching over them that night, which I'm sure Marie knows has the potential to end badly, but it is also leaving the men and the young people with a sense of responsibility, something to take care of. They fail. In the final scene of the chapter, we see Albertine literally trying to spoon "the fillings back into the crusts" (42) after the pies are destroyed in the fight. We witness in Albertine how the next generation of women in this family will also be tasked with trying to hold their family's world together.

Chevys and Ball Caps: Cars, Clothes and Wrecked Dreams

The cars and the clothes that Erdrich describes add texture to the rez aesthetic, while simultaneously speaking to the desires and longings of her characters. Erdrich includes the Indian car, a ubiquitous fixture on many a rez, at one point referencing a "typical Indian car that has been driven all its life on reservation roads, which they always say are like government promises—full of holes" (184). Keith Secola's rez anthem "NDN Kars" made popular the knowledge that an Indian car is old and beat up: "My car is dented / The radiator steams / One headlight don't work / But the radio can scream / I got a sticker / It says 'Indian Power' / I stuck it on my bumper / That's what holds my car together." In *Love Medicine*, rez cars, even or especially old, broken-down ones, become fixtures of a family property. A rez car that has seen the end of its days is prominent on the Kashpaws' yard when Albertine describes "the rusted car that had been [Nector's] children's playhouse and mine" (18). In "'Fine Ponies': Cars in American Indian Film and Literature," Julie Tharp writes: "Automobiles serve, in much Native literature and film, as expressions of characters' differences from and relationships to the larger culture" (77).

On my rez, people are identified by the cars they drive. On a small rez where everyone knows who drives what vehicle, you can spot who is visiting whom based on the cars that are

pulled into a given driveway. This is how Albertine identifies who is home when she pulls into the Kashpaw family home: “Driving up to the house I saw that [Aurelia’s] brown car and my mother’s creamy yellow one were parked in the yard” (12). Erdrich describes the cars of other family members who arrive at the house alongside the characters themselves. Gordie, for instance, arrived when “his old Chevy chugged to a halt” (27). Although the Keith Secola-style of rez car—also known as a rez *bomb*, rez *runner* or rez *edition*—is well-documented in popular culture, one of the lesser-discussed facts of rez cars is that they also demonstrate social status when they are nice, brand-new vehicles. As I mentioned in the previous section, there are limitations of space and land on reservations that impact the potential for growth in housing, so there is less competition for “keeping up with the Kashpaws.” Cars, however, are a whole other story. On my rez, the person who has the newest and most souped-up pick-up truck reigns. Erdrich shows this other type of rez car as well, when King and his non-Native wife, Lynette, arrive in a new car, toting a baby and grandparents: “They drove up to the front steps in their brand-new sportscar. King Junior was bundled in the front seat and both Grandma and Grandpa Kashpaw were stuffed, incredibly, into the tiny backseat” (15). The car, purchased with money King inherited following his mother June’s death, isn’t worn in yet and isn’t part of the fabric of the family or the rez: “nobody seemed proud of it except for King and Lynette. Nobody leaned against the shiny blue fenders, rested elbows on the hood, or set paper plates there while they ate” (24). While some cars become integrated into family and community life on the rez, others, like King’s, represent alienation where “the automobile has also had the effect of ‘undermining community and family, and it invited anonymity and anomie’” (James J. Flink qtd. in Tharpe 78). Erdrich, a master of symbolism, uses the car to represent the unease of King and his family, which comes to a head later in the chapter.

Cars are popular symbols of freedom, individuality and mobility in American culture and literature, but Erdrich's Indian cars are beaters. Tharp writes: "For the average American, the car is inseparable from individual freedom, an icon of social, sexual, and geographical mobility. Mainstream society weds personal aspirations to car ownership" (78). While this is true of the shiny, new American car—like a Ford Thunderbird or a muscle car—the fact that Erdrich more often includes cars that have seen better day make them symbols of her characters' failed desires. We see this most clearly in the chapter, "The Red Convertible," which is a story told through the perspective of Lyman Lamartine, Lulu and Nector's son, about his brother Henry's return from the Vietnam War. The chapter begins with the quote referenced earlier, where Lyman claims: "I was the first one to drive a convertible on my reservation." Immediately, Erdrich is putting the convertible to work as a symbol for the chapter. Although Lyman is first to drive it on the rez, he "owned that car along with my brother Henry Junior" (177). The brothers spend their last pennies on the convertible and drive as far as Alaska, picking up a girl and driving her home, in the one glorious summer they spend happy and free before the army "remember[s] Henry had signed up to join it" (181). Erdrich describes their sense of freedom: "We went places in that car, me and Henry. We took off driving all one whole summer... Some people hang on to details when they travel, but we didn't let them bother us and just lived our everyday lives here to there" (179).

When he returns to the rez after about three years in Vietnam, "Henry was very different, and I'll say this: the change was no good." His change is described in terms of his lack of humor, one of those key rez sensibilities: "He'd always had a joke then, too, and now you couldn't get him to laugh, or when he did it was more the sound of a man choking" (182). Because they can't take Lyman to the Indian doctor, since their mother had a love affair with him, and they don't

trust “regular hospital[s]” (183), Lyman devises a plan to get Henry back to himself by fixing up the red convertible. The only problem is, the car is “in tip-top condition and ready to drive,” so Lyman bangs it up: “I took myself a hammer. I went out to that car and I did a number on the underside. Whacked it up. Bent the tail pipe double. Ripped the muffler loose” (184). The car, which was originally attached to the sense of freedom and possibility for both brothers, is now banged up worse than your average rez car. Like Henry, once hopeful and full of laughter, now hardened and barely choking out a laugh, the joy has been beaten out of the car and the man. Henry fixes up the car but, ultimately, Lyman’s plan to heal his brother fails: “We start talking. He said he knew what I’d done with the car. It was obvious it had been whacked out of shape and not just neglected. He said he wanted to give the car to me for good now; it was no use. He said he’d fixed it just to give it back and I should take it” (187). Speaking through the symbol of the car, Henry lets his brother know that he can’t be fixed but that he wants Lyman to have the happiness the car formerly provided them both. In a tragic scene where the brothers are fighting, drinking and joking (finally) for a moment by the river, Henry jumps into the water and is taken under by the current. Lyman buries the car with his drowned brother in the river: “I walk back to the car, turn on the high beams, and drive it up the bank. I put it in first gear and then I take my foot off the clutch. I get out, close the door, and watch it plow softly into the water” (189). Tharpe interprets this as a final gift between brothers: “Traditionally Chippewa who drown are said to wander forever between two worlds, never to be at peace. Lyman has simply ensured that Henry will wander in style, not on foot” (86). In this chapter, what starts off as an American dream for these two brothers drowns at the bottom of the river.

Erdrich also uses clothing and style to paint a rez scene for her readers, giving them an image of what grandmas and uncles on reservations like to wear and how those choices reflect

their lot on the rez. Like the food, the clothing worn by *Love Medicine's* characters casts them as ordinary, everyday people. They're not wearing buckskins or traditional outfits. Their clothing and hairstyles are reflective of 1980s styles, both on the rez and off: young moms in tight, high-waisted jeans; grandmothers with carefully coiffed curls; grandfathers in work pants and button-down shirts. Erdrich observes of Grandma Kashpaw that her "rolled-down nylons and brown support shoes appeared first, then her head in its iron-gray pageboy" (16); and Albertine describes her Mama's "flat blue-black ponytail and rough gray face" and aunt Aurelia "with her careful permanent, high rounded cheeks, tight jeans, and frilled rodeo shirt" (14). These are the looks of the rez: comfortable, casual but still put-together. They are separate from "town clothes," described by Anishinaabe comedian Ryan McMahon as the special outfits rez people put on when they dress to impress. Echoing this distinction, Albertine's mom Zelda says: "Aren't you dressed nice. Did you get your top in Fargo?" (14). Some people on the rez are such creatures of habit that they wear the same style so often it becomes one with their person, as we see with Eli in this description: "They happened to be dressed the same though, in work pants and jackets, except that Grandpa's outfit was navy blue and Eli's was olive green. Eli wore a stained, crumpled cap that seemed so much a part of his head not even Zelda thought of asking him to remove it" (27). In this opening chapter, hats are crucial to understanding the characters.

Hats represent the relative comfort and discomfort Native men on the rez feel in their own skin and in relation to certain ideals of Native masculinity, such as hunting. This comes across literally through the nickname of one character, Beverly "Hat" Lamartine, who hides his "feminine" given name under an assortment of nicknames: "Having a name some people thought of as feminine had turned Beverly Lamartine to acquiring nicknames and building up his muscles" (102). Beverly literally uses Hat (the nickname) to signify masculinity. But the

pinnacle of this symbolism comes in the exchange—or attempted exchange—of a hat between great-uncle Eli Kashpaw and his nephew King Jr. For Eli, who is one with his hat, it represents his wholeness. He knows who he is, where he is from and it shows up in the ease with which he wears his hat: “Eli sat up straight and tilted his little green hat back” (31). As a child, June, whom Eli adopts, shows admiration for her uncle by copying his hat-wearing: “She’d picked an old scrap of billed hat from a dump and wore it just like him, soft and squared in on her hair” (91). For King, however, the eponymous World’s Greatest Fisherman hat represents just the opposite of ease. Under his hat, King hides his insecurities about his wife’s standing in his family of origin and, as I will show, his own reputation in the city: “Now, brooding under the bill of his blue hat, [King] turned that moody stare through the windshield and shook his head at his wife. ‘She don’t fit in,’ he said” (26). The hats Eli and King wear show opposite levels of confidence and security. In this scene, Erdrich uses hats to contrast the level of self-actualization between Eli and King. Eli’s hat fits him perfectly, as does his position at home, on the rez, in this family. We see the contrast when King attempts to gift his great-uncle Eli with his own hat. In a moment of beer-induced love and generosity, King gives his great-uncle Eli his beloved “World’s Greatest Fisherman” hat straight off his head. When King is out of the room, his wife Lynette explains to Eli the gravity of the gift because it’s King’s favorite hat and it’s a sign of his reputation and stature in the Twin Cities: “They think the world of him down in the Cities. Everybody knows him. They know him by that hat. It’s his number one. You better never take it off” (36). While the hat has significance for King, who clings to it as proof that he is making something of himself away from the rez, its meaning doesn’t translate for Eli, who is quick to return to his well-worn, plain green hat: “Uncle Eli took his old cap off his knee and put it on his head. ‘This one fits me,’ he said” (36). Eli, whose life experience earned him the actual title of

“the last man on the reservation that could snare himself a deer” (29), acts as a foil for King, whose aspirations to be the World’s Greatest Fisherman, or at least an important man in the city, are outmatched. At the end of the chapter, after the fight where King nearly drowns his wife in the kitchen sink, Erdrich shows readers that King’s longings are futile and self-destructive: “He stepped down flat on his fisherman hat as he ran” (41-42). I’ve always recognized the rez as a place where many men wear hats. Erdrich invests intention into this everyday wardrobe choice.

The Lip Point at the *End of the Trail*

One of the most nuanced techniques and successful depictions of rez life comes in Erdrich’s writing on the embodiment of her characters; their gestures and postures tell readers much about the nature of the people. Erdrich is one of the earliest, if not the first, to depict in writing the now ubiquitous Indian “lip point,” or in her case “chin point,” when she describes this gesture: “Aurelia pointed at me with her chin. So Zelda turned to me and spoke in her low, prim, explaining voice” (23). Thirty years after the publication of *Love Medicine*, in 2014, a humorous Indian Country Today article named the gesture of pointing with your lips as number one on their list of “10 More Ways to Tell You Might Be Native American” (Schilling). Today, the image of Native people pointing with their lips abounds in Native film and television, comedy sketches and internet memes but when Erdrich was writing in the 1980s, depictions of Native people written by Native people were scarce, and Erdrich earns her “rez cred” by accurately capturing nuanced gestures of real Native people and inscribing them into the literary canon.

While other gestures described in *Love Medicine* do not have the same notoriety in Native pop culture as the lip/chin point, they come together to give readers a sense of the kinds of postures and gestures that form a rez embodiment. I draw on Vilém Flusser’s writing on

gesture, which states that intuition is the most powerful tool within our current arsenal to interpret human gesture. Flusser writes:

one way of defining ‘gesture’ is as a movement of the body or of a tool attached with the body, for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation. To understand a gesture defined in this way, its ‘meaning’ must be discovered. That is exactly what we do all the time, and it constitutes an important aspect of our daily lives. But we have no theory of the interpretation of gestures and are restricted to an empirical, ‘intuitive’ reading of the world of gestures, the codified world that surrounds us. And that means that we have no criteria for the validity of our readings. We must remember this as we try, in what follows, to read gestures, to discover the affect in them. (3)

Flusser indicates that there is no formal theory or social science to use to interpret gesture—those fleeting, instinctual human movements—beyond an intuitive reading of gestures that uses context clues to understand their affect. Fortunately, Erdrich offers several examples of gestures and postures that lend themselves to this kind of intuitive reading. The postures of Erdrich’s ordinary rez folk do not reflect the proud expressions of a model in an Edward Curtis photograph or even the stance of a modern powwow dancer posing for a picture. In a fleeting moment, Erdrich captures Albertine observing Marie (Lazarre) Kashpaw: “Grandma wiped each finger on a dishrag” (20). The ease of this motion embeds Marie into the intimate space of the kitchen and the home. Erdrich moves from small movements like these to large ones, when motion and sound fill the entire Kashpaw kitchen. Erdrich’s female characters laugh and cry at the memory of a near-miss when the children almost hanged June by accident while they were playing. Erdrich describes the scene as the women reminisce:

And then Aurelia started giggling behind her hands. Zelda put her fist down on the table with surprising force. . .

“That’s right!” Now Grandma’s chin was pulled up to hold her laughter back. “She called me a damn old chicken. Right there! A damn old hen!”

Then they were laughing out loud in brays and whoops, sopping tears in their aprons and sleeves, waving their hands helplessly. (22)

The giggling behind hands, holding back laughter and especially the last line where the women are laughing and “sopping tears in their aprons and sleeves, waving their hands helplessly” captures the joy the women in this family share when they come together. They are doing “the auntie laugh,” an expression for women on the rez who throw their heads back and laugh loudly. What makes *Love Medicine* such a beautiful novel is its blending of lightness with darkness, hope and tragedy or, as Erdrich writes of June later in this chapter, “amusement at both the bad and the good” (37). June’s death will be at the center of much of the strife and resolution to come, but in this moment with the Native women in the kitchen, we are treated to a glimpse of the laughter and joy she leaves behind.

Characters’ postures allude to famous images of Indians outside of the text. A transformation takes place in the Kashpaw home, specifically in the kitchen, that goes beyond a simple transition from day-to-night: “Gordie unlatched a beer, pushed it across the kitchen table to me. We were still at that table, only now the plates and dishpans of salad were cleared away for ashtrays, beer, packs of cigarettes” (29). This kitchen table in *Love Medicine* is the place where it all happens: day and night, good and bad, darkness and light. Through the transformation of the kitchen table—from the center around which babies bob on knees and comfort foods are prepared to one that is messily scattered with ashtrays, beer and cigarette packs—Erdrich invites us to understand the love, loss, longings and violence of these messy characters. I want to focus less on the effects of the drinking itself and more on the way Erdrich writes about the postures of the people as they are doing the drinking. Erdrich captures subtle gestures and actions: Eli is “turning the can around and around in his hand without drinking” (33); King “tipped his beer up” (26); and Lynette “had come into the room with a fresh beer” (31). The most significant form of embodiment comes when Erdrich describes this posture:

“Lipsha sat down, a beer in his hand like everyone, and looked at the floor” (29). While the Indian silhouette with which many Americans might be most well-acquainted is that of the sculpture *End of the Trail* by James Earle Fraser (see Fig. 1), people on the rez are equally familiar with Lipsha’s posture at the kitchen table late at night.



Fig. 1. *End of the Trail* by James Earle Fraser.

This scene in *Love Medicine* alludes to that artwork but rather than a traditional Indian on horseback, Erdrich gives us Lipsha, the ordinary Indian slumped over his can of beer during a night of drinking around the kitchen table. The sculpture, according to Robert L. McGrath in his article “The Endless Trail of the *End of the Trail*,” “gives silent voice to the theatrics of despair.” McGrath goes on to summarize the dominating interpretations of the statue: “For many, it is the archetypal figure of the defeated ‘Other,’ the martial adversary, once ‘mysterious, duplicitous and dark,’ now bent, humbled, and destined for extirpation. For others, the statue evokes, like Wood’s Midwestern rustics [in *American Gothic*], a compelling sense of loss, a nostalgia for a vanished America” (8). The image is not only ubiquitous in mainstream American culture, Native people on the rez have (re)appropriated and styled it for themselves in beadwork, on wall

hangings and other forms of decoration. In the fine arts, performance artist James Luna, in another variation of the drinking Indian as Erdrich writes Lipsha in this scene, straddles a sawhorse with a bottle of whiskey in one hand (McGrath 13). The dominant interpretations of the Indian of *End of the Trail*, as American nostalgia or its former adversary, both cast Indians as people of the past. Lipsha's posture offers a literary snapshot of one Indian who is still here. Refusing romanticism and not casting any of her characters as completely good or completely bad, Erdrich invites her readers to sit next to Lipsha at the kitchen table.

The Hum of Politics: Rez Politics and the Intimate Domestic

The chapter "The Plunge of the Brave" tells Nector's story. Readers mainly know Nector as a grandfather in "The World's Greatest Fisherman" and other chapters in the novel, but here he is a young, single man trying to make it as an actor in Hollywood. His dream is dashed once he finds that the executives hiring him continually cast him to play a dying Indian, falling off a horse in a movie or plunging to his death in a painting. Soon after this Hollywood stint, Nector finds himself back on the reservation, married to Marie and the father of many children: "I liked each of our babies, but sometimes I was juggling them from both arms and losing hold... They were all over in the house, once they started. In the bottoms of cupboards, in the dresser, in trundles. Lift a blanket and a bundle would howl beneath it. I lost track of which were ours and which Marie had taken in" (122). Not long after his marriage to Marie, Nector begins an affair with his childhood sweetheart, Lulu Lamartine, that will thread its way through the rest of the novel, following them into the old folks' home, the Senior Citizens. In this chapter, we see both the way Nector started up his love affair with Lulu (it involves a lot of butter) and the way he makes his first attempt at ending it (which results in his accidentally burning down Lulu's house). This chapter of the novel contains some of *Love Medicine's* more epic moments, but in

this section I focus on the moments in-between those when Erdrich demonstrates the way rez politics form a hum in the background her characters' lives.

Through Nector's storyline, Erdrich demonstrates the way politics form the backdrop of everyday life on the rez. The hum of politics can be heard in the background and between the action of this chapter when Nector narrates his memories: "But the moment I was getting the feel of quietness, leaning up against a tree, parked in the truck, sitting with the cows, or just smoking on a rock, so many details of love and politics would flood me" (132). It's remarkable that Nector thinks of politics just as often as the ever-present human emotion of love and that both haunt him in his solitude. There is a saying I've heard repeated that Indians are born into politics. Where I'm from, the quote is attributed to Grandfather William Commanda, a well-known traditional elder from my community, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg (Whiteduck 83). Comedian Ryan McMahon shared the story of his grandmother telling him something similar when he was young: "Everything you do, Grandson, is going to be political. You're Anishinabe." In *Love Medicine*, Erdrich illustrates the innerworkings of how this operates in the lives of people on the rez. We are introduced to Nector Kashpaw through his ties to politics. In the opening narrative when Nector talks about getting most things in his life "handed to [him] on a plate" (118), he attributes this good fortune (if you can call it that) to his family name: "It came from being a Kashpaw, I used to think. Our family was respected as the last hereditary leaders of this tribe" (118). By glancing at the genealogical chart that Erdrich includes in the front matter of the book, readers get the sense that there are a few families on the reservation and that they are all connected to one another; this is true of many small and mid-sized reservations in the U.S. and Canada, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Your family name means something because it connects you to your kin in the community and people can sometimes trace

their lineage, through family storytelling or archival records, to the first of a handful of individuals to “settle” on their rez. The introduction to family reputation and hereditary leadership—having the Kashpaw family name mean something on this reservation, at least to Nector—begins Erdrich’s portrayal of a distinctly rez politics.

Beth H. Piatote’s concept of the “intimate domestic” from her book *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature* is generative for understanding Erdrich’s representations of rez politics. In her examination of assimilation era Native American writers, Piatote looks “to the familial space of the Indian home, or the intimate domestic” (2) and names it as “the primary site of struggle against the foreign force of U.S. national domestication” (4) following the “bloody annihilation that had dominated much of the nineteenth century” (2). Drawing on examples in Canada, Piatote shows that the reach of state apparatuses extended into intimate domestic sites as “policies were adopted to ban the potlatch, outlaw traditional modes of housing, limit Indian mobility, and require Indian children to attend boarding schools” (81). Putting Piatote’s concept of the intimate domestic in dialogue with my earlier considerations of Michel de Certeau’s strategies and tactics, systems like boarding/residential schools and laws that prohibit ceremony are strategies that aim to structure, limit and contain Indian life. Erdrich reveals to readers the kinds of tactics that are possible within the “intimate domestic” site of the Indian family and Indian home in *Love Medicine*. The way politics operate in the background of Nector’s life, a hum behind the love affairs that are foregrounded in the book, is something familiar to rez people. In this passage, Erdrich ties politics to one key symbol of everyday rez life and the intimate domestic: the washer. Nector tells us:

I never asked for the chairmanship, or for that matter, anything, and yet I was in the thick and boil of policy. I went to Washington about it. I talked to the governor. I had to fight like a weasel, but I was fighting with one paw tied behind my back because of wrangling over buying a washer for Marie. (132)

A close reading of this passage reveals the repetition of the root word “wash” in “Washington” and “washer,” which serves to tie the intimate domestic space of Nector’s family home with the capital-W politics in the capital city. The way Nector describes his involvement in politics in this passage removes all traces of romantic notions of American politics, where good looking people in power suits walk-and-talk about pressing issues and the political maneuvers required to make things happen. But Nector’s description rings true. It combines the reality for many rez people of being thrust into the thicket of state and federal politics with the excessively ordinary experience of rez domesticity making up day-to-day life. It might be unusual to see these opposing spheres, the political and the domestic, co-existing so easily, but it is actually a highly accurate portrayal of the way Native American or First Nations politics plays out.

The “domestic” is significant in Nector’s life as in U.S. federal law. Because of the U.S. Supreme Court’s declaration that the Cherokee people held the status of “domestic dependent nation,” in *Cherokee v. Georgia (1831)*, one of three pivotal cases in Native American legal history that make up the Marshall Trilogy, rez people and their politics are thrust onto, as Nector describes it, the streets of Washington or the governor’s office. However different might be the underlying principles of constitutional government from the perspective of federal Washington or federal Ottawa, the reality of rez politics in both contexts is that the tribal chairman (in the U.S.) or the chief (in Canada) generally presides over a small land-base and a small population of people. The 2010 U.S. Census shows that the largest reservation populations are between 9,000-16,900 after removing the outlier of the Navajo Nation (Norris, Vines and Hoeffel). The ideological position that propels indigenous politics on both sides of the border is that of the nation-to-nation relationship. Both Native American tribes and First Nations in Canada operate under the premise that they are nations whose inherent right it is to negotiate with settler

governments, namely the federal government in the U.S. and the Crown or federal government in Canada. The point I am making here is that, through Nector's story and his ties to politics, Erdrich brings to life the complicated and incongruous position that Native American political leaders find themselves in when they are representing their tribes in talks with the federal government, while the realities of their lives consist more regularly of "wrangling over buying a washer" and other rez concerns. Listening to the background hum of politics in *Love Medicine* provides an understanding for readers of the simultaneously long and short distance between bumpy rez roads and the manicured streets of Washington, D.C.

The interplay between tactics and strategies occurs when Erdrich's characters treat these domestic politics without the weight or gravity elicited off the rez. This might be surprising to readers, especially in light of Indians' unique political status or, as Piatote calls it, "form of impossible subjectivity" as a domestic subject (9), as well as the dominant media image of Indian politics and activism. But it is in that space of surprise where the tactic occurs. When Nector is aged and living with a form of dementia, his granddaughter, Albertine, reflects on stories she wishes she could hear from him: "The politics, for instance. What had gone on? He'd been an astute political dealer, people said, horse-trading with the government for bits and shreds. Somehow he'd gotten a school built, a factory too, and he'd kept the land from losing its special Indian status under that policy called termination" (19). This quote not only acknowledges the political labor and significant gains made by everyday rez "bureaucrats" or tribal government workers, its deliberate imprecision about the land's "special Indian status" and "that policy called termination" dethrones the serious, to borrow again from Susan Sontag's writing. Termination was threat in federal Indian law that advocated "termination of the federal government's trust relationship with Indian tribes and, as a consequence, the elimination of federal benefits and

support services to the terminated tribes” (Pevar 11). This example from Albertine, however, dethrones the seriousness of the policy, not through humor but through a deliberate kind of half-understanding. Her paucity of hard facts reflects the ordinary ways people on the rez process information about the history, policies and politics that are produced around them. This partial form of awareness, in some ways, insulates the people the policies were intended to affect.

In another example of the way rez politics dethrone the serious, Nector, looking back on his life, seems ambivalent about his former position as tribal chairman. He remains unmoved when reflecting on his past political position:

It was 1952, and I had done what was expected—fathered babies, served as chairman of the tribe. That was the extent of it. Don’t let the last fool you, either. Getting into the big-time local politics was all low pay and no thanks. I never even ran for the office. Someone put my name down on the ballots and the night I accepted the job, I became somebody less, almost instantly. (123)

Besides taking the romance out of political positions and calling them like he sees it—“fathered babies, served as chairman of the tribe”—Nector goes as far as to say that he “became somebody less, almost instantly.” We can speculate on the reasons why Nector felt less; perhaps he felt like a pawn or maybe he envied the lifestyle of his brother Eli, the world’s greatest fisherman. Maybe it was just that time got away from him too quickly, as Erdrich writes: “Less and less, until I was sitting on my steps in 1952 thinking I should hang on to whatever I still had.” Love and politics intersect again for Nector, as politics make him less while he “shrank into the blue distance of marriage” (124). Knowing Nector thinks an elected leadership position injured his character, rather than building it or gaining him power, is an unexpected response. In both cases, Albertine’s flippant remarks about “that policy called termination” and Nector’s perception that his leadership position lessened his life, make the ground of the rez an unsteady landing place for

predictable responses to Indian politics and federal policies. These characters use tactics to build meaningful lives for themselves, lives which include sovereignty and self-determination.

Everyday Magic: Heartbreak, Prayer and “The Touch”

This final section examines Erdrich’s representation of prayer and spirituality, both Christianity and Ojibwe, within the fabric of the everyday experiences of her characters. When it comes to Native ceremony and traditions, there are scarce references throughout the novel to the kinds of Native spiritual and cultural traditions one might expect; Erdrich mentions a powwow and a hoop dance at a couple of different points, but they are not places her characters go or things her characters do. She writes a line about Ojibwe pipe ceremony, as one character “returned the pieces of the pipe to their case as they were, for to fit them together, Nector once said, was to connect earth and heaven” (256). The choice to feature the bingo halls more prominently than the powwow grounds reflects Erdrich’s effort to widen readers’ understanding of the variety of ordinary things that come together in rez life.

Erdrich, however, is explicit about biblical and Christian references in the novel. There is a lively debate in Native American literary studies about Erdrich’s relationship to and representation of Catholicism, mainly circling around the question of whether Erdrich gives prominence to Ojibwe traditions, Catholicism or syncretizes the two (Ingraffia 314). My focus in this section, instead, is on what the ordinary depictions of either form of spirituality tell us about rez folks. One of the of chapters that contains a great deal of action—at least as far as this measured novel is concerned—is “Saint Marie,” the second chapter in the novel that shows a young Marie (Lazarre) Kashpaw, living in a convent at the time, in a battle with a nun that leaves her scarred. Once again, though, the character features and plot development I focus on in this chapter are not the “epic” scenes like this fight, but the small moments that happen in between.

Later in life, Marie, having forsaken her former Catholicism, finds her way to prayer in a moment of desperation upon learning her husband intended to leave her for another woman (Lulu). She tells readers: “I never went down on my knees to God or anyone, so maybe washing my floor was an excuse to kneel that night” (160). Erdrich chooses the simple, everyday task of washing floors as an equivalent to prayer for Marie, indicating that *Love Medicine*’s characters find their guidance and their hope not always in a higher power but in the things that make up their everyday lives.

Another subtle biblical reference Erdrich works into the novel relates to June Kashpaw. There are two ways Erdrich parallels her character, June, and Christ. First, June initially comes to be a part of Marie and Nector’s family when she is found in the woods, surviving by sucking sap from trees. Marie remembers June’s arrival: “But then the two drunk ones told me how the girl had survived—by eating pine sap in the woods” (84). This is June’s own nativity story, only instead of three wise men searching for her, it’s “the two drunk ones” who found her. The second parallel is June’s death on Easter, which opens the novel. Additionally, even though the book begins with June’s death, she is omnipresent and the memories she leaves behind organize much of the action throughout the novel. The bible has multiple narrators, as does the story of June’s near hanging through the book, which is told several times through different characters’ perspectives.

When Erdrich chooses to feature Ojibwe spirituality, the characters don’t always convey confident connections to those traditions, with some exceptions like the scene with baby June surviving on pine sap—literally nursing from the land. One of the best examples how Erdrich depicts this sometimes provisional relationship to the land comes when Lipsha Morrissey is devising his plan to conjure a love medicine for his grandparents (recall the failed turkey heart

experiment). When Lipsha faces challenges trying to layout his plan, he tells readers: “I knew the best thing was to go ask a specialist, like Old Lady Pillager, who lives up in a tangle of bush and never shows herself. But the truth is I was afraid of her, like everyone else” (237). Lipsha claims to have a special power of sorts that he calls “the touch”: “I am sometimes blessed with the talent to touch the sick and heal their individual problems without even knowing what they are” (307). The difference between Old Lady Pillager’s (a main character in other Erdrich novels) knowledge of love medicine and Ojibwe traditions and Lipsha’s touch can be explained using the concepts of *mino pimadiziwin* and *ni-mino pimadiziwin* as I discussed them in the Introduction. Both mean living a good life, but the former refers to ceremony, tradition and epistemology, while the latter is a more everyday, conversational representation of the ways people get by and make meaning out of their day-to-day lives. Erdrich shows us that both kinds of characters co-exist on one rez, breaking through stereotypes that pigeonhole all Indians as noble, spiritual and of-the-land. My reading of Lipsha’s touch is that it’s not the kind of Ojibwe spiritual traditions that Old Lady Pillager practices; it is the small things that help ordinary rez folks understand themselves and their place, the rez. This interpretation is, arguably, supported by the following passage, where Lipsha reflects on how the touch helps him make sense of the heartbreaking things he’s seen and heard of in his life on the rez:

I looked around me. How else could I explain what all I had seen in my short life—King smashing his fist in things, Gordie drinking himself down to the Bismarck hospitals, or Aunt June left by a white man to wander off in the snow. How else to explain the times my touch don’t work, and further back, to the old-time Indians who was swept away in the outright germ warfare and dirty-dog killing of the whites. (232-233)

Louis Owens describes the kinds of losses Lipsha lists here as “mundane tragedies,” writing: “the fragmentation of this community, the rootlessness that results in an accumulation of often mundane tragedies among the assorted characters, subtly underscores the enormity of what has

been lost” (204). The touch is the magic—not literal magic, but the unexplainable and extraordinary ways that people persist on the rez, despite the horrible things that might happen around them, and in spite of the sometimes-difficult conditions of rez life.

Reading Lipsha’s touch not as literal magic but as lived experience that creates resilience and persistence in these characters reveals how they make meaning out of their everyday lives. Lulu Lamartine, raising her many sons, uses this magic of persistence to make her household—her intimate domestic space—run smoothly: “She seemed to fill pots with food by pointing at them and take things from the oven that she’d never put in. The table jumped to set itself. The pop foamed into glasses, and the milk sighed to the lip” (115). Albertine, when she goes to the city, gets by not with a traditional Ojibwe medicine bundle with items of spiritual significance, but a rucksack of useful items: “The brown hair swung over her face as she bent, smoothing a red handkerchief into a small square. She was wrapping things back into her bundle” (173). Following his funeral, Nector’s spirit is mentioned, not as a helpful or wise ghost, but as a watchful eye over the ordinary lives of his loved ones: “Behind the wall of death, he’d watched the living eat and cry and get drunk” (252). What Erdrich is telling readers in these scenes is that the magic lies not only in the places where we might expect to find it, like in goose heart ceremonies and in the bush with a Pillager, but in the small in-between moments that bond families and make rez life worth living. As Lipsha says: “Maybe there’s no rhyme or reason to it, like my getting the touch, and then again maybe it’s a kind of magic” (236). *Love Medicine*’s power comes from the way the novel takes a collection of ordinary moments and things—clothes, food, cars, kitchens—and, through a magic all its own, spins them into a narrative that reveals the meaning behind everyday rez life.

Conclusion

Love Medicine is a family saga and a literary epic. Readers watch Nector accidentally burn his lover's house down; follow Lipsha as he learns who his biological mother and father are and as he unwittingly assists the latter's prison escape; walk alongside June toward her death. Despite all the action, the novel still eases along at an unhurried pace, spending quiet moments with the people and their place. This results from Erdrich's careful attention to character and setting. The epic scenes in the book don't necessarily transform it into an action-packed page-turner, and that is because Erdrich revels in the innermost thoughts and feelings of her characters and takes the time to introduce her readers to the rez aesthetic through the sounds and tastes and sights of places like the Kashpaw family home. From the sounds of whooping laughter of Native women making potato salad in "the dim, warm kitchen" to the sights of junky Indian cars to the background hum of politics in rez life, I explore the variety of ways that Erdrich paints a portrait of a rez aesthetic in *Love Medicine*. I argue that Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* provides an original array of depictions of the rez and is key starting point for understanding rez theory in Native American literature.

Love Medicine wrote elements of rez life into the American literary canon in the 1980s; now the book itself features in Native popular culture as icon of the rez, a piece of everyday Native life that adds to contemporary rez aesthetics and *bricolage*. Beth Piatote makes a reference to the novel in her short story "Katydid" from her collection *The Beadworkers* when two characters are discussing their dating life:

'You still with that Norwegian?'
'Swede. Remember? "Never—"'
"Never go with a Swede!" And we laughed at the private joke between me, Ada, and
Love Medicine fans everywhere. (106)

This exchange in Piatote's story refers to the *Love Medicine* character, Zelda Kashpaw, who declares, "Never marry a Swedish is my rule" (15). Elissa Washuta evokes the novel's title in her memoir, *My Body Is a Book of Rules*, as she recounts her experience in Catholic school. Washuta writes: "In that virginal space, in which my flesh had no saintly reason for abstinence, my desperation took the form of a sort of ugly love medicine" (26). Bethany Yellowtail, a Crow and Northern Cheyenne fashion designer, released a line of t-shirts and sweatshirts embroidered with the words "love medicine" that was popular with the young (and bookish) Native American crowd on social media. *Love Medicine*—the novel, not the t-shirt—left an impact both in literal references like these, but it also influenced the way rez life is depicted in fiction, memoir, television and film with its focus on everyday rez life.

In addition to the literal references to the novel and its title, I have also come across scenes in novels and on television that seem reminiscent of *Love Medicine*. For example, in *Mohawk Girls*, the television series at the center of Chapter 3 of this dissertation, there is a character named Butterhead. He earned this nickname because he is known on the rez for "using the butter" in sexual escapades with the many women he dates. Butterhead is a serial cheater and he gets caught by one girlfriend "using the butter" on another woman. This scene is almost too specific and unusual not to have been influenced by the love scene between Nector Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine in *Love Medicine*, where Nector tells readers: "Butter. That's right. Seventeen tons of surplus butter on the hottest day in '52. That is what it takes to get me together with Lulu" (124). Both scenes from *Mohawk Girls* and *Love Medicine* are more humorous than they are erotic. Erdrich writes of this encounter:

She reaches into the backseat and grabs a block. It is wrapped in waxed paper, squashed and soft, but still fresh. She smears some on my face. I'm so surprised that I just sit there for a moment, feeling stupid. Then I wipe the butter off my cheek. I take the block from her and I

put it on the dash. When we grab each other and kiss, there is butter on our hands. It wears off as we touch, then undo, each other's clothes. (128)

In *The Only Good Indians*, a horror novel by Blackfeet author Stephen Graham Jones, the monster is an elk head on the body of a woman. The Elk Head Woman is tracking down, one-by-one, four friends who killed her on a piece of elders' land where they weren't supposed to hunt. Jones' Elk Head Woman has echoes of *Love Medicine*'s "Crown of Thorns," a chapter that stands out in the novel for its eerie, rez gothic tone (more on that in Chapter 3). In this chapter, Gordie Kashpaw is drinking and driving when he hits a deer. He puts the deer in the back of his truck, but it then resurrects—as his deceased wife, June Kashpaw. In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, written on Terese Marie Maillhot's *Heart Berries*, I examine how she depicts her memoir's protagonist as a "ruined Native woman" who is unapologetic about her life, not unlike Lulu Lamartine. At its heart, *Love Medicine* is a rez story and, whether in literal references or thematic nods, it lives on in the evolving storytelling of contemporary Native writers and creators. *Love Medicine*, which focuses as much on the details that compose the kitchens on the rez as on the action driving the plot, paints a vivid and intricate portrait of rez life.

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Chapter 2
A Ruined Native Woman:
Redeeming the Rez in Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries*

In one of the chapters of her literary memoir *Heart Berries* (2018), Terese Marie Mailhot moves between memories: she recalls her childhood, her move from Canada to the U.S. as an adult and her graduation from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. Between recounting these major life events, one minor memory is triggered by a sound: “When I hear empty bottles, I remember. Empties are a cliché—the sound of them is so familiar. The collective sound of glass against glass, muffled by brown paper bags and collapsing tin. Empties are my father” (117). Mailhot’s description of the sound of empty beer bottles is part of the soundtrack and background noise of certain parts of everyday rez life. Writing the distinct sound of “empties,” for many readers, instantly evokes stereotypes of the drunken Indian. In some ways, the sound of these empties affirms rather than challenges or subverts the negative portrayal of the rez, as David Treuer names it in *Rez Life*, as “harsh, violent, drug-infested, criminal, poor, and short” (5). If she were following the politics of respectability, Mailhot might leave moments like these on the cutting room floor. Instead, she does the opposite, exposing the unsavory sights and sounds of rez life. My analysis of *Heart Berries* traces these unsavory moments, among other signifiers of rez life, and asks why Mailhot chooses to include them and how they are operating in her text.

Terese Marie Mailhot, born on June 15, 1983, is a member of Seabird Island First Nation, located in British Columbia. She primarily lived with her mother and siblings on the rez, though

in her memoir she recounts calling child protective services and being placed in foster homes. She married young, shortly after her experience in foster care, and had two sons with her first husband. In *Heart Berries*, Mailhot writes about the painful experience of losing custody of her oldest son as she is giving birth to her second child. As a young adult, she recalls being labelled “a welfare mom, an at-risk youth,” descriptors that would eventually be replaced by postdoctoral fellow and Native woman writer (Castaneda). She got her GED, then went on to receive her B.A. from New Mexico State University and her M.F.A. from the Institute of American Indian Arts, where she would one day teach. She fell in love with a writing instructor, Casey Gray, to whom she is now married and to whom much of *Heart Berries* is addressed. Their union produced Mailhot’s third and youngest son. Her memoir *Heart Berries* was a New York Times bestseller, and she has also published her writing in venues such as *The Rumpus*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Yellow Medicine Review* and *Indian Country Today*. Mailhot is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Purdue University.

Heart Berries is a coming-of-age life story that takes place primarily off the rez. Most chapters are written in either epistolary style or as lyric essays, the latter of which is defined by Deborah Tall and John D’Agata as a form that “partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes in the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form” (“Lyric Essay”). *Heart Berries*’ early chapters find the protagonist losing her mother and her eldest son, leaving the reservation and meeting Casey. The story then follows her through life, loss and new beginnings. Mailhot’s writing moves swiftly between key themes and big moments, such as her relationship to her mother, her sons and her move off the reservation:

We ruined each other, and then my mother died. I had to leave the reservation. I had to get my GED. I left my home because welfare made me choose between necessities. I used a check and some cash I saved for a ticket away—and knew I would arrive with a deficit. That’s when I started to illustrate my story and exactly when it became a means of survival. The ugly truth is that I lost my son Isadore in court. The Hague Convention. The ugly truth of *that* truth is that I gave birth to my second son as I was losing my first. My court date and my delivery aligned. In the hospital, they told me that my first son would go with his father. (6)

Terese is in an on-and-off relationship with Casey, while getting her education and finding her voice as a writer. The experience that seems to be the marketing backbone of the book is recounted in an early chapter when Terese checks herself into a mental hospital for two weeks following a breakdown. The penultimate chapter finds Terese graduating and beginning her writing career. The memoir ends with a letter to her mother, Wahzinak, to whom the book is dedicated. Mailhot’s nonlinear narrative includes parts of her upbringing on Seabird Island Indian Reservation in British Columbia, but much of the story follows her protagonist through adulthood, including her move to the U.S. It is crafted as a raw account of a woman who confronts shame, posttraumatic stress disorder and bipolar II disorder, life’s unsavory moments and, in her own words, the “futile endeavor of being Indian” (133-134).

In my dissertation’s Introduction, I suggested that “being all rezzed out” is an action-oriented process, or a way of being, that could be performed outside of the boundaries of the reservation through aesthetics and sensibilities. To test that position, I turn to *Heart Berries* in search of signifiers of rez life that appear both in Mailhot’s childhood memories on the rez and as she travels outside of it. What I find are unsavory signs of rez life: empty beer bottles, a black eye, the word “squaw.” Given the presence these unsavory rez signifiers in the text, the questions that drive this chapter are: What is the effect of a Native woman’s memoir that purposefully exemplifies the things Native people are told are unsavory about rez life? What happens when

Native life writing confirms, rather than resists or defies, stereotypes? How does one narrate one's own life when stereotypes are hidden around every corner?

In what follows, I analyze rez signifiers in *Heart Berries* and show that Mailhot's decision to include them troubles the unsavory, not by redeeming the sound of empties as somehow "good" but by dwelling in the ambiguities of rez life and revealing the complicated nature of these signs. I argue that Mailhot's tactic of purposefully revealing, rather than concealing, unsavory symbols and memories makes space in literature for rez folks and rez signs be understood as messy, yet still deserving of attention and humanity. Mailhot's characters and rez signifiers demonstrate how stereotypes and assumptions cloud understandings of the rez; what her writing accomplishes is the prevention of unilateral definitions of rez life. *Heart Berries* rests in ambiguity and prevents "terminal creeds" from taking shape. Terminal creeds are a theoretical term created by Gerald Vizenor that literary critic Louis Owens describes as "beliefs which seek to fix, to impose static definitions upon the world. Such attempts are destructive, suicidal, even when the definitions appear to arise out of revered tradition" (144). Mailhot refuses to sanitize her memoir of Native life and that decision creates outcomes worthy of study.

A Home for Heart Berries

One of the foremost autobiography studies scholars, Paul John Eakin, contextualizes autobiography, as a literary genre, within the greater human process of self-narration that is learned in childhood and continues until death. Eakin claims that narrating your life story is what creates identity and that it is a process that all humans are constantly engaged in. In fact, we are so engaged in the process through stream of consciousness thoughts that our self-narration essentially becomes invisible (until it malfunctions through, for example, Alzheimer's disease). Translating this kind of self-narration from thoughts and memories to the page is one feature of

modernity (Abrams 36). Three waves have been identified in autobiography criticism. In the second edition of their seminal text *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe the key features of each of the waves. The first wave includes the majority of autobiography before 1970 and focuses on the life stories of “Great Men.” It privileges telling stories of public life, elite status and that which is generally considered “high culture.” The second wave, or the “counter canon,” emerges in the 1970s and 1980s and offers a radical challenge to the notion of a representative or knowable self. It takes its cues from postmodern and poststructural theory and questions previously accepted categories, such as the self and truth. First wave autobiography thought of itself as producing history and as a site of truth, whereas second wave autobiography claims to make art and a representation of one’s life through creative self-engagement (195-203). Smith and Watson describe the third wave using themes and concepts; the focus in autobiography criticism from the 1990s to the present has been on performativity, positionality and relationality. The authors draw on the concept *performativity*, as Judith Butler theorizes it, and note that it was the dominant trend in autobiography studies of the 1990s to think of lives as performed rather than simply lived. *Positionality* recognizes the identities and subject positions that women, in particular, negotiate and historicizes autobiographical subjects. In their consideration of *relationality*, Smith and Watson credit scholars of Native American autobiography, such as Arnold Krupat and Hertha D. Sweet Wong, for demonstrating the way individual autobiography is connected to communal social organization and kinship networks. Relationality brought into focus the way a narrator’s story is refracted through their community and that what was previously thought of as an autonomous subject is, in fact, always in process and involved with other relations (213-218). Krupat called this the synecdochic self, “[w]here any narration of personal history is more nearly

marked by the individual's sense of himself in relation to collective social units or groupings" ("Ethnocriticism" 212). Despite the potential inclination to label *Heart Berries* a third wave autobiography because of its consideration of Native American autobiography, Mailhot's work is more accurately second wave as text that creatively engages notions of the self.

Krupat's *Native American Autobiography* (1994) provides a history and taxonomy of Native American autobiography and names common themes and approaches in the composition of Native life stories. The seven categories he identified are: traditional lives; the Christian Indians; the Resisting Indians; the closed frontier; the Anthropologists' Indians; Native American Renaissance; and traditional lives today. Wong's *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (1992) makes an argument for expanding the timeline we normally draw in Native American autobiography to add non-literary and pre-colonial forms of life narrative, such as pictographs, tipi drawings and winter counts. Wong writes: "what we can at least call autobiographical activity emerges on its own terms from pre-contact Native Americans. By the nineteenth century, indigenous oral and pictographic forms of personal narrative intersect with Western autobiographical forms, continuing a long tradition of adaptation and development" (24). Given the influx of contemporary Native life writing, it may be time to add a new group or theme to the list.

There is a gap in scholarship on Native American autobiography and life writing following Native American Renaissance autobiographies, such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* and Gerald Vizenor's *Interior Landscapes*. In a special issue of the journal *Biography* featuring Native American and Indigenous scholars, editors Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice articulated the importance of telling the stories of individual Native people in our current historical moment when Indigenous lives are being demonstrably undervalued as,

for example, Native women and girls are murdered or disappear at an alarmingly high rate (244). However, this is not a call for life writing to educate on issues like these. In an article on Gerald Vizenor's autobiography, Michael Snyder notes that "Native authors' autobiographies are unreasonably and problematically expected to inform readers about their essential connection to traditional tribal folkways and knowledge" (58). I think of contemporary Native writers of memoir, like Terese Marie Mailhot, as a cohort doing something new and taking this expectation to task. Along with *Heart Berries*, Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians* (2013) and Elissa Washuta's *My Body Is a Book of Rules* (2014) are examples of life writing published in the past decade by Native women who resist to perform to ideas of who or what Indians should be. Recent texts such as Shonda Buchanan's *Black Indian* (2019), T. Marie Bertineau's *The Mason House* (2020) and Danielle Geller's *Dog Flowers* (2021) are just a snapshot of the proliferation of Native memoir in recent years that might direct scholars toward new themes. This chapter adds to the study of those horizons.

Autobiography theory and methodology offer guidance on how to differentiate between representations of the self in life writing. Mailhot, the author, is not the same as Terese, the memoir's protagonist, and I use these different names to distinguish the two. In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson distinguish four kinds of autobiographical "I"s that exist in life writing criticism: the "real" or historical "I," the narrating "I," the narrated "I" and the ideological "I." The "real" or historical "I" is the flesh-and-blood human who wrote the text and the study of life writing deals relatively little with this version. Instead, it is the narrating "I" who is most readily available to readers. This is the writer of the memoir, who is selectively recalling elements of their life in order to form a life narrative or life story. The narrating "I" exercises the control to show or not show readers parts of their lives. The narrated "I," also crucial to the study

of life writing, is the protagonist of the text, the textual version of the self that the narrating “I” chooses to put forth. And finally, the ideological “I” refers to the author’s understanding of the self at the time of writing. It is accessible by the literary critic through moments of metanarrative in a text when the author slips into a voice that reveals their own thought processes regarding the formation of the life narrative (71-78). For example, in a passage I analyze below, Mailhot refers to her own thinking about how to represent her father in the text when she writes: “I resist the urge to bleed out on a page, to impart the story of my drunken father” (82). In this chapter, I am dealing primarily with the latter three forms of the autobiographical “I.” In the study of *Heart Berries* that follows, I distinguish between these versions of autobiographical “I” by using the author’s last name (Mailhot) when referring to the writer—the narrating I and the ideological I—and her first name (Terese) when referring to the narrated I, the protagonist or “main character” of the memoir whose thoughts and actions are recorded in *Heart Berries*.

While Mailhot’s memoir technically falls within the Native American Renaissance period, its approach to some of the core Renaissance themes differs. Two key themes across Native American Renaissance novels are that: a) they feature a Native protagonist who is “broken” and whose healing comes through a reunion with their homeland and traditions (Selinger 38-68; Roemer 77-98); and b) the narrative arc is organized around “homing in,” or the homing plot, a term coined by William Bevis in a 1987 publication that describes protagonists who are initially alienated from their homeland then eventually return to find transpersonal resolution, that is, a resolution for the main character that is connected to the land and their tribe or family (585). In *Heart Berries*, Mailhot writes her protagonist as a ruined woman, echoing certain features of the “broken” protagonists of the Native American Renaissance. However, Mailhot’s approach to healing, the overarching theme of the Native American Renaissance,

differs in that it is left ambiguous for the memoir's protagonist. She doesn't "home in" by returning to her rez or performing ceremony. Instead of going back to the rez, she makes her home anew in the U.S. with her husband and children. There is no tradition or ceremony at the end of the book; if there is a resolution, it is accessed her relationship to her mother, to whom her final chapter is addressed.

Before turning to my analysis, I want to mark a phenomenon I noticed in some Native American autobiography that I call "humility penance" and point out how *Heart Berries* refuses to pay it. Because humility is considered a Native value—for the Anishinabe, for example, it is one of the seven grandfather/grandmother teachings—some Native writers are reticent to select the form of writing that highlights individual lives and accomplishments. Wilma Mankiller, the renowned, late leader of the Cherokee Nation, writes that "no individual's life stands apart and alone from the rest. My own story has meaning only as long as it is part of the overall story of my people" (qtd. in Beard 115). She expresses her synecdochic self as it relates to her Cherokee people. In *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, Brain Swann and Arnold Krupat use strong language to describe the negative attitudes they encountered when soliciting original autobiographical contributions from Native American writers for their collection, ranging from "repugnant" and "hostile" to "ambivalent." Swann and Krupat also note the gendered dimension of the aversion to Native American life writing and remark that "writing autobiographically seemed more difficult for the Native American *women* than for the Native American *men*" (xii, emphasis in original). Nearly twenty years later, Theda Perdue, in her edited collection of biographical essays of Native women, *Sifters* (2005), writes that "[b]iography and autobiography are alien genres, and an emphasis on individual lives runs the risk of distorting Native values" (5). This aversion to life writing that is cited by multiple scholars of Native

American autobiography qualifies as a strategy, by Michel de Certeau's definition, as a practice that seeks to organize the behavior of others. Citing the scholarship above, the strategy claims that autobiography is a "repugnant," "alien genre," one that "Native American *women*," least of all, should engage. And Mailhot responds with a tactic of her own: writing her memoir.

In my reading of Native American autobiography and memoir, I traced the origins of humility penance to the ultra-popular *Black Elk Speaks*. Written with non-Native interlocutor John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* opens with the line: "My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow?" (1). Writers have been replicating this original humility penance found in *Black Elk Speaks* ever since. Ironically, as Raymond J. DeMallie shows, lines like these are Neihardt's literary maneuvers rather than Black Elk's original thought; according to DeMallie, the first six paragraphs of *Black Elk Speaks* "are Neihardt's, expressing in his own words his sense of Black Elk's mood and motivation for telling his life story" (2n4). Another example of how this kind of humility penance is replicated in contemporary Native American memoir is found in Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan's memoir, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*. When Hogan writes, on the first page that "Self-telling is rare for a Native woman" (14), she performs this common downplaying of her individual life story—before going on to tell it anyway.

In the first line of *Heart Berries*, however, Mailhot refuses pay humility penance. Instead, she writes: "My story was maltreated. The words were too wrong and ugly to speak. I tried to tell someone my story, but he thought it was a hustle" (3). While other Native writers use the first pages of their autobiographies and memoirs to indicate their understanding of humility as a Native value that discourages individualistic sharing, Mailhot makes no such apologies. Instead,

she says that her story was maltreated, which signals that the book is a corrective measure. She also demonstrates persistence, writing a memoir after being rejected by someone who didn't want to listen. While other Native writers appear almost apologetic for writing about themselves and their own humble lives, Mailhot's opening line is a fierce gesture that puts readers on notice that she is about to reclaim her story. Between the covers of *Heart Berries* is Terese's story, not something representative of Indians or restorative for her nation.

It is not uncommon for Native writers of autobiography and memoir to begin their texts by diminishing or downplaying the importance of their individual life story in the grander scheme of their community, tribe or nation—then going on to tell it anyway. When asked about her connection to these various literary lineages, including Native American autobiography and memoir, Mailhot had this to say: "I need to make an assertion that I am nobody's relic. I won't be an Indian relic for any readership. So, I decided this book would stand apart from some of the identified themes within our genre" (126). Mailhot describes her motivation in *Heart Berries* as an intervention, like a tactic disturbing a strategy. In addition to writing the book, Mailhot's tactic is to reject the romanticism with which Native literature and Native people are treated. This signals to readers that they should adjust their expectations when they pick up *Heart Berries*. Not only will we not find certain kinds of romantic language that Mailhot claims has been misused or misread, but we also won't find her drawing on the positive connotations of romanticism. In fact, as we will see, these moments when Mailhot rejects romanticism in favor of the unsavory are some of the most surprising and intriguing parts of her text.

Redeeming Rez Signifiers in *Heart Berries*

Signs of rezziness form a backdrop in *Heart Berries*, rather than appearing front-and-center. *Heart Berries* is a memoir about the experience of love and motherhood, trauma and

mental illness while Indian, which is the term Mailhot uses when referring to her identity. Being Indian appears almost happenstance in Mailhot's memoir, rather than a central area of concern. This, on its own, reconstructs a rez sensibility that presents itself in day-to-day life, where rez folks simply go about their lives *as* Indians, rather than constantly talking and thinking about their Indian-ness. Instead, Mailhot foregrounds her relationships to her partner, her mother, her children and herself. As a result, the text contains relatively few references to themes readers might come to expect from Native American literature, such as a relationship to the land, instead drawing on the more unexpected image of a Native woman who is, at various moments, succeeding in her writing program and checking herself into a hospital.

The instances in *Heart Berries* when Mailhot indulges in the unsavory are some of most compelling and what appears as unsavory are often signifiers of rez life. Mailhot's text responds to romanticized notions of the Indian: assumptions that Indians are connected to the land, nature and environment or that all Indians are spiritual, ceremonial and traditional. Mailhot uses the language and terminology of "relics" to make sense of the way the figure of "the Indian"—stereotypical imagery like the noble savage—still plagues her as a modern writer and how she actively resists its pull. The danger of the Indian relic is its potential to empty Native literature and cultural production of signs of modernity or undesirable qualities with the goal of producing a unified and essentialized version of "an Indian thing." Her decision to lay bare unsavory moments of her life is a tactic that intervenes in the grand narrative of Indians as relics. Scott Richard Lyons describes the stronghold these romantic notions have in his chapter "Migrations to Modernity: The Many Voices of George Copway's *Running Sketches of Men and Places, in England, France, Germany, Belgium, and Scotland*," using the phrase "the great and terrifying power of the *Indian*" (170). The power is great and terrifying because it can grip peoples' minds

and imaginations so relentlessly that even when they are faced with modern Native people, they still defer to “the Indian” of their imagination. Mailhot, in the afterword of *Heart Berries*, reflects on this process when she critiques “the genre-marketing of Native memoir into this thing where readers come away believing Native Americans are connected to the earth, and read into an artist’s spirituality to make generalizations about our natures as Indigenous people. The romantic language they quoted, or poetic language they liked—it seemed misused to form bad opinions about good work” (126).

Mailhot’s protagonist is a foil for the romanticized Indian. Terese appears as an unwell, even hospitalized, Indian in the chapter “Indian Sick,” a cornerstone chapter of the book that she began to write when she checked herself in to a psychiatric hospital for two weeks. Throughout the text, readers encounter unexpected stories from Terese’s life and they are things one might find on the rez: on-again, off-again relationship drama; losing custody of her first child and her own placement in the child welfare system; traditional ceremonies (but with unexpected results). Philip J. Deloria writes in *Indians in Unexpected Places* that “[e]xpectations and anomalies are mutually constitutive—they make each other” (5), and *Heart Berries* trades in the anomalous as well to keep her characters in motion. The focus on Native people acting in unexpected or misunderstood ways generally pivots on the dichotomy between the primitive and the modern; to borrow a phrase Jean M. O’Brien coined in *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England*, writers have long combated the notion that “Indians can never be modern” (xi). The romanticized Indian is one of the quintessentially anti-modern figures and Mailhot’s protagonist “ruins” the ideal of a perfect Native woman. In some instances, Terese becomes ruined when she acts in ways that defy community or cultural norms. Her use of the term “squaw,” which I later analyze, is another example of crafted ambivalence used purposely

to show that the author neither disparages the word nor attempts to subvert it, as readers might expect. Instead, Mailhot finds a way to redeem “squaw,” while maintaining the essence of the term. While Mailhot’s ruined woman protagonist and unsavory rez signifiers may not be fully redemptive, her literary techniques reveal the messy and ambiguous tapestry of Native life.

A Postindian Black Eye

One of the greatest forms of redemption for rez signifiers in *Heart Berries* is Mailhot’s use of the black eye. In the descriptively titled chapter, “Your Black Eye and My Birth,” Mailhot narrates Terese driving to Santa Fe, New Mexico with Casey where she is set to start her MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA). At this point, she is pregnant with their child. During the car ride, when Terese is using Casey’s cell phone, she discovers text messages between Casey and an ex-girlfriend that took place when Terese was hospitalized. Terese punches him in the face while he is driving and gives him a black eye. Addressing Casey, she writes of her arrival at IAIA:

It was an Indian renaissance. Somehow it was more Indian with you there behind me, with a black eye. Somehow it was more Indian because I was pregnant. There was a medicine wheel in the academic building, so large and proud to be Indian that I knew I was home. There were Indian writers, and we smiled at each other, as if this was a sovereign land and we belonged. (76)

In this passage, the things Mailhot (the author) narrates that make Terese (the protagonist) feel “more Indian” are unsavory: arriving with a boyfriend who has a black eye, perhaps being an out-of-wedlock pregnant woman. Her insistence that these are markers of her Indian-ness might surprise or confuse some readers, and in that space of surprise and confusion there is room to redefine what features make an Indian. But not everyone is shocked or confused. There is a contingent of Native readers who know exactly what Mailhot means when she writes that she felt “more Indian” because she was pregnant and because her boyfriend had a black eye. These are

markers of rez life. Mailhot rejects respectability politics and, instead, chooses to be rez and finds comfort in those unsavory signifiers. She uses “more” twice in the passage, along with other words that have positive connotations like “large,” “proud,” “home,” “smiled” and “belonged.” In her subtle use of language, Mailhot redeems unsavory rez signifiers by communicating her own positive feelings towards them.

Mailhot’s writing of this scene, I argue, qualifies her as a *postindian warrior*, a term created by Gerald Vizenor that describes Native literature, performances and acts emphasizing Native presence and a tribal consciousness where there is “wonder, chance, coincidence” (14). *Postindian warriors*, or the *postindian* for short, follow the scene of dispossession and Indian simulations, such as the romanticized Indian or a stereotype like the activist Indian, that came before them. The *postindian* considers the history of the Indian of the popular imagination, then plots their next move accordingly. The *postindian* can be good, bad or both. Taken on their own, the out-of-wedlock pregnancy and black eye might be unsavory, but the signs come in a passage filled with affection and vulnerability, as we see in the group of Native writers who smile timidly at each other. The temptation to read this passage as an act of subversion is there: by taking the things that are unsavory (black eye) and depicting them alongside something positive (Native writers), those unsavory images might be restored. In other words, it might appear, upon first read, as if Mailhot is covering up or diluting the unsavory by combining it with other positive imagery but, I contend, her work is better understood through Vizenor’s concept of the *postindian*.

The *postindian* emerged as Vizenor sought “an alternative to both the negative stereotypes [of Indians] and their idealized replacements” (Sugars 82). Mailhot is unconcerned with negative stereotypes and actively flouts “their idealized replacements.” Although the

passage begins by proudly declaring the group of young writers an Indian renaissance, it loses its surety when Mailhot brings into view an earnest medicine wheel and the writers smiling timidly at one another. The admission that the writers, the program and the building itself are performing a version of sovereignty comes through when Mailhot writes, “we smiled at each other, as if this was a sovereign land and we belonged.” Sovereignty is an entrenched concept in Native American studies. Theories of Native American literary sovereignty, also known as nationalism or the nationalist school, focus on the ownership and control of a nation’s or tribe’s own literatures and criticism of those literatures. Rather than centering or asserting sovereignty in the text, Mailhot prefers to have her writing suspended in the grey area—“waver[ing] over the aesthetic ruins of *indian simulations*” (15)—allowing for moments of vulnerability like these. Rather than declaring forthright sovereignty for herself and the other writers in her cohort, Mailhot highlights the distance between the institution where they gather and sovereign land. When she writes “we smiled at each other, *as if* this was a sovereign land and we belonged” (emphasis added), the “as if” is doing a lot of heavy lifting. The “as if” makes visible the theater of Native sovereignty, as Vizenor would describe it. Through the image of budding Native writers and the knowledge that the building was set up in the hopes that the presence of a medicine wheel would provide a sense of belonging, Mailhot reveals the precarious ties that bind symbolic acts of sovereignty. Mailhot is not only showing readers the flashy four colors on the front of the medicine wheel, she is also allowing them to see the small nails that hold it to the wall.

Ultimately, confronting the simulations becomes an act of love because it makes way for what is real. This literary maneuver should not be construed as Mailhot exposing the symbolic efforts or being critical of the other writers in her program. From the perspective of the

postindian, Mailhot is revealing representations and simulations so that the real Native writers, and their multiplicity of ways of being and their ordinary insecurities, can be seen without living in the shadow of the romanticized Indian. Her writing evokes something akin to Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe's Seven Gen building, the small, plain cultural center couched a bit further down the road on the rez from the magnificent Ziibiwing Center. Mailhot's inclusion of these rez signifiers in her writing helps readers understand how the rez travels with her to new places and how she makes sense of her *postindian* experience.

The Ruined Native Woman

Mailhot constructs *Heart Berries*' ruined Native woman protagonist in a way that redeems ordinary Indians and creates space for various characters in Native American autobiography and memoir. Susannah B. Mintz's concept of unruly bodies from *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities* provides a framework for understanding how Mailhot conceives of her ruined Native protagonist and the effect she can have. Mintz argues that the writers in her collection "display corporeal differences to demonstrate the damaging effects not of disease or impairment but, rather, of the cultural mythologies that interpret those conditions in reductive or disparaging ways" (1). In *Heart Berries*, Mailhot works toward similar ends. I contrast Terese, Mailhot's ruined protagonist, against the recent genesis of "bad Indians" in Native American literature and cultural production. Deborah Miranda's memoir *Bad Indians* and the "Bad Indians" video poem by Ryan Red Corn of the comedy troupe the 1491s are two prime examples of the emerging trope of "bad Indians" who are bad simply because they refuse to vanish and do not conform to expectations about them. While it is tempting to categorize Mailhot's *Heart Berries* as a "bad Indians" piece—after all, being ruined must be "bad"—I consider her work to be related but in a separate category, more accurately described as an

“ambivalent Indian” than a bad one. Cultural productions that explore the theme of “bad Indians” have an active defiance at their core. However, with Mailhot and “the ruined,” unsavory aspects of Native life are revealed and displayed, but they do not necessarily defy or resist. Like the writers with disabilities in Mintz’s collection, Mailhot’ draws attention to the cultural mythologies that deem aspects of rez life unsavory. The unsavory moments she highlights can confirm stereotypes about Indians, but they also expose the processes and systems that interpret certain things as “reductive or disparaging,” to quote Mintz. Mailhot’s ruined Native woman protagonist is not a “bad Indian,” she is simply an Indian in all her complexity, demanding to be seen, perceived and, maybe, redeemed.

Another passage that draws readers’ attention to the cultural mythologies around Indians and alcohol, like the empties, comes toward the end of the book when Mailhot narrates Terese, having reached some pinnacle in her writing career, at a party with other authors. Mailhot writes: “Today, in front of a slew of white authors, during a fellowship, with a drink in my hand, I said that I was untouchable. There was a gasp, and maybe it was a hundred years of work for my name to arrive here, where I can name my pain so well that people are afraid of the consequences and power” (119). In this scene, the claim of being “untouchable” is a little outrageous. But again, it is important to consider what kind of cultural mythologies Mailhot might be highlighting in a scene like this. Mailhot drops her protagonist, Terese, in the middle of a literary event in the company of white authors, making a comment that is boastful. Mailhot puts Terese in a vulnerable position, once again, with alcohol, an unsavory signifier of rez life. But once again, Mailhot makes a subtle maneuver. When she writes “maybe it was a hundred years of work for my name to arrive here,” Mailhot conveys recognition of the Native authors who spent a hundred years writing so that she could walk into that party. So, perhaps, what motivates the

comment that she is “untouchable” is not false pride but the knowledge that her writing exists within this powerful lineage.

This scene also exemplifies the tone of *Heart Berries*, where Terese (the protagonist) articulates confidence and a fierce defiance of, as one example, the white literary space, while Mailhot (the author) expresses a subtler opposition to the expectations put upon Native writers, particularly writers of memoir. There are times when her writing indicates a clear resistance to notions of the romanticized Indian, yet more often than not she writes scenes that demonstrate a nuanced circumvention of expectations. Mailhot writes in the afterword: “It was my intention to write with a polemic voice, and have a First Nations woman character be overly sexual, ruined, and ruining people’s lives, respectively. It was an audacious feeling to write a Native woman as gratuitous, even if it was ruining her—it empowered me” (127). What Mailhot is resisting is the effort to produce texts that further promote images of the romanticized Indian: “The reckoning, or futile endeavor of being Indian, there’s profundity there, but ultimately it’s false and contrived—put upon us because they want us to stay relics, and romance is beautiful, relics are beautiful—I feel pulled in and I resist” (133-134). This explains Mailhot’s decision to put the effort she does into constructing Terese as a ruined Native woman. She is empowered by the rejection of expectations, whether on the part of audiences, critics, publishers or society-at-large. When she acknowledges that “romance is beautiful, relics are beautiful,” she recognizes the strong pull toward reinscribing those themes in the literary canon. But by creating this ruined Native woman character, instead, she pulls the needle in another direction, making space for the ambiguities that exist in rez life. This helps to explain the reasons why she pulls in unsavory aspects of rez life: they support her ruined Native woman protagonist as she states her claims that Terese can be an unsavory character and still be worthy of representation in literature.

There are different ways of being a ruined woman. She can do something unsavory; make overly confident declarations; present herself as grotesque; have an unruly body or mind; misbehave; shirk the politics of respectability; if she is a Native woman, she can drink in non-Native company. During my graduate program, I got the opportunity to attend events and dinners with Native American and Indigenous studies scholars when they came to campus for lectures. At one dinner with a well-known Native academic, she and I were the only Native people in non-Native company, and there was an awkward moment when she ordered a cocktail, and one of the hosts informed her that alcohol was not a reimbursable university expense. “I’ll pick up the tab for anyone who wants a drink,” she offered. Orders were taken around the table: soda, coffee, “water is fine.” I was the last to order. Although she seemed completely confident and content, I couldn’t let her be the only one to have a drink—not only because it could be socially awkward, but because it would make her *the* Native woman drinking. I quickly glanced at the menu and ordered a glass of chardonnay. A line from *Heart Berries* rang in my ears that night as I sipped the wine: “Sometimes I hide my empties because I don’t want to be a drunk Indian. I do get drunk, and I am Indian, but not both” (117). Although it sometimes seems there is still a long distance to travel to interrupt the most pervasive of stereotypes and representations of Indians, I can’t help but hope that books like *Heart Berries*, which is widely read as a New York Times Bestseller and selection for actress Emma Watson’s book club, challenge and expand understandings of Native people.

Ceremonies of Ambivalence

The title of her memoir comes from a story Mailhot shares early in the book about O’dimin, Heart Berry Boy. By her telling, it is a story of “how the first medicine man came to be” and how strawberries came to the people. Mailhot describes the challenges Heart Berry Boy

faces: “The people in his village were sick and dying because the Indian world was shifting. The boy lost his mother. O’dimin became a sorrowful kid who found solace in the dream world. He fell asleep and spun a restlessness that comes when people are waiting to die” (13). The spirits of elders visit Heart Berry Boy in his dreams and direct him to “introduce himself by name and lineage to a bear and follow her until she gave him a gift.” He does this and the bear shares the gift of planting strawberries. There are parallels between the way *Heart Berries* describes Terese’s mental illness and what Heart Berry Boy faces in this story. His losing his mother, his sleep and “waiting to die” seem reminiscent of the mental illness that Terese faces and that leads her to check herself into the hospital. Mailhot presents the story early in her memoir but does not engage with it directly. Rather, it hovers over the rest of the book, leaving readers uncertain about whether Terese will, like Heart Berry Boy, wake from her sleep and find the medicine that helps her and her people.

Mailhot writes about a young Terese’s unexpected response to receiving her Indian name in ceremony. The account of her naming ceremony proves that there are a variety of responses young people can have in moments like these. In this instance, Mailhot does not draw on an unsavory signifier of rez life; rather, it is her response that might be deemed unsavory or unexpected in a ceremonial context. The title of the chapter, “Little Mountain Woman,” refers to Terese’s Indian name. Readers might expect this account to be treated with reverence or to reveal spiritual insights, but Mailhot doesn’t take that direction. As in the other chapters, Mailhot’s nonlinear writing style makes it impossible to say that “Little Mountain Woman” is about just one thing. This is one of Mailhot’s epistolary chapters, written to her partner, Casey. Throughout it, she continually refers to herself as a squaw, which I will return to in the next section, and crosscuts between memories of the dissolution of her first marriage and the loss of custody of her

first child, and her current marriage and the relationship with her two youngest sons. This chapter is about Terese's feelings of inadequacy and being misunderstood by Casey. Although the title of the chapter suggests that the naming ceremony might be its central topic, it is not until the end—and even then, it is only one paragraph—that Mailhot writes about receiving her Indian name:

When I was eleven, I stared in the mirror to see if I had breasts yet. Fred Cardinal, an elder, was in the next room. He called me in and said, "Your name is Little Mountain Woman: Asiniy Wache Iskwewis." I felt ashamed and undeserving of the name. He wanted me to know that I was good and holy, but I didn't think that my body was a universe. I didn't think I would unravel so well either. I drew power from the mountains and chose a home in the desert. (98)

With this passage, we can count Mailhot among the Native writers who make the process of naming central to their literature. As Kenneth M. Roemer writes in his journal article about naming in Louise Erdrich's work:

Many contemporary Native American authors address the positive and negative powers of naming. One of N. Scott Momaday's (Kiowa, Cherokee) best-known works is entitled *The Names* (1976). Gerald Vizenor (Ojibwe), Thomas King (Cherokee), and Sherman Alexie (Spokane, Coeur d'Alene) rival Thomas Pynchon in their ability to create allegorical, multilingual, classical, biblical, satirical, and zany place and people names. (115)

Roemer argues for the varied and continued power of naming in Erdrich's novel, *Plague of Doves*, which he shows demonstrates a wide variety of naming practices, from comic nicknaming to Anishinaabe naming ceremonies. This theme in Native literary studies makes the naming in Mailhot's work worthy of note. At first glance, the curious part of this passage is the way Mailhot narrates the emotional response to her naming ceremony. Generally, Indigenous spiritual discourse teaches women their bodies are connected to the land and to revere their role as life givers. So, Young Terese's reaction of feeling "ashamed and undeserving," is nearly the opposite of the anticipated reactions of happiness, wholeness or being united with one's purpose. Mailhot allows her readers to see the dissonance between the elder, who wanted her to be "good and holy," and how she actually felt about herself at the time. Even later in life, Mailhot writes

that she “drew power from the mountains, but chose a home in the desert.” This communicates some ambivalence to land and ceremony, even while stories like that of Heart Berry Boy direct our attention toward things like oral traditions. As I wrote earlier in this chapter, there are few moments in the text when Mailhot makes reference to common themes in Native American literature, like a relationship to the land, so her line here is significant. Again, it contains something unexpected in that it expresses more of a rejection of the power she could derive from the land; choosing the desert over the mountains further entrenches her status as a ruined Native woman. Her unexpected response to the naming ceremony and to the relationship to the land becomes the antithesis of the romanticized image of the Indian. By laying bare the dissonance of her personal experience with her naming ceremony, Mailhot’s ambivalent ceremony makes clear that she is not an Indian relic.

At second glance, there is an interesting language difference here that might only be picked up by people familiar with Indigenous languages. Although Mailhot doesn’t mention this in the text, with some basic knowledge of Native languages, I recognized Terese’s name, Asiniy Wache Iskwewis, as Cree. The elder’s last name, Cardinal, is another clue as a popular Plains Cree surname. Mailhot is from the Seabird Island Indian Band in British Columbia, which is part of the Sto:lo Tribal Council and she refers to her Salish community. Being given a Cree name as a Salish woman (or girl at the time) is noteworthy. While staunch traditionalists might read a scene like this as a violation of national boundaries and protocols, I think it’s worth asking what it tells us about the self-representation of Native people at this moment in time. In the same vein that Lyons considers the Ojibwe language mistakes Louise Erdrich makes in *Love Medicine* to more accurately represent the state of Ojibwe language proficiency in the 1980s (that is, novice attempts at speaking rather than perfect fluency), Terese also enacts a form of imperfect

ceremony (*X-Marks* 104). This brief moment, which might well go unnoticed by readers who gloss past words written in Indigenous languages, provides an authentic representation of the myriad, and sometimes flawed, ways that Native people engage or re-engage in their culture and traditions. And in this case, it is not only her reaction to the ceremony that is unexpected, but her name itself speaks volumes about her contemporary Native life.

Moments in Mailhot's text when she encounters ceremony or the land and fails or refuses to engage it are a large part of the construction of her character as ruined. In this excerpt, Mailhot appears unafraid to make apparent her protagonist's unwillingness to take the first steps toward the land, the same footsteps that eventually heal her literary counterparts in the Native American Renaissance:

My aunt said that being in the desert, away from my land, made me sick.
"Go to the river," she said.
"I will," I said, knowing I couldn't. (70)

Arguably, the moments when Terese encounters land and ceremony in the text do not even fit the criteria of "making do" ceremonies prescribed by Roemer, which allow for a great measure of imperfection as characters' half measures and partial knowledge construct a flawed ceremonies because they desire healing for themselves. In "Making Do: Momaday's Survivance Ceremonies," Kenneth Roemer draws connections through N. Scott Momaday's writing that show how, in the Red Power era when a large number of Native people moved to urban centers following the federal Indian Relocation Act of 1956, Native American Renaissance protagonists maintain spiritual traditions and connection to land through these imperfect and incomplete ceremonies. At another point in the text, Mailhot acknowledges the role ceremony plays in healing for Native people: "In my culture, I believe we carry pain until we can reconcile with it through ceremony" (28). That ceremony doesn't come in *Heart Berries*, at least not explicitly. In

these low moments, Mailhot does not present her memoir's protagonist as a sympathetic character, trying to heal herself by "making do" with the limited tools at her disposal or "reconciling" her pain in ceremony. Instead, Terese fails to even pick up those tools. By dwelling in the space of brokenness, Mailhot explores the figure of a ruined Native woman in memoir. But there is one figure in the text who might still lift Terese up and she is one many rez folks are familiar with: the grandmother.

"My Grandmother's Eyes on Me"

Mental health is a central theme in *Heart Berries*, but the question of healing is left somewhat ambiguous. The book is marketed as a mental health memoir and the author's diagnoses are named on the book jacket. There are two separate chapters titled, "Indian Condition," and one titled "Indian Sick." In interviews, Mailhot talks about writing portions of the book while hospitalized with "a composition book and a flexible, non-lethal ballpoint pen" (Vinopal). When asked about her family's perspectives on mental illness, Mailhot answered:

Within indigenous communities and with my specific community, when someone is not well in their heart and mind we have a phrase called Indian sick. That you need to spiritually cleanse yourself and you need to grieve if you have to grieve or deal with your pain through ceremony, so seeking therapy or going to a hospital sometimes sounds counterproductive to the people I grew up around because you are in a white building and people not from your culture are trying to help you relate to the world and understand it... I have to find balance. I utilize therapy. I utilize medication. But I also pray. I also turn back to the teachings my mother gave me. (Castaneda)

This passage comes from an interview, so it is the real-life Terese Marie Mailhot (the "real" or historical "I") recounting the variety of ways she finds balance and approaches her mental health. So, even if Mailhot writes her protagonist, Terese, having a complicated relationship to ceremony and land, as I described in the last section, that does not mean Mailhot's real life

experience is precisely replicated. For example, this passage in *Heart Berries* also describes the concept of Indian sick in Mailhot's Salish culture, but in a more literary fashion:

The spirits used to possess the people. We called it 'Indian sick,' and it was the first illness to be accounted for. It begins with want, with taking, and ends with a silence that hurts and makes us beg. There were stories about the cures and cases. Women tried to eat soapberries, or nothing, and talked about how we all had it coming. (17)

As we see in the comparison of these two passages, what is described as a ceremony for processing grief by the historical "I" becomes a spiritual possession as the narrating "I" writes it. Mailhot, the historical "I" turns to a mixture of prayer and therapy and teachings from her mother. She acknowledges the role ceremony plays in healing. Since her text doesn't have the kind of transpersonal healing established in the Native American Renaissance—the healing that comes from a relationship to the land, tribe and ceremony—what Mailhot's writing provides instead is space to dwell in ambiguities when healing is not guaranteed.

In the text, Mailhot develops her own therapeutic practice, the idea that her deceased grandmother watching over her nudges her toward good health or behavior. Her description of her grandmother when she was living contains elements of the rez aesthetic: "Her hands felt like rose petals, and her eyes were soft and round like buttons. She liked carnations and canned milk" (7). Although this is an idea developed by Mailhot in *Heart Berries*, it makes for a thought-provoking rez sensibility. In Chapter 1, I discussed Louise Erdrich's character Marie Kashpaw as a grandmother figure who, to quote historian Brenda J. Child's book, "holds the world together." With the role that grandmothers often play in families on the rez, Mailhot might be developing her own rez sensibility—the idea that grandmothers watching over their rezzy grandchildren inspires them to "be good"—when she writes:

The awareness that our ancestors were watching was vital. I don't feel the eyes of my grandmother anymore.

What I feel struck with is something smaller, in a less impressive world... My illness has carried me into white buildings, into the doctor's office and the therapist's—with nothing to say, other than I need my grandmother's eyes on me, smiling at my misguided heart. Imagine their faces when I say that? (18)

This passage comes in the chapter, "Indian Sick," where Terese has checked herself into the mental hospital. Even after making the decision to seek therapy in the "white buildings" from a doctor and therapist, Mailhot still writes of the rez sensibility of her "grandmother's eyes on" her as a potentially more potent cure for what ails her.

Mailhot demonstrates the rezziness she carries with her when she enters the hospital. Although the book is not humorous, the author finds small amusements in her own expectations of how to exist in the institution she enters. She writes: "In the morning, I was the only one dressed in my hospital gown for breakfast. The nurses walked me back to my room and explained I should wear my clothes, which were put away in my dresser" (22). Among these observations, Mailhot also includes rez signifiers, like rez dogs: "I'm going to die an Indian death. I want to lay my neck on the cool steel allow of the train tracks back home. I want the death of a rez dog. Mutts can't keep away from the tracks" (16). Rez dogs, who are best known for roaming free, seem out of place in this passage, in the hospital setting, perhaps because, as Mailhot said in the interview cited above, many Indians she knows believe in ceremony rather than hospitals or therapy. But by bringing elements of the rez into her hospital stay with her—her desire for her grandmother's eyes on her and thoughts of rez dogs—Mailhot provides several examples of how "being all rezzed out" can happen in unlikely settings.

Part-Squaw, Part-Monster

There are moments in *Heart Berries* when Mailhot narrates negative feelings about herself and her family history and, ultimately, concludes that no matter how dark things get, she is still a

person deserving of love. In the opening line of the chapter, “Little Mountain Woman,” Mailhot writes: “I feel like a squaw. The type white people imagine: a feral thing with greasy hair and nimble fingers wanting” (88). The sentence is alarming, with the term “squaw” having exited decent vernacular some time ago. Reading that Mailhot feels like a squaw, a sentiment that she repeats throughout this chapter, has shock value because of the term’s outdated usage and pernicious connotations. It also creates dissonance for readers as they process the fact that a Native woman is referring to herself using derogatory terminology.

This chapter, a letter to her partner Casey, is grounded in a period in Terese’s life when she is having her third son and remembering her former experiences of motherhood and marriage. The chapter ends with Terese and Casey marrying, and all the while, Terese weathers posttraumatic stress disorder and bipolar II disorder and, as she writes, “having the baby didn’t make things better” (89). It is tempting to read Mailhot’s use of the term “squaw” as an effort to reclaim the terminology, attempting to take some of the sting out of a bad word. But Mailhot’s use of “squaw” does not follow those standard conventions. Communities who reclaim disparaging terms subvert their original meaning by supplanting it with affection or pride. But this is not what we see in *Heart Berries*. Mailhot is not reclaiming the term “squaw” by finding some kind of power in it. She leaves the original intention of the word as is, writing at different points in the chapter that the word makes her feel poor, dirty, monstrous and fragile. By the end of the chapter, Mailhot makes a claim that she deserves to be loved and treated well *even* as a “squaw.” This demand for respect and love comes through the symbol of ladybugs:

I killed a ladybug when we were walking, and you looked at me like I was wild. I am the mother of your son. I don’t think you know how poor I used to be—that my house was infested with ladybugs for so long. My brother and I went mad when they wouldn’t stop biting... Their death smelled like a puddle and wouldn’t leave our home. My mother didn’t come home when the bugs overtook the living room. (88)

This memory is connected to Terese calling child protective services and beginning a stay in foster homes following her mother's absence during this three-day period. Mailhot goes on to recount other instances when Terese felt like a squaw, like her inability to bond to her infant son and her suicide attempt. But by the end of the chapter, Terese makes a plea that she should be loved and treated well even when she feels like a squaw:

Can you wash me like a saint? From squaw, to mother with a face, and pores, and a body, and my own good history—I want my large heart, but older and safer, and clean. Can't you wash me? Or hollow me out for good? Wash me in my own regard and pain, and let me dry out. Let me kill every ladybug and laugh when I do. (99)

The return to the ladybugs signals that she wants to be accepted as she is, even if that form is related to the squaw. Mailhot's writing finds its power not in the grand gesture of reclaiming the term squaw for herself, but in the quiet demand for respect in her current state.

There is also hidden meaning in her usage of the term squaw, whether or not Mailhot intended it in her writing. In Algonquian languages, the word simply meant "woman." Now, the term is known to most as a derogatory term for Native women used historically by white men, settlers and fur traders. The term is described by Debra Merskin in the article "The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman" as "an element of discourse that frames a version of indigenous female-ness consistent with the historical colonial construct of stereotypes of American Indians in general as animalistic, savage, and sub-human" (346).

According to Margaret Bruchac, there are multiple meanings of the root word:

The word "squaw" - as "esqua," "squa," "skwa," "skwe" and other variants - traditionally means the totality of being female, not just the female anatomy. The word has been interpreted by modern activists as a slanderous assault against Native American women. But traditional Algonkian speakers, in both Indian and English, still say words like "nidobaskwa" = a female friend, "manigebeskwa" = woman of the woods, or "Squaw Sachem" = female chief. (Bruchac qtd. in Schilling, "The Word "Squaw")

We also encounter a version of the word earlier in this chapter when Mailhot recounts receiving her Indian name (which is Cree): “Asiniy Wache *Iskwewis*” (emphasis added) or Little Mountain Woman. So, when Mailhot writes that she feels like a squaw, when everything else is stripped away, she could also simply be saying that she feels like, to quote Bruchac, “the totality of being female,” which for Terese includes the unsavory parts of her life, too.

Mailhot writes about her own relationship to the word squaw, but her writing about herself as “part monster” extends out of her father’s dark past. Darkness and light appear several times throughout Mailhot’s text. Her use of the lyric essay, mixture of first and second person, and non-chronological narrative gives readers the sense that we are walking with Mailhot through a darkened hallway, where she chooses to reveal snippets of her own life through opened doors and by peering through windows. Her metaphors of darkness and light produce a book that reads, at times, like a piece of traditional Northwest Coast visual art in written form. In some instances, Mailhot uses metaphors of the light and the dark explicitly: “In my kitchen I turn the lights off again, like I used to. It allows me to feel as nothing as the dark” (63). In other moments, her abstractions depict images of space that is empty or full: “I know the limit of what I can contain in each day. Each child, woman, and man should know a limit of containment. Nobody should be asked to hold more” (117).

Mailhot’s understanding of Salish art seems to explain some of her writerly choices. She writes of light, darkness and space: “I wrote like I had something to prove to you. The stories were about the Indian condition alongside the mundane. Most of the work felt like a callback to traditional storytelling. Salish stories are a lot like its art: sparse and interested in blank space. The work must be striking” (48). With that statement, readers might guess that Mailhot’s form—which is sparse and striking in the way it moves from moment-to-moment—is an attempt to

write in a style inspired by Salish visual art. Ultimately, Mailhot draws the conclusion that, although she appreciates the form, her writing is not Salish art—at least not in the conventional sense:

The truth of this story is a detailed thing, when I'd prefer it be a symbol or a poem—fewer words, and more striking images to imbue all our things. I can't turn it into Salish art. I had to fill these pages with the story of our new family, because the merging was so complicated, even I was confounded. I had to write full sentences, and the exposition lent itself to the dialogue, and there can't be ambiguity in the details of this story. (67)

Heart Berries ends up somewhere in between the light and the dark of Salish art. As I mentioned earlier, the chapters of Mailhot's memoir qualify as lyric essays, a form that draws both from poetry and essays. Although she seems to indicate in this passage that she relinquished symbol and poetry in favor of narrative, "full sentences" and dialogue, her form relies heavily on her stated affinity for poetry. The final irony is that Mailhot claims no ambiguity in her family's origin story, yet so much of her text dwells in ambiguity in other places

One key method for the analysis of life writing is to locate meta-narrative, that is, writing where the author lifts the veil to reveal the performative process of writing (rather than presenting a straightforward narrative of presumed truth). In "I Know I'll Go," Mailhot recounts her father's death and his role in her life. She begins with his murder—"he was beaten over a prostitute or a cigarette. I prefer to tell people it was over a cigarette" (81)—then calls him "a drunk savant" and an artist who taught her that "[i]t meant so much to draw a circle well" (82) in a Salish art tradition that relies on circular forms. Including small details like these is one way she demonstrates the complicated nature of her characters. She writes of decision to discuss her father as she does: "I don't write this to put him to rest but to resurrect him as a man, when public record portrays him as a drunk, a monster, and a transient" (87). Late in the text, Terese remembers repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse by her father. Mailhot's metanarrative

considers how the baggage of “the Indian” figures in her writing process as it relates to decisions on how to include her father in the narrative:

As an Indian woman, I resist the urge to bleed out on a page, to impart the story of my drunken father. It was dangerous to be alone with him, as it was dangerous to forgive, as it was dangerous to say he was a monster. If he were a monster, that would make me part monster, part Indian. It is my politic to write the humanity in my characters, and subvert the stereotypes. Isn't that my duty as an Indian writer? But what part of him was subversion?
(82)

Mailhot makes evident her writing process and the role refusal plays in it. By adopting a writerly ethic that insists on the subversion of stereotypes, creating full Native characters and resisting victim narratives, Mailhot is negotiating representational politics and limitations, which Audra Simpson describes encountering in research with her own community: “The limit was arrived at when the representation would bite all of us and compromise the *representational* territory that has been gained in the past hundred years, in small but deeply influential ways” (111-112). Simpson describes her conscious decision, which other Native writers face as well, to refuse to include information about their communities when they know that it will further ingrain harmful stereotypes into the academic record or, in this case, the literary canon. Mailhot makes her desired devotion to this ethical practice clear, but at the end of the passage she asks, “what part of [her father] was subversion?” She wrestles with the loaded decision of what to include and not include in the face of a sea of dangerous Indian stereotypes, but implicit in this final question is a hesitation. If his life does not subvert any stereotype, no matter how hard a Native writer wishes it would, is it still necessary or important to write his character with the ethics of refusal in mind? Similar to the way her writing pushes readers to rethink the use of the term squaw, grappling with the right way to present her father figure could lead to new questions and new ways to represent complicated Indian characters who confirm Indian stereotypes or who are part-squaw or part-monster. And like Terese wanting to be loved despite killing ladybugs, here Mailhot is

asking her readers to better understand the complicated nature of her father figure in the text. Understanding Terese as part-squaw or her father figure as part-monster is not tidy or pretty, but it is honest and represents the complicated terrain of Native characters and the complexity of Native life.

Honoring Our Imperfect Ancestors

I conclude my analysis by examining one final figure on the rez that Mailhot's writing redeems: her imperfect ancestors. In the chapter, "Indian Sick," Mailhot recalls her mother's dedication to travelling the "Red Road," a rez terminology for the path of abstaining from alcohol and living a healthy, traditional lifestyle based in Native traditions. She writes about how her mother would do things like walk to the river and pray or fast alone in the mountains as a pipe carrier. From behind hospital walls Mailhot divulges that she cannot relate to these traditional practices that her mother lived by: "I never understood her commitment to living well. It seems innate that I am fucked up. I think I have the blood memory of my neurotic ancestors and their vices. Her work seems as important as my work, to acknowledge that some of my people slept in, and wasted their lives, and were gluttonous" (32). Mailhot is not going so far as to reject or criticize the Red Road, but she distinguishes it as a place that belonged to her mother. Instead, she shows Terese walking an alternative path, one where Native people like her—who sleep in, spend their lives sitting on the couch or land in the hospital (rather than on "the land")—can be written onto the pages of literature and might also be redeemed. She is not suggesting that imperfect characters replace Red Road figures, but that we allow space for both to show a wider, messier tapestry of Native life.

In the Native American nationalist tradition of literary scholarship, there is a tendency to venerate the traditional Native lifestyle that Terese's mother exemplifies. As Arnold Krupat

writes in *Red Matters*, “nationalist positions also need other positions, those indigenists (as persons with different bodies of systematic knowledge) ... for their anticolonial projects to succeed” (7). When our histories contain layers upon layers of oppression and negative stereotypes that characterize Native people as less-than-human, it is easy to understand why Native writers and scholars, and Native people generally, swing in the other direction and honor their ancestors, whether they are loved ones who have passed on or the specter of pre-contact relations we will not know. Using Krupat’s model of three critical perspectives on Native American literature, “Nationalism, Indigenism, Cosmopolitanism,” those coming from an indigenist perspective are apt to emphasize the power of Indigenous knowledge, the land and ways of being. Krupat writes that for indigenist critics it is “the ‘earth’ that is the source of the values on which a critical perspective must be based” (“Red Matters” 10). Although this kind of writing comes from a place of love, it can result in romanticization, albeit with positive, rather than negative, connotations. Of course, this does not mean that we should not speak kindly of our ancestors and loved ones. Where the scales are tipped, and certain positive representations become limiting, is when we constantly imagine our ancestors as perfect. This makes them into near-inhuman beings. When people cannot have faults, their humanity is erased. In the quest to build a nationalist Native literary canon, the strong Native characters like Terese’s mother are required to form the foundation. She shines and deserves to be represented. But Mailhot’s writing offers another approach, one that prevents unilateral definitions of rez life and prefers the space ambivalence provides.

As I discussed at points throughout this chapter, the model protagonist of the Native American Renaissance was the “broken” Indian, a person whose connection to their homeland and family was severed and whose life was marked by issues like mental illness or alcoholism.

Still, there exists somewhat of a taboo on the rez around critiquing one's ancestors in writing or discussing one's relatives with anything other than reverence. When Mailhot writes that she has the "the blood memory of my neurotic ancestors and their vices," she is using the term "blood memory" ironically. Rather than contributing to the discourse on epigenetics, Mailhot writes her ancestors radically as ordinary people with bad habits. This maneuver is radical simply because these are not the kinds of characters or literary figures that will build a nationalist canon and criticism. They are the rejects, the kinds of unsavory characters that respectability politics direct us to avoid highlighting in writing. But Mailhot does not avoid them; she stakes her claim that they deserve to be represented in literature and they will be in the pages she contributes to the canon. Mailhot writes her ancestors into the pages of her book as people with "vices" who "slept in" and makes the claim that these unsavory ancestors deserve to be seen alongside those who, like her mother, lived a traditional Native lifestyle. In fact, Terese's mother is one of those complicated characters herself; although she walked the Red Road in her life, remember that she also left her children alone for several days. By the end of the memoir, we have seen multiple sides—the good and the bad, the being both ways—of most of Mailhot's characters. The imperfect ancestors she imagined must have had good qualities as well. By never settling on one "good guy" or one "bad guy" in her life writing, Mailhot reveals the complicated nature of all her characters and prevents readers from fully settling into one view. *Heart Berries* offers an alternative or an antidote to the unidimensional, romanticized Indian character: complicated, rezzy Native characters who demonstrate multitudinous ways of being Native, even when their stories are unsavory. The ruined Native woman's life story should be heard because it reveals the complicated nature of rez life and Mailhot offers her compelling version of it.

Conclusion

Heart Berries doesn't end with a triumphant moment or definitive declaration of redemption for Terese. It ends with a letter Terese writes to her mom structured as a series of questions. If there is any version of ceremony in this final chapter, it is the way Terese recalls her mother's funeral: "Do you know the reservation received your body like Christ or the Holy Ghost or the Father?" (121). The choice to end with this series of questions rather than narrative is Mailhot's final literary maneuver in crafting the ambivalence that pushes definitional boundaries outward for her characters, creating space where the Indian relic once threatened to close in on them. Although the ending is ambiguous, readers searching for closure and resolution might find it in the lines that connect Terese to her mother and her grandmother: "We shine brighter in heaven. You are formless to me now. But, still your pine and winter willow are in my body. As are my grandmother's olive seed and red hill earth" (123). In an earlier chapter, Mailhot writes: "My mother's looming spirit guides me some days, telling me that nothing is too ugly for this world. I am not too ugly for this world" (114). This sentiment is what *Heart Berries* contributes to the canon of Native American life writing: the written proof that even when rez life reveals unsavory, messy and complicated truths, her characters are still worthy of their humanity.

Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries* is an exemplary text in the ongoing efforts by Native writers to interrupt the hegemonic narratives of "the Indian" with their own complicated, messy and not-always-respectable representations of everyday rez life. The romanticized stereotypes of the Indian obscure rez people from view, effectively hiding our stories, our humor and sometimes even our more dubious behaviors. Inevitably, when authors dedicate themselves to including the full spectrum of ways of being a contemporary Native person, this will include

unsavory characters, moments and stories. This chapter explores how Mailhot deals with those “unsavory” moments in *Heart Berries*, charts what the unsavory looks like and what it reveals in her memoir. I found that Mailhot’s self-representation as a ruined Native woman ultimately redeems Native stories and Native people by demanding visibility for Native people and Native characters, even when they are not perfect. Mailhot allows Native people to be seen in all their complexities; she shows readers grandmothers whose gaze is critical to living a good life, mothers who walk the Red Road and girlfriends who give their man a black eye.

By using memoir to deliver the message that the unsavory parts of Native life deserve literary and critical attention, Mailhot uses the vulnerability that memoir both provides and requires to dismantle expectations of rez life. By leaning into this vulnerability and moving toward the messy truth of a ruined Native woman’s life, Mailhot moves the needle toward a greater understanding of and appreciation for everyday rez people as we truly exist. We encountered these unsavory moments when Mailhot narrated her life story as a ruined Native woman: when she refers to her protagonist as a “squaw” and “part-monster”; and when she thinks of herself as a descendent of ancestors with vices. There is something powerful about the freedom that comes from rejecting the images and norms that for centuries have constrained and attempted to determine Native life. Mailhot finds freedom in vulnerability; by allowing the “unsavory” parts of her life to have a place in the text, she is no longer beholden to the project of correcting misrepresentations of Indians with its opposite, the image of a triumphant Native woman. *Heart Berries* widens the possibilities of what Native women’s life writing can be. Native women can be triumphant or ruined, and in all likelihood, our life stories fall on the spectrum in between.

The goal of my research and rez theory is to carve space in Native literary studies for both the beauty and darkness of ordinary, everyday Native folks. One of the effects of focusing on the full spectrum of contemporary Native life is that you must take the good with the bad. What I am writing *for* is the ability for each Native person to be able to live in the multiplicity of their own truths. What I am writing *toward* is the widening of the framework that we use to understand Native literature and Native people ourselves. What I am writing *against* are the limitations foisted upon our families, communities, ancestors and future generations that impact how we move in the world and how our literatures and cultural productions are understood.

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Chapter 3
The Poetry of Rez Life:
Television Representations of the Everyday on *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster*

On the pilot episode of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) television show, *Trickster*, the teenaged main character, Jared, is walking down a dusty rez road. He is wearing a hoodie and a set of Beats headphones that play the hip hop music of the Snotty Nose Rez Kids. As Jared walks, he introduces viewers to the setting of *Trickster* on the rez, Kitamaat Village, which is the “home community of the Haisla people” with a small population of 700 on the north coast of British Columbia. The camera pans out to show the road where Jared walks, which divides the beautiful landscape of British Columbia from the rez houses (fig. 2). This opening scene foreshadows the divide that Jared will face in the series: soon the main character finds himself “caught between two worlds.” But this double-bind is not between the Native world and the non-Native world, a familiar struggle recounted by generations of Native writers. Both of Jared’s worlds are Native; the side with the houses represents his day-to-day rez life, while the other side, the water and mountains, stands in for the lineage of witches, tricksters and other fantastical beings Jared will soon learn he descends from. The front yard of the house in the foreground is littered with junk, barrels and a knocked-over basketball hoop. It is reminiscent of the description in *Love Medicine* of one character’s yard where “[t]he ground is cluttered with car parts, oil pans, pieces of cement block, and other useful junk” (Erdrich 139). As Jared continues, he passes another rez hallmark, a row of broken-down cars. His seemingly uneventful walk is suddenly interrupted by a rez dog—marked as such by the way it roams free—barreling

down the road in Jared's direction. When Jared notices the dog, he looks terrified and runs in the opposite direction. In this instant, an ordinary day-in-the-life of a teenaged boy on the rez transforms into a horror scene as the dog chases Jared.



Fig. 2. Jared walking in Kitamaat Village from CBC's *Trickster*.

The rez as it is presented in *Trickster*, in many ways, affirms outsider perceptions about what a reserve looks like. Even when people divulge that they “have never been to a reserve/reservation before”—an admission I have heard at several points throughout my life—the representation of the rez in the media and public education probably looks something like Jared's rez in this opening scene. In other words, nothing is unexpected about the rez on *Trickster* (at least not until viewers experience the magic of the show, at which point much is unexpected). And, in the context of this dissertation, that is not a problematic thing. Part of the argument of rez theory is that there is an aesthetic that many rez people can identify with, at least on some level, whether they live in the Maritimes in Canada or the southwest of the U.S. But there are anomalies, reservations that stand out with their higher-than-average populations or great economic prosperity. The rezes that are represented on television in this chapter are each

based on real-life places that are very different from one another.

On the other side of the country, on another rez road located in Quebec, viewers are introduced to four twenty-something women in the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network's (APTN) series, *Mohawk Girls*, which was marketed by its production company, Rezolution Pictures, as "*Sex and the City* – Mohawk style!" This comparison was picked up in the media and reviews following its original airing in 2014 included headlines such as "Mohawk Girls: A native take on *Sex and the City*" (Hays) and "Mohawk Girls more than its *Sex and the City* aboriginal-style billing" (Wong). This rez, Kahnawà:ke, has a much larger population of 8,000 and is located next to the metropolitan center of Montreal. One of the four main characters, Anna, steps out of her vehicle onto a bustling street. Anna, who will be permanently nicknamed Hat Girl because of the flashy cap she wore on the day of her arrival, is recording a video of herself on her phone, documenting her return to the rez (fig. 3). She speaks to her phone camera: "Day one of my move back to the rez! Well, not really a move back. Used to come here as a kid to visit my dad's family but haven't been here since he was... since I was eleven" (2:17).



Fig. 3. Anna, a.k.a. Hat Girl, arrives on rez at Kahnawà:ke.

The rez road Anna stands on is unlike the one we saw on Jared's rez. She pulled up onto what looks like it could be a busy town center—no broken-down cars or junk in yards. Anna says that she is in the Old Village, which she remembers visiting when she was a kid. But parts of it look less familiar as she turns her camera toward a monster truck and what she thinks is a condo building: “this is... oh, I don't remember monster trucks here before... Whoa, oh my god.” She waves down a woman who is walking by. “Hey, excuse me, umm, when did you guys get condos here?” The woman answers, “That's somebody's house! Weirdo.” The camera pans to a castle-like, three-story brick building. While Jared's rez of dirt roads and junk-strewn yards confirms the typical image of a rez, the monster trucks and mansions on *Mohawk Girls* unveil another kind of rez that outsiders might not know exists. But the title of *Mohawk Girls*' pilot episode, “Welcome to Our World,” invites viewers to experience the everyday lives of these four young women as they navigate love, sex, identity, belonging, culture, family and friendship—on a rez that may or may not appear familiar to its viewers.

Throughout this dissertation, I remained committed to examining the full spectrum of the rez, including both its humor and its horror. These two series cover both ends of that spectrum. *Mohawk Girls* molds the sitcom format to its advantage and approaches difficult rez topics, like belonging, authenticity and nationhood, alongside the dating and friendship exploits of its four main Native women characters. *Trickster* uses the fantasy genre to capture what I think of as rez gothic, an aesthetic that combines elements of everyday rez life with gothic and horror features to offer something new to the small screen. While the rezes presented here are quite distinct, they contain one core similarity: the critical setting of the rez. The northwest coast has little in common, geographically, with Montreal's next-door-neighbor, but both settings are equally rezzy. The real-life Kitamaat Village is a remote reserve, located a 16-hour drive north of

Vancouver, British Columbia. Its remote location and small population of 700 mark it as a community with higher levels of poverty than a place like Kahnawà:ke, with its population of 8,000 and suburban location. The rezzes we see on television are, of course, representations of the original communities they are based on, but this background information helps to situate the types of reserves depicted on each series.

In this chapter, I show the rez as a place where language, politics and humor prevent strategies, or powers that aim to structure our lives, from taking root. Although some scholars, such as Kenneth M. Roemer in his article, “Making Do: Momaday’s Survivance Ceremonies,” have described similar aspects of Native life using the concept of “making do,” I use rez theory to argue that *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster* show that rez life is more than “making do.” It is beauty. It is play. It is tactical. It is even staring into darkness. Above all, it is poetry. In this chapter, I provide evidence from these two series to illustrate how the poetry of rez life is constructed through the conceptual frameworks of *bricolage* and tactics that form the basis of rez theory. The rez person depicted on these series gives “an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities,” as Claude Lévi-Strauss writes of the process of *bricolage*. “The ‘bricoleur’ may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it” (21). In *Trickster*, for example, it is not the spectacular scene where a man morphs into a raven (the trickster) that makes the series special and intriguing, but another scene that depicts a woman, who could be anyone’s Native auntie, as a monster. Living in a linguistic landscape where they value their Indigenous language while principally speaking English, characters on *Mohawk Girls* manipulate both the English and Mohawk languages to suit their needs, creating their own codes that mix the two. These are examples of the poetry of rez life.

Before I turn to my literature review and analysis, I want to address my decision to include *Trickster* as a text in light of the ethnic fraud scandal of one of its creators, Michelle Latimer. *Trickster* debuted in 2020 and had a one season, six-episode run. Due to its popularity, the show was renewed for a second season by its network, CBC, but it ultimately did not move ahead beyond season one as a result of this controversy. In the months following *Trickster*'s original air date, Latimer, who co-created the show alongside Tony Elliott, was publicly called into question for false claims to an Indigenous identity. Latimer identified as Métis/Algonquin throughout her lengthy entertainment career and, when asked to be specific for press around her documentary film, *The Inconvenient Indian* (2020), she claimed ties to my community, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg (Barrera). Latimer initially apologized for not doing “the necessary work to understand the connection” to Kitigan Zibi, while remaining silent on her claim to the Métis nation (Deer and Barrera). She later served CBC with a libel suit for its reporting on this issue (Hertz). Critics of Latimer point to the numerous paid job opportunities she was able to seize because of her identity claims, which included acting roles on *Blackstone* (2012) and *Moose TV* (2007), and director credits on the VICE documentary series *RISE* (2017) and a documentary film adapted from Thomas King's book, *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012); the latter documentary was fully completed then pulled from shelves as a result of this controversy (Monkman).

Despite this debacle, I contend that it is still possible to consider *Trickster* an Indigenous cultural production if we think of it as a multi-authored text. Auteur theory in film studies views the director as the author and principal creative force behind a film's production, as opposed to the screenwriter or the author of the text from which a film was adapted. André Bazin is recognized as one of the leading critics of the idea. His concern, articulated three years after the inception of the concept by François Truffaut in 1957, is described by Jackson Ayres as follows:

“Bazin worried that, although the criteria for who qualified as an auteur were ambiguous and somewhat arbitrary, granting the auteur status to a director risked the creation of cults of personality so powerful that critical attention would be diverted away from the individual film in favor of the director” (1). Although this critique is generally applied to famous directors (for example, Alfred Hitchcock or Quentin Tarantino) whose films might routinely be reviewed as masterpieces because of their directorship, we can also imagine it working in the opposite direction where, in this case, a television show is deemed “bad” because of the integrity of the director, or, more pertinent to this dissertation, where a showrunner’s ethnic fraud might undermine the work’s standing as an Indigenous cultural production.

In place of auteur theory, what would happen if we thought of *Trickster* as having an assemblage (or a *bricolage*) of potential authors? This is not so far-fetched because there are many players and moving pieces that go into television productions. *Trickster* would not exist without the performances of its actors, the multiple writers that most television shows employ and, most importantly, the novelist who wrote the original story upon which the show is based. When we look to the smaller details in the series, we see that Indigenous musicians and fashion designers also have their fingerprints on the production. One of the great tragedies of *Trickster* being “cancelled”—both literally cancelled on T.V. and cancelled in the cultural zeitgeist—in relation to this ethnic fraud scandal is that it also erases the work of the many Indigenous people who were involved in the production. Eden Robinson (Haisla and Heiltsuk) is the author whose fantasy novel, *Son of a Trickster*, is brought to life in the television series; this book is the first in a popular trilogy. Joel Oulette (Cumberland House Cree Nation), Anna Lambe (Inuk) and Nathan Alexis (Nakota) are young, emerging actors whose performances shined. Kalani Queypo (Blackfeet, Hawaiian, Swedish), Craig Lauzon (Anishinabe) and real-life mother and daughter

duo Crystle Lightning (First Nations/Enoch Cree) and Georgina Lightning (Mushwatchees Cree) round out the largely Native cast (Jaksic, “Introducing the stars”). Episode 4 of *Trickster* ends with a spectacular and horrifying dance scene that was choreographed by Santee Smith (Mohawk), an internationally recognized performer and trained ballet dancer. Sage Paul (urban Dene member of English River First Nation), a fashion designer, advised the costume and wardrobe department, and “[a]ll of Maggie and Sarah’s earrings are beaded by a Métis artist, Natalie Sweeney Wades. The leather key chain and Sofia’s medicine pouch were created by Chrys Tabobandung from Wasauksing First Nation” (Jaksic, “Secrets behind Trickster’s fashion”). Indigenous fans expressed their disappointment that the series wouldn’t continue because representation mattered to them (Canadian Press). On twitter, where much of the conversation about the Latimer fallout took place, Chief Lady Bird, a Chippewa/Potawatomi artist, tweeted:

I saw very little/no criticism of the series until we found out Latimer is not Indigenous. Personally, I am disappointed to learn that she falsely identified herself as Indigenous because she received many opportunities... But do I still think Trickster is a great show? Yes. I can’t describe the feeling of watching my dad feel represented while watching this show. He has always loved Supernatural and shows/films like that, but to see it on Trickster, with all Indig[enous] people on tv, was quite an experience for him. And that, to me, makes the series meaningful. (@ChiefLadyBird)

This is not an exhaustive list of the many Indigenous people who were involved in *Trickster*’s production, and the latter is only one example of the kind of impact it had on Native audiences. Although one Wasauksing beadworker’s earrings don’t have the same impact on the show as the overall direction, they add to the *bricolage* that creates the production which, as this dissertation shows, is not insignificant. And, cumulatively, an earring here and a dance choreography there amount to tactics, where Native people find various ways to make their mark on television. I read *Trickster* as a fresh, beautiful and thrilling portrait of the rez created by a combination of Native

writers, producers, actors and artists, under the direction of two non-Native showrunners. If we understand *Trickster* as a multi-authored series, then perhaps we can shift focus away from the ethnic fraud scandal, which has consumed enough of our space and energy as Native critics and fans, and turn toward what is most interesting about *Trickster*: the text.

Rez Television

Television is an important medium to study because of its omnipresence in American (and Canadian) culture. From its position at the center of most American households, television offers a major opportunity to impact and shape mainstream perceptions of the rez. Television allows touchpoints, places where viewers can literally point their finger at something on T.V. and pronounce, “That is so rez!,” which I did while watching both *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster* during their original airing. Self- and community-representation is important in all varieties of cultural productions—literature, film, television, music, theater, visual arts, design—but there is something intimate about the way the rez is brought to life on the small screen and broadcast inside family living rooms once a week. Its audiovisual format allows viewers to identify the rez through the soundtrack that is laid atop of scenes, like the Snotty Nose Rez Kids’ music in *Trickster*; the costumes that characters wear, like Jared’s hoodie and the *Mohawk Girls*’ dangly earrings; the accent, tone of voice and the language they use (“Weirdo!” on *Mohawk Girls*); the setting, not just on a rez road, but inside Jared’s grandmother’s log cabin and at the rez coffee shops and bars where the *Mohawk Girls* meet up. Dustin Tahmahkera, in his book *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms*, wrote that television is “one of the most pervasive and influential inventions of all time in shaping public perceptions about practically any issue” (xv) and Michelle H. Raheja, in *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*, called film and other modes of visual culture “the

primary representation field on which Native American images have been displayed to dominant culture audiences in the twentieth and twenty-first century” (ix). As a study of the ordinary and the everyday, television is arguably the medium that best suits the topic of this dissertation.

These two series signal a new era in Native television. Self-representation by Native people on television has been relatively rare, so the current uptick in “tribal television,” to use Tahmahkera’s term, is a newer occurrence. The Aboriginal Peoples’ Television Network (APTN), which was home to *Mohawk Girls*, began broadcasting in Canada on September 1, 1999 (Roth 206). APTN is considered a leader in Indigenous television programming, alongside Māori Television in New Zealand, which hit the airwaves five years after APTN in 2004. Both networks are financially supported by their respective federal governments and are committed to Indigenous language and cultural representation. They broadcast a variety of programming, including news and current affairs, children’s shows, cooking shows and reality television, as well as syndicated shows from mainstream networks that are popular among Indigenous peoples (like *North of 60*). While Faye Ginsburg, in the chapter “Native Intelligence: A Short History of Debates on Indigenous Media and Ethnographic Film,” asks (rather ominously) whether separate Indigenous networks like these “create sequestered media worlds that will become the televisual equivalent to ‘reservations’” (234), I have a more optimistic view and see them as an incubator for Native creativity. And, from within the perspective of rez theory, being a “televisual equivalent to a reservation” is not a bad thing. Networks like APTN paved the way for the prioritization of a Native audience: both *Trickster* and *Mohawk Girls* are shows that invite viewers into the inner world of the rez where some Native people recognize themselves on-screen in ways they haven’t seen before, and viewers unfamiliar with the rez are introduced to nuances and conversations to which they might not otherwise have access.

In Native American and Indigenous studies scholarship, television has received less critical attention than mediums like visual arts, literature and film. Television, however, should not be neglected since it has an incredibly wide reach. The time is ripe for scholars to focus on all sorts of Native cultural productions, especially as television continually improves in quality. Tahmahkera's *Tribal Television* is the most extensive study of Native representations in this medium. He examines how Indians show up in mainstream T.V. shows, and the book closes with his concept of sitcom sovereignty and its application to the APTN comedy-drama series, *Mixed Blessings*. Sitcom sovereignty, Tahmahkera notes, speaks "to Native producers' and audiences' inherent right to construct, critique, and readjust recognizably Native representations of indigeneity," which is a televisual offshoot of tribal sovereignty which he succinctly calls "a people's inherent right to control their destiny" (26). To illustrate sitcom sovereignty in action, Tahmahkera also looks at *Mohawk Girls*, specifically how showrunner Tracey Deer exercised hers when she dared to ask a question that nobody in the mainstream entertainment industry was even wondering about: "*Mohawk Girls* follows the daily lives of 'four young women trying to figure out the answer' to the question, 'What does it mean to be a modern day Mohawk woman?,' which Hollywood TV series have never really asked nor shown any textual evidence of considering, not for Mohawks nor for practically any other indigenous nation or tribe" (26).

Tahmahkera explains the impact: "Engaging in the on- and offscreen politics of creative control in producing Native sitcoms, casting Native actors, developing Native characters, and collaborating with Native-run and Native supporting networks, sitcom sovereignty works to combat stereotypes, reach diverse audiences, and feature Native perspectives and humor" (27). While Tahmahkera's argument is useful, I show in the following section that *Mohawk Girls*' sitcom sovereignty went beyond representation and created real economic change on the rez

where it was filmed. We must not overlook the potential injection of economic prosperity and educational and career opportunities into Native communities as a result of these multimillion-dollar productions when they are filmed on the rez. For Native people, the relationship between a concept like sitcom sovereignty and the ability to control our own affairs go hand-in-hand.

This, however, is not a dissertation about sovereignty, except for when it appears in the lives of everyday rez people. Much of the book-length criticism written on filmic representations of Native people has focused on how Indian figures appear in movies, and less work has been done on what we might consider Native-made television or rez television (this is also the result of the dearth of those productions—or confusion when a formerly “Indigenous” producer is exposed as an ethnic fraud). This chapter fills that gap. Still, the work on representations of Indians in film is comprehensive and shares some of its history and implications with the small screen. Raheja, in *Reservation Reelism*, examines the complicated nature of the ubiquity of Indian representations: “Native Americans are often hypervisible in North American films, especially in films produced during the first half of the twentieth century; at the same time they are rendered invisible through plotlines that reinforce the trope of Indigenous people as vanishing or inconsequential, they receive few speaking parts, and they are often uncredited” (x). This describes Nector Kashpaw’s literal, though fictional, experience of trying to make it in Hollywood in *Love Medicine* as described in Chapter 1. This phenomenon of being simultaneously hypervisible and invisible is, in many ways, the opposite of the sitcom sovereignty Tahmahkera names. To the field of Native American film and visual culture, Raheja adds the concepts “visual sovereignty” to describe Native American control of visual culture and aesthetics and the setting of a “virtual reservation” as “the imagined and imaginative sites produced by the cinema” (xii).

Both Tahmahkera's and Raheja's texts arrived in the wake of Beverly R. Singer's evocatively titled book, *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video* (2001), which did some of the foundational work of naming discrimination in the film industry. Singer's book focuses on Native American film and video as a means of seizing cultural sovereignty and supporting tribal sovereignty practices around language (2). Taking perhaps a more imaginative approach, the collection of reviews edited by LeAnne Howe, Harvey Markowitz and Denise K. Cummings, *Seeing Red: Hollywood's Pixeled Indians*, encouraged writers to "be funny" as they crafted "'experientially based' [film] reviews by embedding their critical voice in autobiographical accounts of how they responded as children, teens, or adults to the representations of Indians in their films" (xi). The collection of essays sought "to challenge the dominant ideologies concerning race" and take "on the naturalization of such images; they are a model for teaching viewers to recognize both good filmmaking and the problem of misrepresentation of Native peoples" (xvii). A centerpiece in Native American film, the 1998 Chris Eyre movie, *Smoke Signals*, is one of the most oft-cited examples of a Native-made production, including in Jacquelyn Kilpatrick's, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*, where she notes that it was "advertised as the first feature film written, directed, produced, and acted by Native Americans" (131). Her book documents the push toward an American Indian aesthetic that connects tribe-specific stories with common features shared by Indians. Using the example of George Burdeau's film, *Surviving Columbus*, Kilpatrick explains: "The film is about one nation, the Pueblos, but the aesthetic he is striving to create or express, the communication he is striving to produce, is one that involves all Indian peoples" (141). This history of visibility and aesthetic is where my work picks up the thread and takes it to the rez.

The *Mohawk Girls*' Guide to Rez Life

Mohawk Girls is an insider's portrait of the rez, specifically Kahnawà:ke, that unveils the small things that make a community. The show was co-created by Tracey Deer and Cynthia Knight, and Deer is a member of the community where the fictional action takes place. For five seasons on APTN between 2014-2017, the 30-minute comedy-drama series followed the dating lives of four twenty-something Mohawk women. Bailey searches for a Mohawk husband who will help fulfill her nation-building responsibilities—preferably one to whom she is not related. Anna, or Hat Girl, moved to the rez from New York City to reconnect with her family and culture in the wake of her father's death. Zoe struggles with family and community expectations and joins the BDSM community in a storyline that appears tacked on to fulfill the show's *Sex and the City* aspirations. Caitlin struggles with the Native men in her life, trying desperately to hang on to her straying boyfriend and reconnect with her dad. The four friends discuss their love lives and personal dilemmas over drinks, but rather than martinis at a ritzy club, they sip longneck beer bottles at a rez bar. The show's core themes include nationhood, authenticity, romance and friendship. *Mohawk Girls* inherits its title and political thrust from Tracey Deer's 2005 documentary by the same name, which follows three Mohawk teens as they navigate the complex identity politics tied to the choice to leave or stay in their community. The television series was filmed in Kahnawà:ke—the rez road Anna, a.k.a. Hat Girl, initially pulls onto is in the actual community—and the cast includes several local actors Deer directed at drama camp when they were kids (Kelly).

Despite these close ties, the show is not universally celebrated in the community. Deer said of the show in an interview: "There are definitely those people here [in Kahnawà:ke] who hate it and think I'm a traitor and that I'm making us look terrible" (Rukavina). The backlash

comes from the show's willingness to depict controversial political issues in Kahnawà:ke, such as marriage laws that discourage marrying outsiders. Some reserves in Canada are still reeling from the gendered discrimination in the Indian Act that connected a Native woman's Indian status—and her right to live on the rez—to her choice in husband. Native identity scholar, Bonita Lawrence, describes it: “until 1985, the Indian Act removed the Indian status of all Native women who married individuals without Indian status (including nonstatus Canadian Indians and American Indians, as well as white men), and forced them to leave their communities” (8). After the Indian Act was amended by Bill C-31 in 1985, women were not often welcomed back to community life. Kahnawà:ke scholar Audra Simpson describes it: “they were called ‘C-31s,’ as were their children. The bill that legislated their return to Indian status has become their categorical identity within the community” (61). Simpson also describes the contemporary iterations of related membership laws and their effects:

In Kahnawà:ke, questions concerning self, peoplehood, and nationhood are clustered around the issue of membership in the community. At present, the criteria necessary for determining Indian status are being discussed and reconsidered on social and political levels. The result of this discussion was the Kahnawà:ke Membership Law (2003), which supplanted the Mohawk Law on Membership. Passed into effect in 1984, the Mohawk Law on Membership—with its requirement of a measurable quantum of Mohawk blood for determining citizenship—is a lightning rod for controversy in the community. (44)

Later in her book, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, Simpson shares the experience of a community meeting where individuals who spoke out against this law were essentially heckled. Ultimately, the heart of the issue seems to be the concern of sharing too much to a broad audience. In the press surrounding the debut of *Mohawk Girls* on APTN, Deer articulated her fears related to representing her community's affairs on the small screen: “for so long we haven't been properly represented in the media and that has been a big gripe and I'm a bit worried that I'm putting out a show that is very authentic to the experience of

my people... I'm afraid the opposite criticism is going to come. People might say that's our business, it's private and shouldn't be shared" (Kelly). As *Mohawk Girls* was airing on television, Deer spoke out against enforcement practices of Kahnawà:ke's controversial laws, which seek to bar community members who marry outsiders from living on the reserve (Rukavina). *Mohawk Girls* tackles these charged, community-specific topics in a comedic show that, despite depicting these matters of concern, also doesn't take itself too seriously.

The challenges described above are exacerbated by Deer's role as an insider in her community. Virginia R. Dominguez's ideas about love in the essay, "For a Politics of Love and Rescue," which are really about tough love, help frame *Mohawk Girls*' approach to these difficult topics. Dominguez calls for the presence of love in our scholarship, one that most closely aligns with familial love, where we understand that care undergirds our words even when we disagree (365). The brand of love Dominguez suggests is one that challenges and is concerned with growth: "Loving does not mean (a) presenting only positive characteristics of people in our writing; (b) eliding conflict, violence, or debate; or (c) feeling so guilty about our own geopolitically defined position that we treat those we consult with kid gloves" (366). This is the kind of love I see at the heart of the making of *Mohawk Girls*; it is a love that celebrates community, but also one that pushes people to confront limiting norms and behaviors, like these membership laws. In this section, I analyze how *Mohawk Girls* approaches issues of belonging, conformity and language and ultimately creates a loving portrait of the rez, infused with political hot topics that are approached with a sense of humor.

Politics, History and Dating

Dating is one of the central concerns for the main characters on *Mohawk Girls* and the show demonstrates the intersection between dating, politics and nationhood. If the wealthy,

white women on *Sex and the City* think their love lives in New York are complicated, they haven't experienced dating on the rez. In the pilot episode, one of the main characters, Bailey, is bringing her boyfriend, Thunder, to meet her father. The couple pulls up to the smoke shop where Bailey's dad works, which is plastered with large signs advertising cigarettes and fireworks. Although the place of business does not play a central role in the plot line of the episode, the smoke shop contributes to the rez setting and exemplifies one popular form of commerce that occurs on reserves in Canada and reservations in the U.S. Inexpensive cigarettes and gasoline on reservations may appear arbitrary to passersby, but these untaxed goods are tangible demonstrations of a fragment of Native sovereignty. Bailey's father sits on a lawn chair outside the smoke shop and dashes Bailey's hopes of having found the perfect Mohawk boyfriend when he tells Thunder: "You and Bailey are second cousins" ("World" 5:50). Barely five minutes into the series, Deer introduces viewers to one of the main problems of dating while Indian, or Mohawk in this case. Another Mohawk girl, Caitlin, demonstrates a second type of rez dating problem. She is in a love triangle with a man, nicknamed Butterhead, and the rez mean girl, Vicky. Later in the episode, while drowning her breakup sorrows at the rez watering hole, a frustrated Bailey asks: "How are we supposed to rebuild the Mohawk Nation if all the guys around here are Butterheads or cousins?" ("World" 8:18).

This is a critical moment in the episode when viewers understand the stakes of dating for Mohawk women, including their limited dating pool and the connection to politics and history. Dating for dating's sake, or for love alone, is not an option for these women—at least not one they allow themselves to entertain. Dating while Mohawk involves the challenge of finding eligible bachelors the women aren't related to or who aren't cheaters, but it also means considering their family, community, nation, and the politics and history that appear like

connective tissue between everything the *Mohawk Girls* do. Another example of the collision between a social life and Mohawk politics occurs later in the episode when Bailey accompanies Anna, the new girl, to a party in the city of Montreal, hoping to escape her troubles on the rez. Bailey is chatting with a non-Native partygoer, who learns that Bailey, a white-passing female, is Mohawk and congratulates her on scamming the government by not paying taxes. This is a common and offensive misinterpretation of Native sovereignty and nationhood on either side of the Canada-U.S. border. Native viewers who have navigated social situations like these are instantly transported to moments when they were on the receiving end of a similarly uninformed comment, whether it be about taxes, racist stereotypes or questioning that “real Indians” still exist. And Bailey has the perfect response.

This scene brought back memories of an uncomfortable situation I was in as a young, twenty-something Native woman in the city, one that I didn't handle nearly as fearlessly as Bailey. I went out for a similar *Sex and the City*-style dinner at a ritzy Ottawa restaurant for a friend's birthday. Everyone there was non-Native and no one, except for my friend whose birthday was being celebrated, knew I am Anishinabe. Apropos of nothing, at least in my memory, two of the girls at the table began making inappropriate “jokes” about Native people and drugs. My friend stared down into the depths of her margarita, and I sat there in stunned silence as they cackled. For years following this incident, I imagined what I would have said if I'd had the knowledge of how best to respond and the courage to speak up. But when Bailey responds to the man who made the remark about Native people scamming the system, the show gives Native viewers the gift of living vicariously through Bailey, who has the right thing to say and the fierce attitude with which to deliver her response: “If anyone is scamming, it is your people. Your ancestors showed up all half-dead and pathetic. What do my people do, huh? Hey,

we teach you, we accept you, we welcome you. And what do your people do? You betray us over and over and over again. And now you have the best rental deal in history. So your people are the lucky ones” (“World” 13:20). This scene illustrates the historical and political baggage Native people carry with them in all types of social situations as they make their way through the city of Montreal, city of Ottawa and the world. One might initially assume the purpose of this scene is to educate a non-Native audience, but the show pulls off a skillful move by serving both insider and outsider viewers. Native people are all too familiar with this type of encounter. As Bailey’s character confronts the man’s statement, *Mohawk Girls* breaks stereotypes, on the one hand, offering some Native audience members a form of catharsis on the other. Those who’ve had a similar experience can imagine themselves coming up with the perfect comeback in these uncomfortable scenarios, giving people like me a do-over.

Bailey hits it off with the host of the party, Jack, and their courtship ushers in conversations about “marrying out” to the series. When Jack finds out she’s Mohawk, he shows genuine interest in learning more about her culture. But when he leans in for a kiss, a parade of dissidents run through Bailey’s mind: “A white guy! Everyone will call you a traitor!” Zoe, one of the four *Mohawk Girls*, yells; her aunt and her dad cry, “You’ll get kicked off the rez!” and “I’d be so ashamed!”; the rez gossip, Vicky, sips her martini and says, “I can’t wait to tell everybody!”; and, finally, the chorus of friends, family and community members scream at her, “Traitor!” (“World” 17:05). These imaginary opinions are enough to send Bailey running. Later, Bailey explains to Anna: “What don’t you understand? I can’t date a white guy!” (“World” 17:33). This theme will run throughout the first season as Bailey struggles between her feelings for Jack and the censure she would receive for marrying a white man under Kahnawà:ke’s membership laws. Life for these Mohawk women, and for Native women generally, is

intertwined with politics, and its unexpected effect on dating is just one example of how these unwritten rez rules play out in the lives of the characters on *Mohawk Girls*.

Rez Rules

One of the greatest strengths of *Mohawk Girls* is the way it reveals the unspoken set of “rez rules” that establish community norms, promote conformity in some areas and govern the everyday interpersonal relationships and interactions between people on the rez. Moving through the rez alongside Anna, who has Mohawk citizenship but is otherwise a new arrival, viewers experience some of the rez rules for themselves. Anna is a cheerful person, and she ignores the strange looks her flashy hats and eccentric outfits elicit from onlookers. But through her friendship with the other *Mohawk Girls*, Anna receives lessons about how to fit in. In episode one, Bailey consoles Anna when she is teased for her fashion sense: “It’s a small town. We’re just not used to this” (“World” 11:20). As an interesting aside, characters in this series refer to their community of Kahnawà:ke both as “the rez” and “town,” the latter being a Kahnawà:ke-insider term. After the girls give Anna a makeover—or make-under—to tone down her look, they take her for a night out at the rez bar where Anna learns more about the rez rules, right down to the proper facial expression to have (fig. 4). When they walk into the bar, Anna remarks:

ANNA. Nice to see white people and Mohawks hanging out together!

CAITLIN. Everyone in here *is* Mohawk, stupid.

ANNA. Are you sure?

ZOE. Stop talking this instant.

[Anna dances in her chair.]

CAITLIN. Don’t do that.

ZOE. Don't smile so much.

CAITLIN. Try to look mean.

ZOE. And bored.

ANNA. Come on. You can't look mean and bored at the same time. ("Hanky Spanky" 9:18)



Fig. 4. Zoe (left) and Caitlin (right) demonstrate for Anna (far left, foreground) how to look mean and bored.

In addition to learning how to don a rez girl expression, this scene also includes a playful jab at conversations that circulate in Native communities about those who do and don't look phenotypically Native. As Anna is beginning to learn, there is a specific, and perhaps unpredictable, book of rez rules that establishes parameters around difference and conformity, and she is barely on the first page.

In another scene, viewers learn about rez rules related to driving. While at work in the cigarette factory, Bailey is tipped off that a co-worker is newly single. She is quick to ask him out since, as she explains in another scene, this rez is a place where the women do the chasing: "They [men] are in great demand so we compete for them" ("Teepee" 11:18). Their "date,"

which wouldn't pass muster off the rez, involves slowly driving in circles around the rez while drinking cans of beer. The drinking and driving takes a backseat as writers veer in the direction of rez comedy instead: the cruising. I did a lot of "cruising" on my rez—driving around with no real destination in mind. When I was a teen, I cruised around with my mom, listening to Top 40 radio countdowns. Every rez has its edges, natural points where there is nothing left to do but turn your vehicle around, so people cruise the same loops repeatedly. When I got my driver's license, I cruised around in my own car with cousins and friends. In this scene, Bailey's date cruises past the cigarette shop where Bailey's dad works, and her dad embarrasses her by waving and giving her a thumbs-up—each of the three times they pass. The comedy, for rez viewers who are familiar with the cruising hobby, lies in understanding that "riding around" is a common pastime but that it is limited by the small size of some reserves; so, seeing them continually drive by the same spot is hilariously familiar. In this scene, both the drinking and driving and the cruising show viewers a different set of rules that apply on the rez. The fact that they are casually drinking and driving indicates that this is a socially-acceptable practice and that, perhaps, activities like these are policed differently on the rez. One study interviewed members of First Nations communities in Alberta, Canada and found that community norms around drinking and driving factor into the practice: "Excessive alcohol consumption serves as an indicator of drinking and driving, a prevailing action also considered by many interviewees as normal, community-endorsed behavior. It is predictable and tolerable – the ways of some people." And, as one of the respondents in the research plainly put it: "We cruise around and sit in one spot and drink" (Rothe 341). The cruising, while not a formal rez rule, shows viewers an ordinary pastime of young people on some reservations and *Mohawk Girls* makes comedy of it.

A pool party scene where characters mix and mingle demonstrates family expectations,

community norms and the rez rules. Bailey takes Anna to a barbecue at her aunt's mansion, where her dad is grilling burgers and people lounge by a large inground pool. Anna comments: "There sure weren't places like this here when I was a kid," to which Bailey responds, "I know. A bunch of millionaires now from gaming and the tobacco trade. It's pretty cool, huh?" ("Teepee" 13:36). This is part of the rez "face lift" we get on *Mohawk Girls*, where the show merges unexpected elements, like mansions, with more typical rez aesthetics, like small smoke shops. When Bailey introduces her father to Anna, he exhibits how the "Marry Out, Get Out" rules are enforced at the everyday level. When he learns who Anna's father was, he says: "It's a damn shame what happened to him up on the iron. He lost a lot of respect when he ran off with your mom. But love makes us do crazy things, eh? It's good to see you back to make things right" ("Teepee" 13:55). This is a loaded interaction. Aside from being rude—speaking unkindly about Anna's deceased father and her mother—Bailey's dad's words demonstrate that coming back to the rez, for Anna or anyone else, can be a fraught experience full of moments like these that Scott Richard Lyons names "Indian identity controversies" in *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*. Lyons calls for "the recognition that Indian identities are constructed" and asserts that Indian identity is best understood in terms of actions: "Indian identity is something people do, not what they are, so the real question is, what should we do?" (40). Lyons shares a variety of Indian identity controversies—from his own daughter being called a white girl at a powwow to Shania Twain's claim to Ojibwe identity through her adoptive father (41)—and Anna finds herself amid one of her own. As the series marches forward, we see Anna *doing* the work of Indian identity by learning the Mohawk language and longhouse traditions. In the book of rez rules, there is an entire section dedicated to identity.

The climax of this episode occurs when we see the number one rule on this rez, the one

emblazoned on the cover of the imaginary Rez Rules book: no outsiders allowed. Unbeknownst to Bailey, Anna has invited two men from the city—one white, one black—to the pool party and, before they can be seen by other guests, Bailey hides the men behind a row of cars and lambasts

Anna:

BAILEY. What the hell were you thinking?

ANNA. You said the more the merrier!

BAILEY. I said I can't date a white guy so you bring him to the rez. Are you insane?

ANNA. I know you said that but it's silly. You wanted a great guy and you found one.

BAILEY. You gonna think it's silly when we get ostracized and get them beaten up? You have no idea how things work around here. Everyone's gonna line up against you! ("Teepee" 16:06)

Anna, with her big city perspective and experience, didn't think it would be a big deal to invite outsiders to the party, but Bailey, who was raised following rez rules to a T, reacts harshly. Anna runs off crying and, when she returns, she speaks up for herself and, in effect, for other urban Native people who feel they don't belong when they go back to the rez:

ANNA. I may not be like everyone else here but I am Mohawk. So I do belong here, no matter what everybody thinks.

BAILEY. You're always going to have a hard time here. Why would you put yourself through that?

ANNA. Because... a part of me is missing and I thought I'd find it here. This place is all I have left of my dad.

BAILEY. Okay, okay, fine. But you have to get with the program, Anna. Starting with no more crying. And don't be so damn happy all the time. It makes people uneasy.

ANNA. I'm going to prove to you how Mohawk I can be. You'll see. ("Teepee" 20:35)

Like Bailey's "free ride speech" in the previous section, this is another moment where *Mohawk Girls* give Native audiences a surrogate experience. If they have ever felt like outsiders on their

own rez, Anna's retort carves out a space of belonging for her character as well as Native viewers. As far as Anna knew when she moved to the rez, having Mohawk citizenship through her father was enough to prove she belonged. But the show's M.O. takes a page out of Lyons' literal book, agreeing that identity is shown through actions rather than, in Anna's case, blood quantum or lineage. Anna didn't know she was walking onto a rez where a set of unspoken rules determined belonging, where arbitrary things like "crying" and being too "happy all the time" are unacceptable. In the first episode, Bailey explained "Mohawks are tough. We're warriors" ("World" 18:05), and that attitude made its way into the rez rules of belonging in Kahnawà:ke. Whether Anna conforms to the rez rules or remains true to her individuality is a core conflict in the show.

Rez Linguistics

Mohawk Girls employs language and slang in ways that merit attention. There are three ways *Mohawk Girls* approaches language within the world of the show and in its real life production: first, they have a version of the show dubbed entirely in Mohawk; second, they insert greetings and short phrases in the Mohawk language into English dialogue; and third, they include rez vernacular, a branch off of William L. Leap's idea of American Indian English as a way of molding the English language to create a rez vernacular. Outside of the world of the show, that is, beyond the fictionalized events depicted on screen, the production of *Mohawk Girls* demonstrates a clear commitment to Mohawk language preservation and revitalization. As Bailey tells Anna in one episode, "Only about one percent of us can actually speak the language" ("Warrior" 12:15). APTN offers programming in fifteen Indigenous languages, as well as English and French, and viewers of *Mohawk Girls* have the option to watch it dubbed in Mohawk. When I worked in an administrative role at a university, I helped create an introductory

Anishinaabemowin language course that invited community members to learn alongside students. While the course was successful, one of the main complaints of Indigenous language learners was that language revitalization initiatives stall at the beginner's level; there are myriad places to enroll in an "Introduction to Mohawk Language" course, for example, but far fewer intermediate, advanced and immersive options. A dubbed television show like *Mohawk Girls*, however, has the potential to be truly transformative because it meets audiences where they are: in front of their television sets. In his study of minority language television programming in Europe, Mike Cormack points out that television, as "the central cultural provider in contemporary society" (294), has the potential to play a role in promoting minority language and culture:

If a minority language community is to survive, then its needs are firstly language maintenance (thus children's programming, along with popular programmes, such as fiction, sport and light entertainment, will be important), secondly the creation of a sphere of information and public debate (thus the need for news and current affairs), thirdly self-representation (in both fiction and factual programmes). All three are important if a minority language community is to maintain itself and develop. Cultural identity emerges from these products, not from 'museum' texts but by working over the reality of life and history in the context of an ever-changing political and social environment. Basic, however, to any television channel is the appeal to what is seen as their primary audience. If the programming is not strong enough to capture that audience then all other aims become irrelevant. (306)

The ability to practice Mohawk language comprehension while watching a series that is funny, dramatic and relatable should not be underestimated for the potential impact it may have on language learning. A study involving seven senior staff at APTN revealed the network's commitment to language and cultural rejuvenation. Their primary strategy is to target audiences under the age of 35, since the Indigenous population in Canada is young with 48% of Native people falling under the age of 25 (Tsai and Chang 22).

The show's writers insert Mohawk language into everyday English dialogue in a way that promotes its casual usage, while simultaneously integrating issues of cultural identity into the

plot line. As Tracey Deer explains in a promotional video: “It’s really important to us to have Mohawk be present in the show. However, we also want to be realistic. There’s a very small percentage of people who are fluent in the language, but many of us, myself included, do include it in our everyday language all the time so we definitely wanted our characters to reflect that” (“Mohawk Girls in Mohawk”). Leap writes about this, too, in his study, *American Indian English*: “American Indians and Alaska Natives use their ancestral language(s) as well as Indian English in daily conversation” (3). One storyline involves the language: Anna falls in love with Thunder, the Mohawk language instructor, and their romance develops when he invites her to take his language class. In episode four, “Where’s My Warrior?,” we see how identity politics and cultural insecurities on the rez complicate seemingly simple endeavors, like practicing Mohawk language in daily life, when Anna and Bailey run into someone from the class and Anna is shamed when she attempts her new skills:

ANNA. Sago! [Mohawk greeting.]

STUDENT. You took one class and now you think you’re more Mohawk than us?

ANNA. I was just saying hi.

STUDENT. Show off. [Walks away.]

ANNA. I thought they’d appreciate me making the effort. But somehow that’s still wrong.

BAILEY. Only about one percent of us can actually speak the language, and the others can get pretty defensive about the fact that they don’t.

ANNA. Defensive? Why?

BAILEY. Like that they aren’t living up to their responsibility. (12:00)

Up to this point, some rez girls had been mean to Anna, ensuring she felt like an outsider: making fun of her hats and her clothes and calling her a “wannabe” when she pronounced things wrong in language class. But, as Bailey helps explain to viewers, these actions are not simply

“mean girl” behavior, although they qualify as that, too. Their responses are bound up in the shame of not speaking one’s Indigenous language. In one study of Navajo and Pueblo language revitalization in schools, Tiffany S. Lee notes the importance of deconstructing the relationship between identity and power in interactions like these:

students chose not to speak their language if they felt scolded or teased by their relatives or peers for mispronunciation or grammatical errors of Navajo words and phrases. Students heard rhetoric in school that speaking Navajo was not popular, yet they also received messages from their families and communities about the necessity to speak Navajo to truly identify as a Navajo person. When they were shamed for their efforts, students expressed frustration and reluctance to keep learning. (309)

Interactions on *Mohawk Girls*, like the one described above, illustrate how shame and mixed messaging affect language revitalization efforts. However, not all instances when the Mohawk language is melded with English are so loaded; there are other times when it appears in ways that are plain and sweet. In a later season, for example, Bailey says to her love interest in Mohawk: “Konoronhkwa,” which most viewers don’t understand until he responds in English, “I love you, too.”

Finally, the rez vernacular in *Mohawk Girls* shows the way characters mold the English language to fit their own community norms and practices, creating their own version of what Leap refers to as “the English of American Indians—the English they use at home, on the job, in the classroom, at the grocery store, in church, and in other areas of daily experience” (1). In the penultimate episode of the show’s first season, “Tube Steak,” Anna is taken under the wing of mean girl Vicky and her friends. Vicky promises to teach Anna the ropes so she can finally fit in on the rez, beginning with a language lesson. But Vicky’s language class is not like the Mohawk language class they took in an earlier episode. This is a lesson in rez vernacular:

VICKY. You ready to learn the rules of the rez?

[Anna nods.]

VICKY. Okay first, you have to learn to talk town.

FRIEND 1. Yeah, not all cheerful, annoying city girl.

VICKY. Like we say *fah* when something is nasty.

ANNA. Like, nasty as in mean?

VICKY. No, nasty like, nayuhsty.

ANNA. Like, bird poo is *fah*.

FRIEND 2. This is gonna take forever.

VICKY. Okay, let's try something new. Like, we say *beast* when something is cool.

ANNA. Okay, I got this. You girls are beasts!

VICKY. No, like... [Shirtless guy jogs by.] He's so beast.

FRIEND 1. Totally beast.

ANNA. Got it. Like, my hat is totally beast.

ALL 3: *Fah*. (7:41)

Fah and *beast* are codes created and understood by the rez people of *Mohawk Girls* to communicate, signify belonging and have fun with language. They identify members of a speech community, composed of, as Leap writes, those who “have acquired the *grammar* (or *knowledge of language*) of that language variety and regularly use that knowledge to participate in the same, code-specific *discourse*.” Leap specifies that speech communities are united not by “demographic, geographic, ethnic, racial, or political factors” but by “the frequency of the members’ social interaction and their joint construction of speaking styles appropriate to that interaction” (25). In this scene in *Mohawk Girls*, learning the slang of the rez is lesson number one (number two, later in the episode, teaches the fighting moves for when a girl inevitably gets jumped), signaling its importance. And, according to the rubrics of speech communities, once

Anna masters the codes of the rez she will gain entry to this component of community life as someone who understands and speaks the rez vernacular.

Spring Clean Up

One of the greatest strengths of *Mohawk Girls* is its ability to showcase the rez as a community. To conclude my discussion of *Mohawk Girls*, I consider how community connectedness is featured in the show's storylines and in the material production of the show. *Sex and the City* is famous for claiming to have a fifth main character: New York City. *Mohawk Girls* is no different in the way the rez becomes a "character" that drives much of the action and organizes dialogue, conflict and character development. Through Anna's search for belonging on the rez, audiences learn that dating is political for Mohawk women, the unspoken rez rules that govern behavior and how language creates speech communities. But amid these challenges related to belonging, *Mohawk Girls* gives us tender moments like the community spring clean up (fig. 5). Following a low point when the girls made fun of Anna's outfit for being too try-hard (she was wearing turquoise and feathers), Anna is ready to throw in the towel on her move to the rez and go back to the city when she stumbles across a community event.



Fig. 5. Anna and Thunder at the “Spring Clean up” event on the rez.

At the community spring clean up Anna sees a different side of the rez where community togetherness is performed and lived in everyday ways. Everyone is wearing matching green t-shirts, made specially for the event, that read “Nia:wen for protecting mother earth.” She even sees Vicky, her enemy, teaching her children to pick up trash off the side of the road. She chats with an elder, who speaks to her in the Mohawk language, and Thunder, who invites her to participate in a Mohawk language class. Up to this point, Anna’s attempts to ingratiate herself on the rez have been frustrating; she doesn’t understand the rez rules and is consistently criticized for basic things like smiling too much, the way she dresses and how she dances. But now, Anna sees that the community is not defined solely by conformity and strange norms. Kind people, language programs and volunteer events, like the spring cleaning day, demonstrate community care in practice and make it worth staying, which she does.

As the credits of *Mohawk Girls* flashed by on screen, I noticed one that sounded particularly rezzy: meals provided by a company called Kwe Gourmet. In a major production like this, the community impacts are economic as well as representational; over the course of its

five seasons, *Mohawk Girls* had an estimated \$43.1 million-dollar economic impact on its region and created 430 full-time jobs (CMPA 5). Vehicles for job creation are a genuine source of pride on the rez—even when those jobs butt up against other community values like environmentalism, as I will show in the next section on *Trickster*'s pipeline politics. A report done by the Canadian Media Producers Association showed that the economic impact the show had is comparable to major industries like tourism and new home construction (7). The term “economic development” is one that I grew up with and one that rez people are surely familiar with as band and tribal governments are centrally concerned with creating small businesses on the rez, and the overall economic growth and prosperity of their communities. My mom was employed as the economic development officer of our community and I remember frequenting small businesses that she helped start up on the rez. Since 1987, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development has studied the relationship between sovereignty, culture and leadership for economic prosperity on reservations. Kahnawà:ke Economic Development Commission (Tewatohnni'saktha) representative Barbara McComber stated that *Mohawk Girls* “rents many local facilities for filming locations, such as community halls, restaurants, parking lots, and residential homes” and “that the production also hires many of the local community members as background extras, creating additional employment and opportunities for the community to be directly involved with the television series” (CMPA 8). Both within the world of the show and in its real-life production, *Mohawk Girls* makes a positive impact on rez life.

Mohawk Girls is a television show about modern Native life. In fact, its production company lists the term among the top descriptors of the show: “This is life on the reserve like you've never seen it before – modern, tough, and funny.” The themes I examined in this section

on *Mohawk Girls*—politics, conformity and language—are all approached from a contemporary perspective: heated political discussions happen at a party in the city; the show’s “rez rules” relate less to traditionalism and more to basic behavior, like how to talk and act; and the “rez slang” delivered on the show blends the English and Mohawk languages. On *Mohawk Girls*, the characters draw upon their modern surroundings for material to make poetry of their everyday lives. As a distinctly modern show, *Mohawk Girls* looks forward. This analysis now turns to another television series, *Trickster*, which, by contrast, gazes back to into the past to shape a new motif I call rez gothic.

Rez Gothic on *Trickster*

Trickster is an hourlong fantasy drama series that follows the main character, Jared, on his rez in Kitamaat, British Columbia. As a rezzy version of “the chosen one” trope in the fantasy genre, the premise of the show is one where an ordinary boy discovers he is an important piece of a fantastical puzzle. Viewers meet Jared on what seems like it could be an average day in his life as he walks to school. Moment-by-moment, and character-by-character, the audience gradually begins to understand that Jared is surrounded by dysfunction: he lives with his mom, Maggie, who is a partier; visits his dad, Phil, who doesn’t work; and he financially supports both his parents through his after-school job at the local fried chicken restaurant. He has a best friend, nicknamed Crashpad, and a new next-door-neighbor, Sarah, who eventually becomes his girlfriend. Soon Jared learns that the ordinary rez life he is living is full of magic as he starts to see strange phenomena like ravens rapping, fireflies radiating around his love interest’s head and a doppelgänger. But the true mystery at the heart of the show becomes one of paternity: Wade, his dad’s friend and his mom’s enemy, returns home and claims to be Jared’s biological father. The series then becomes a battle for Jared’s life as we learn that Wade is a trickster named

Wee'git who needs to kill his only surviving son to maintain his power. Wee'git isn't the only more-than-human relative of Jared's: his mom and grandmother, Sophia, are witches whose specialty includes sewing suits out of human skin for frightening beings called "ancients." The series establishes a motif I call rez gothic by making the ordinary elements and aesthetics of rez life horrifying. The show was successful on its home network, CBC, and was picked up and broadcast on the American television network, The CW.

Trickster remains loyal to the original story in the novel it's based on, Eden Robinson's *Son of a Trickster*. Robinson is one of Canada's most prominent authors, having received several awards and honors in her career as a novelist including, the Writers' Trust Fellowship and an honorary doctorate from the University of British Columbia. This is Robinson's first novel in her Trickster Trilogy, which consists of *Son of a Trickster* (2017), *Trickster Drift* (2018) and *Return of the Trickster* (2021). Robinson's bibliography also includes two other novels, *Blood Sports* (2006) and *Monkey Beach* (2000), and the collection of short stories and novella, *Traplines* (1996). Her rez, Kitamaat Village, features prominently in her fiction and is the setting of *Monkey Beach* and the first and final installments in the Trickster Trilogy. This line from Robinson's biography provides a glimpse at the kind of texture readers find in a Robinson novel: "Hobbies: Shopping for the Apocalypse, using vocabulary as a weapon, nominating cousins to council while they're out of town, chair yoga, looking up possible diseases or syndromes on the interwebs, perfecting gluten-free bannock and playing Mah-jong" (Penguin). *Son of a Trickster* and the television show converge particularly when it relates to the characters and their relationships to one another. The main characters, the rez setting, the slow appearance of magic, the issue of addictions across three generations and, of course, the question of paternity are all elements readers find consistent in the television adaptation. Creative liberties were taken in

other places; for example, the strange climax of the novel where Jared's toe is eaten off by a family of river otters is replaced by a more cinematic scene of Wade/Wee'git being burned alive on television. But generally, the television show adheres quite closely to the storyline of the novel. In this section, I analyze how *Trickster's* gothic aesthetic and blue-collar ambiance come together to form a *bricolage* that displays a full and fantastical spectrum of rez life by showing viewers the interior lives of the people in Kitamaat Village who work for the pipeline, as well as the witches who live in the bush and burn its equipment.

Rez Gothic

Jared is walking down the hallway at school with his friend, Crashpad, when he suddenly looks terrified. He points at a middle-aged Native woman standing at the other end of the hall as he scrambles to run away. "That's her," Jared says to Crashpad as his eyes widen in fear (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Georgina, one of the ancients, chases Jared at school.

"Who?" Crashpad asks quizzically, unsure why Jared is so scared. "That's somebody's auntie. What are you talking about?" ("3" 48:32). Jared runs, leaving Crashpad confused about why Jared would be afraid of "somebody's auntie." This scene is one example of the rez gothic

aesthetic of *Trickster*. Viewers eventually learn that the “auntie” is named Georgina and that she is the leader of a third supernatural group, the ancients, described as “communicators” who listen to the land and represent ceremony and tradition. Georgina, with her floral shirt, pink vest and shoulder-length hair looks nothing like the kind of villain one might expect. Her auntie-like exterior is a prime example of how *Trickster* combines everyday rez aesthetics with gothic elements to create something unprecedented on television. Upon closer inspection, viewers see that Georgina’s face is covered in open wounds. David Punter, a leading literary critic on the gothic, writes that the wound is a symbol of trauma: “Gothic speaks, incessantly, of bodily harm and the wound: the wound signifies trauma, and recent years have seen a veritable explosion in studies of trauma at individual, communal and global levels, an orientation which, we can only suppose in the light of recent conflicts and their terrible human consequences, will only become more urgent” (Punter 2-3). Trauma is present on *Trickster* but underdeveloped with only passing references to the grandmother character, Sophia, abandoning her family because of her own residential school trauma. However, Punter’s interpretation of the wound aligns with the motivation of Georgina her brood of ancients throughout *Trickster*, who are walking and talking wounds that represent the trauma of a severed relationship between Indigenous people and the land, their ceremonies and traditions. Georgina makes up one part of the rez gothic scene that Jared is living in. What is haunting the rez on *Trickster*? And what about everyday rez life is gothic?

Rez gothic extends out of traditional forms of the gothic, but it uniquely employs a *bricolage* of rezzy ephemera and blue-collar surroundings to establish its ominous and haunting tone. There is an ongoing debate among leading scholars about a standard definition of the gothic and, by extension, the kinds of boundaries to draw around it (Rintoul 701-702). There is a sense

that audiences know what is gothic when they see it, and it is often treated as synonymous with the modern-day horror genre and a mysterious, dark aesthetic. Most scholars agree that Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) was the first gothic novel and that "Gothic novels could easily be identified by their incorporation of dominant tropes such as imperiled heroines, dastardly villains, ineffectual heroes, supernatural events, dilapidated buildings and atmospheric weather" (Spooner and McEvoy 1). Catherine Spooner, in the book *Contemporary Gothic*, also names the following themes of modern gothic texts: "the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present; the radically provisional or divided nature of the self; the construction of peoples or individuals as monstrous or 'other'; the preoccupation with bodies that are modified, grotesque or diseased" (8). What unites these gothic elements are their relationship to terror in some form (Punter 6). And although there are many motifs associated with the gothic, Punter names among them: phantoms, crypts, specters, the uncanny, bodily harm and the wound (2). Modern gothic and its accompanying literary criticism include a range of cultural productions as objects of attention, such as vampire movies, goth subculture and the globalization of gothic. The latter refers to derivatives of the original European gothic genre, such as Southern gothic, Mexican gothic—and Indigenous gothic.

If the broader term Indigenous gothic refers to the relationship between supernatural elements and Native American oral traditions and storytelling, such as the *windigo* as Michelle Burnham claims, then rez gothic describes how the everyday lives of these characters can be haunting. Much of the scholarly work done on Indigenous horror, ghosts and other gothic elements focuses on the Indian as a haunting figure of the American past and constant reminder of its violent history. Colleen Boyd and Coll Thrush's collection, *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence*, examines the role Indian ghosts play in American nation-building narratives and the

editors implore historians, specifically, to treat ghosts and hauntings seriously for what they tell us about settler relationships to narratives of territoriality and materiality. As the editors write: “living Natives threatened the survival of new settler communities determined to carve a presence in colonized landscapes, and their removal through so-called Indian Wars and forced marches to Indian Territory is remembered as tragic *and* justified, fearsome *and* inevitable. And the remembering is done in no small part through ghost stories” (xiii). What I am interested in, however, is not the Indian burial grounds of American gothic nor whether *windigo* stories qualify as Indigenous gothic, but how an everyday rez auntie like Georgina becomes a haunting presence.

Rez gothic describes the bleak, and sometimes horrifying, ways that rez life is depicted on screen and in literature. Writer Alicia Elliott’s column on Indigenous horror offers valuable insights into the relationship between rez life and the horror genre:

Indigenous writers... acknowledge the mundane horror of living in a country that dehumanizes you, weaving the reality of Indigenous life with fiction to scare audiences. In Waubgeshig Rice’s *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, for example, the apocalyptic event that ends life as we know it — taking out power, internet, phones, satellites, etc. — isn’t even really noticed as an apocalyptic event at first; it’s just another day on a northern rez, where power can go out at any time and internet and phone signals aren’t always available. As Nick, a young Anishinaabe man, points out, “We thought it was kinda funny...The blackout was only two days, but it seemed like some people were already freaking out a little bit. I was just like, “Come to the rez, this shit happens all the time!””

Elliott points out how living everyday life on the rez, because of inequalities that limit access to certain necessities and technologies, contributes to the horror in Indigenous fiction. On *Trickster*, however, it is not only systemic oppression and discrimination that provide a source of horror. There are cringe-inducing moments when viewers, Native or non-Native, might prefer to shield their eyes—like when Maggie, Jared’s mom, walks into the middle Jared’s high school party and declares “Let’s get this party started!” while holding up a bottle of liquor—on the pilot episode

of *Trickster*. Rez gothic looks at the dark parts of the rez, whether they come from the outside or from within, and asks what they might tell us about life on the rez and the Indigenous experience.

The gothic sensibility in *Trickster* is created in large part through *bricolage*, an assortment of objects, settings and attitudes that create a dark rez scene. In promotional interviews, Latimer referred to *Trickster* as Indigenous gothic: “I feel like it’s both a coming-of-age story, but also an Indigenous gothic story that uses supernatural elements to unpack a family’s healing” (Donato and Modi). While she was using the term to promote the new show, literary scholarship provides more distinct variations of the forms of gothic, even under the umbrella Latimer referred to as Indigenous gothic. For example, in her chapter with the inquisitive title, “Is There an Indigenous Gothic?,” literature scholar Michelle Burnham teases out the differences between such terms as Native American Gothic, First Nations Gothic and Northern Algonquin Gothic. Alan Velie, Burnham points out, was first to use a version of this label in the title of his 1991-1992 essay on *Bearheart*, “Gerald Vizenor’s Indian Gothic” (Burnham 228). Native American Gothic and First Nations Gothic refer to the work being produced on each side of the U.S.-Canada border, and Northern Algonquin Gothic is one example of tribe-specific horror storytelling traditions around, for example, the *windigo* (231). Burnham suggests that European Gothic traditions might be complicated or enriched if they consider contemporaneous “gothic” elements being developed in the precontact Americas, “such as the figures and stories of windigo, witches and ghosts” (226). Burnham also argues that one of the distinguishing features of Indigenous gothic is how it incorporates hauntings into everyday space:

Part of what distinguishes these examples of Indigenous Gothic from their European counterparts, in other words is that the haunted space between the living and the dead is

represented as a space that is terrifying but also crucial. Because ghosts are both necessary and useful, they possess an ambivalence even when they are absolutely menacing. Because they help to preserve and value the past, and bring the dead into dialogue with the living, their presence often must be sustained or at least tolerated rather than conquered or eliminated. (233)

While her examples of windigo and other precontact “ghosts” do not feature in my analysis of *Trickster*, her argument about Indigenous Gothic sustaining rather than eliminating its haunting figures tracks on the show. As Jared learns about the tricksters, witches and ancients that populate his world—and that he is descended from them—the core conflict on *Trickster* becomes one where he must both save himself from the murderous Wade/Wee’git and incorporate these gothic elements into his world. Since Wade/Wee’git is Jared’s biological father, we also witness Jared’s ambivalence about his mother’s determination to kill the trickster to save her son.

Part of what differentiates rez gothic, in my estimation, from Burnham’s analysis of Indigenous Gothic is its use of *bricolage*, the process of using the “odds and ends” of everyday life and combining them to make something new. Rez gothic does not rely on Indigenous traditions for its terror or hauntings. Both the rez of *Mohawk Girls* and the rez of *Trickster* use a plethora of objects, language, settings and material culture to build a rez aesthetic, as do the works of literature discussed in this dissertation. The main difference is that in *Trickster*, the *bricolage* of rez life is shrouded in darkness and mystery, drawing equally on the witchy aesthetic of Jared’s grandmother’s cabin and the uncomfortable aspects of his mother’s drinking for its ominous tone. As an example of a rez gothic *bricolage*, this promotional image displays the kinds of ephemera that come together to form a rez aesthetic: the log cabin walls, Native-print curtains covering windows and cupboards, an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, oil lamps and tea kettles (fig. 7). These items are standard fare that you might find in a house on the rez, but the items being shrouded in darkness are what earns *Trickster* its rez gothic label.



Fig. 7. Promotional image of CBC's *Trickster*.

Trickster maintains its gothic aesthetic through the duration of the series. At the end of the pilot episode, we are treated to two rez gothic scenes. The first is when Jared initially lays eyes on Sarah, his new next-door-neighbor and eventual love interest. Jared spots Sarah as she is carrying spoiled moose meat to the trash. Her hands, arms and the front of her shirt are covered in blood (44:00). Fireflies dance around Sarah's head as a symbol of her radiant personality in the show and the novel alike. Later in the episode, Jared is at a party with friends from his high school when he sees his doppelgänger staring at him with a terrifying grin on its face. In Episode 3, audiences first meet the ancients as three of them are gathered inside an R.V. trailer. We see that these beings are basically walking wounds as one of them peels off an entire fingernail (17:00) and the others have open cuts and scabs on their bodies. By Episode 5, viewers learn that ancients are skinless beings who need the powers of witches, like Sophia and Maggie, to sew skin suits for them out of dead bodies so they can walk among humans. When a family member finds Sophia using her sewing skills in this manner—a basic task for many Native women on the rez—and asks, with horror, what she's doing, Sophia responds simply: "What does it look like

I'm doing? Sewing" (25:29). The combination of an everyday skill on the rez, like sewing, with these skin monsters makes the scene rez gothic. Finally, Episode 4 ends with a stunning Indigenous gothic choreography. In a ceremony where Georgina receives her skin suit, she appears at first as a body turned inside out (fig. 8). There is a mix of terror and beauty in the scene as it alternates focus on the grotesque creature and the beautiful Haisla drummers encircling it. Georgina's dance, choreographed by professional ballet dancer Santee Smith, looks like a terrifying version of a powwow dance and the music in the scene is an electronic powwow song called "Sioux Revolution" composed by Christopher Dececio and Dominic Marsh. It is a striking and frightening example of the kind of new material rez gothic adds to the genre.



Fig. 8. Georgina, an ancient, dances as she receives her skin suit.

Burning at the Survey Stake

Beyond the rez gothic aesthetic of the show, viewing *Trickster* through rez theory—that is, looking for the appearance of politics, language and humor—illuminates how these characters make poetry of their everyday lives. *Trickster* uses the presence of a pipeline to demonstrate the varieties of political opinions that co-exist on the rez. Although viewers are exposed to a variety

of political opinions about the pipeline among people on this rez, the balance skews more toward the anti-pipeline position with the majority of airtime being devoted toward those opinions. The ancients—the creatures mentioned above who represent Indigenous traditions and the land—are gravely concerned with the pipeline’s effect on the land and, in one of the final scenes of the series, Georgina stands over a large crater, presumably dug for the pipeline, and commits to “end[ing] the trickster bloodline” to save the land (“6” 55:21). But, even among the anti-pipeline political positions of its characters, *Trickster* treats its viewers to a variety of angles. The most interesting comes from Sophia, Jared’s grandmother and Maggie’s mother, who viewers find starting a fire outside her cabin in the bush using the pipeline company’s survey stakes (fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Sophia starts a fire using survey stakes.

Sophia’s actions against the pipeline’s construction are an example of how tactics take advantage of timing, while strategies rely on space. As de Certeau explains: “because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’” (xix). The pipeline company uses the survey stakes to manipulate space in the bush, planning for construction, but Sophia takes advantage of timing

when she finds survey stakes in her day-to-day life and removes them. Her walks through the bush are a rezzy interpretation of de Certeau's walk through the city, but rather than adding her own mark to it, her removal of the survey stakes appears in service of the land. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's writes that unlike large Indigenous political movements like those at Standing Rock or Mauna Kea, "most Indigenous peoples' activism is too often invisible to the dominant, settler-colonial society" (xiii). By depicting this everyday moment in Sophia's life, *Trickster* takes a step in making them visible.

There are limits to her tactical maneuver and Sophia acknowledges them. In a conversation with her daughter, Maggie, about why she is doing this, Sophia explains that she dislodges the stakes to hassle the workers:

MAGGIE. What are those?

SOPHIA. Survey stakes. They want to put a pipeline right through my land. Soon as they put them in, I pull them out and burn them.

MAGGIE. That won't stop the pipeline.

SOPHIA. No, it won't. Just my subtle way of letting them know that I ain't going to make it easy for them. ("3" 34:50)

De Certeau claims that "a tactic is an art of the weak," and although Native people exercising resistance don't think of themselves as "the weak," understanding her action this way elucidates the art and the beauty that exists in these types of everyday actions that originate from below. The literal beauty is evidenced in the televisual format captured in figure 9; the survey stake fire, dotted with abalone shells, which are used by many Natives for smudging, and Sophia's cozy cabin in the woods show the transformation of pipeline detritus into a pleasant fall day for Sophia. De Certeau also writes of a tactic:

it is a maneuver 'within the enemy's field of vision'... within enemy territory. It does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy... It operates in isolated actions,

blow by blow... [It] must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment... It must vigilantly make use of the cracks... It creates surprises in them. (37)

This is precisely how Sophia's tactic of burning stakes occurs, by seizing an opportunity on the fly. That Sophia uses the survey stakes for firewood is not poetic justice *per se* since the pipeline will still be built. Instead, it is a tactic that makes up the poetry of everyday rez life.

Sophia's tactics represent one grandmother's approach to pipeline politics, but we also hear the varying opinions of the teenagers on the rez. An ordinary conversation between Jared and Sarah signals how pipeline politics and protests elicit a variety of responses among rez people, rather than the unified anti-pipeline agenda onlookers might assume all Native people share. Sarah is an Indigenous rights activist and Jared is not. As they are getting to know one another, Jared tells Sarah: "You know, I didn't think you had a fun side. I mean, you're all 'reclaim this, decolonize that'" ("2" 5:19). Jared's perspective is informed by the rez around him, while Sarah's political point of view is more worldly as a Native foster kid who moves around. When he says that she's "all reclaim this, decolonize that," not only does his use of "all" fit Leap's American Indian English, Jared's light-hearted accusation indicates that Sarah's views around reclamation and decolonization are not typical of day-to-day life on the rez. Later in the episode, Jared sees Sarah putting up posters for the anti-pipeline protest she is organizing and they have this exchange:

JARED. So, what are you advertising for?

SARAH. I'm not selling anything. I'm raising awareness. Anti-pipeline protest. The federal government is trying to force a pipeline through unceded lands.

JARED. I don't know if that's gonna fly here. A lot of people are relying on the new gas terminal for jobs.

SARAH. So you're pro-pipeline? ("2" 56:53)

Jared voices what is perhaps the stance of the average, everyday person on the rez. And it differs from Sarah's staunch, woke perspective. One magazine article describes *Trickster's* differences of opinions on the pipeline as a "northern B.C. town... torn apart by a pipeline debate, with one side for jobs, and the other for protecting the land" (Lewis), but subtle differences of opinion like these, not explosive disputes, are most characteristic of how pipeline politics play out on the show.

Although the anti-pipeline politics are most explicit, we also find apathy and a burgeoning pro-pipeline movement. When Sarah's anti-pipeline protest at the school takes place, it is met with mixed reactions. A seemingly diverse group protests to the sounds of a hand drum song and chant of "Water is life! Protect the earth!" But Jared appears apathetic when Sarah and Wade implore him to participate, as does Crashpad, who says to Jared afterward: "That was whack, eh? When everybody pretended to die and shit. Are you gonna be this granola on me when you go to Van[couver]?" ("3" 48:21). The reactions from two rez boys disrupt assumptions that all Native people partake in activism. Understated props and set designs depict the pro-pipeline contingent on the rez. In a separate scene and equally subtle manner, we see a sign in Jared's dad, Phil's, window that reads "Kitimat says YES" and the logo for the real-life natural gas company, LNG Canada. Throughout the series, signs like this will appear again in Phil's garage and in a diner when Jared and his mom are on the run from Wade/Wee'git.

Trickster viewers bear witness to the differences between strategies and tactics on the rez. Although both Jared and Sarah fit de Certeau's description of users who move through systems designed for and imposed upon them, whether it be the rez or foster care, Sarah's pipeline protest could also be considered a strategy within its rez context. The context—rez versus urban, for example—changes the way one action is understood. If she were organizing a protest in an urban

area, her maneuver is a tactic because her targets in that setting are oil companies and government policy makers—the powerful groups de Certeau calls “producers.” She is punching up. On the rez, however, her target shifts. As Jared points out, not everyone will automatically take her side and people on the rez will be concerned about jobs. So, in the unique context of the rez, Sarah’s actions no longer originate purely “from below.” They are felt differently in this place. She is not a producer, in the de Certeau sense, because she does not have significant power, but her actions threaten the blue-collar work that so many people on the rez rely on to make ends meet. Suddenly the act of protesting a pipeline becomes a strategy on the rez because it seeks to make decisions and structure the lives of rez folks who, even if they don’t agree with the environmental impact or politics of a pipeline, still need the jobs it creates. Context is everything and actions that occur on the rez have a tenor all their own. The rez is a place where strategies find it difficult to take root and politics are complicated.

While the plotline around pipeline politics offers the most apparent example of rez theory, there are also interesting examples of language and humor in the show. We see both in one scene where Jared’s dad, Phil, gifts him with *Trickster*’s version of the rez car. In one of the show’s few comedic scenes—it is a gothic show after all—Jared drives off in an electric mobility scooter given to him by his dad. Phil excitedly hands Jared the keys and tells him:

PHIL. This baby is all yours! You can make it your own, you know, rez your ride... Make it look real skookum.

JARED. Don’t you need it, though, for your back?

PHIL. Ayyyy... But don’t tell my social worker. (“2” 53:50)

This odd gift paves the way for a rare moment of comedic relief as Jared cruises away from his dad’s house in his new ride. For Jared, who is later embarrassed to be seen by Sarah on the scooter, even a junky rez car might be preferable to riding around on the electric scooter. In

addition to the comedy, Phil's language in this scene contains markers of rezziness. For one, he uses rez as a verb, suggesting that Jared "rez" his ride. And when he suggests that Jared make it look "real skookum," the latter word is jargon used by tribes in British Columbia to mean something big, great or good. Finally, Phil's "ayyyy," more of a sound than a word, can be heard by rez folks when they are teasing or laughing.

Bingo & Bricolage

To conclude this section, I step into the bingo hall to show how *Trickster* composes a *bricolage* of rez life. *Trickster* is a visually stunning piece of television. The gothic elements described in this chapter, combined with the rez aesthetic and northwest coast landscape, create a visual setting that is unique on television and contributes to the show's popularity. The premise of the show relies equally on everyday rezziness and gothic motifs. Because of this transition from the everyday rez into the magical realm, not every scene is gothic—some are just plain rezzy. *Trickster* subtly incorporates a sense of rezziness in its costume design, props, settings and soundtrack. The televisual format lends well to the making of a *bricolage* in *Trickster*, as the audiovisual medium speaks to viewers through background sights and sounds that are not always central to the plot or dialogue, but that add to its rez aesthetic.

If there is a rez kid uniform on *Trickster*, it is the basic hoodie sweatshirt and jeans we find Jared wearing in every episode. As the *Mohawk Girls* explained regarding rez "fashion," nothing should be too flashy or unconventional and Jared's uniform fits the bill. Still, other characters customize the rez uniform of jeans and a t-shirt. Maggie, for example, wears rock band t-shirts, which show her edgy side. Crashpad's t-shirts communicate rezzy messages: one displays the imaginary seal of a "Sasquatch Research Team," while another reads, "I was told there would be fry bread." The figure of the sasquatch is important in some Indigenous

traditions, for example, representing honesty in Anishinabe seven grandfather/grandmother teachings. Frybread, a popular food in Native homes on special occasions and along the powwow trail, is a modern food made “authentic” through its ubiquity in Indian Country. The article “Indigenous Health Initiatives, Frybread, and the Marketing of Nontraditional ‘Traditional’ American Indian Foods” by Devon Mihesuah documents this controversy that provides further proof that strategies, as top-down attempts to structure Native people’s lives, fail on the rez:

Recent frybread drama occurred when fitness advocate and star of the weight-loss reality show *The Biggest Loser* star Jillian Michaels attempted to educate Yavapai Apaches about the dangers of fried flour at a 2010 tribal gathering. She dropped a plate of fried bread in the trash and called it ‘poison’; in return, a tribal member called her an ‘idiot’ and threw a pile of bread at her. Afterward, she received a poor turnout for her diabetes discussion. (46)

Although this is a true story and, of course, *Trickster* is fiction, many communities have their own stories, memories, opinions and recipes associated with this popular food. The choice of the frybread t-shirt for Crashpad’s wardrobe is a nod to rez folks and their own frybread stories. Speaking of fried foods, Episode 4 opens with the overhead image of a popular rez meal or snack: baloney frying in a cast iron pan (1:22). The fried baloney is contrasted by another shot, later in the same episode, of Sophia making smoked salmon at her home (33:11). The juxtaposition of these two foods in one episode—the latter a traditional form and the former a processed food—demonstrates that rez life occurs on a continuum. The choice for rez folks is not *either* traditions and salmon *or* assimilation and baloney; they exist side-by-side and each represent the rez.

Attentiveness to background details reveal how *Trickster* composes its rezziness. In one scene, when Jared goes to pick up from the food bank, there is a collage of community flyers and posters advertising lost dogs and a community harvest; a poster for the Kahnawà:ke spring clean up would fit right in among these rezzzy announcements. Sophia’s cabin in the woods has an

abundance of Indian stuff; the tanned buckskin tablecloth and wolf's and other animals' furs hanging from walls and chairs are almost too over-the-top ("4" 57:57). However, the props inside Maggie and Jared's home, like a Native-print blanket hanging over the back of a couch or a dreamcatcher on the wall, are more understated and readily identifiable as fixtures in many homes on the rez. A quick pan across Jared's desk in the final episode illustrates the *bricolage* that makes up one teenage boy's life on the rez: a copy of Gord Hill's *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, a backscratcher shaped like a bearpaw and the image of a thunderbird (16:17). Some might dismiss certain items, like the bearpaw backscratcher, as cheap representations of Indianness that aren't "authentic," perhaps unlike the skins covering Sophia's table which, to my eye, are too try-hard. Understanding rez folks as *bricoleurs*, as people who make something new out of the odds and ends of their everyday lives, allows us to see how Jared folds "inauthentic" items like these into his *bricolage*. The bearpaw backscratcher, by right of Jared's use of it, earns its spot alongside the more "authentic" comic and traditional symbol.

The music on *Trickster* deserves a study all its own. Many of the artists featured, such as Jeremy Dutcher and The Halluci Nation (formerly A Tribe Called Red), are at the forefront of the music scene in Canada. These two artists blend elements of their Indigenous musical traditions with more recognizably "western" styles of music to create something new—a *bricolage*—of sound. When the audience first meets Sarah—in the scene I described above where she is bloodied by spoiled moose meat—she is walking towards Jared in slow motion as the electronic powwow music of The Halluci Nation's song "Red Skin Girl" plays over the scene. The song samples from the original "Red Skin Girl" by popular powwow drum group, Northern Cree, and combines it with electronic dance music. In another scene, Maggie breaks down in tears while the haunting vocals of classically trained Wolastoqiyik opera singer Jeremy

Dutcher play, punctuated by her sobs. The song, “Oqiton,” includes Dutcher’s own impressive vocals, as well as “century-old wax cylinder recordings of traditional songs by his people, the Wolastoqiyik of the Tobique First Nation in New Brunswick, sung in their language of Wolastoqey.” In a news article about Dutcher’s album, *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*, he quotes Buffy Ste. Marie to describe the motivation for his music and it sounds, to me, like he is a *bricoleur*: “If what you want is not on the menu, go into the kitchen, cook it up, and show them how good it tastes” (Darville).

I end with one final rezzzy scene, one that flashes across the screen so quickly that it could be missed. In a move that contains echoes of Lipsha Morrissey in *Love Medicine*, Jared borrows thirty dollars from Crashpad and comes up with a plan to raise the money to pay his mother’s drug debt: bingo (“1” 53:50).



Fig. 10. Unnamed auntie and Jared playing bingo.

Anyone who knows serious bingo players, or is one themselves, recognizes this scene: the multiple bingo dabber options (in case one runs out of luck), the good luck charms (blurred out in the foreground) and a pro-player, with what looks like too many cards to manage, who finds time to dab the numbers Jared missed (fig. 9). As I discussed in the introduction to this

dissertation, “being all rezzed out” is an action-oriented process that traverses the physical boundaries of the reservation. This is a prime example of it. Native people make bingo halls rezzy, whether they are on or off the actual reservation. The rez aesthetic travels with the people as they come and go: the Tamarack goose sculpture (third trinket from the left) and the easy bond between Jared and the unnamed auntie make them rez no matter where they are. Even Jared’s request to “borrow thirty bucks” and his plan to use it to save his mom are rezzy attitudes. Bingo, baloney, music, t-shirt slogans and bearpaw backscratchers: *Trickster* gives viewers the makings of a rezzy aesthetic, and we watch as characters put it all together in a beautiful *bricolage*.

Conclusion: Walking the Rez Road

Television is a symbol of the everyday and that is precisely why it matters to this chapter. The entirety of this dissertation has focused on the ordinary, the everyday, and television sets are part of that landscape. Dustin Tahmahkera summarizes how Native writers have discussed their relationship to television: Sherman Alexie calls himself “a sitcom kid”—a label Tahmahkera adopts for himself—who was equally influenced by the *Brady Bunch* and powwows (9), while others like Scott Lyons have interesting and funny recollections, like thinking *Star Trek*’s Spock was an Indian (14). Television was a central part of my household growing up and I remember my uncle who lived in the city dropping off VHS tapes of shows like *The Simpsons* that he recorded for us because we didn’t catch them on the rez. Until recently, positive and complex Native representations were rare on television—apart from the occasional series like *North of 60*, a gem of its time that my dad watches every noon hour—but that has begun to change over the past few years as shows like *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster* grace the small screen.

Trickster and *Mohawk Girls* are both ripe for the application of rez theory. In the first

part of the chapter, I looked at the comedic series *Mohawk Girls* through the themes of politics, conformity and language. Like its reference point *Sex and the City*, *Mohawk Girls* takes the central theme of dating and follows the friendship of a group of four women as they navigate their love lives. Unlike the glitz and glamour that the backdrop of New York City provides, however, *Mohawk Girls* gives us the rez, where sexual encounters involve catching your man “using the butter” on another woman at a party or end with a character sneaking out of a basement egress window. *Mohawk Girls* also explains to viewers some of the inner workings of rez life and the unwritten book of “rez rules” by which citizens are expected to conform. Finally, *Mohawk Girls* offers a prime example of rez linguistics, an idea that branches out from Leap’s American Indian English, where language that is only legible to people living on the rez structures social interactions and creates speech communities. I concluded with a consideration of the impact that the production of *Mohawk Girls* had on the real-life reserve, Kahnawà:ke.

Trickster communicates its rezziness primarily through the audiovisual format that television provides. While *Mohawk Girls* established its rez sensibility through the show’s writing, where the plot lines and character dialogue communicate the rez to viewers, *Trickster* relies more on the visual format and soundscape to convey a sense of being on the rez. One American television critic called the rez as *Trickster* presented it “a rural blue-collar community that looks like almost nothing you’ve ever seen before on American TV” (Fienberg). I named this never-before-seen environment depicted on *Trickster* rez gothic, a branch on the ever-widening genealogy of the gothic. While Michelle Burnham has put thought to an original form of Indigenous Gothic delivered through traditional stories, my definition of rez gothic describes the way everyday Native life on the rez creates a unique aesthetic basis for a gothic scene. In the background of the show’s main storyline, where Jared learns he is the son of a trickster and a

witch, is the hum of pipeline politics, and the show takes every advantage to demonstrate numerous perspectives on the issue. Finally, *Trickster*'s use of *bricolage* creates a visual of rez life that assembles a wide range of objects—from survey stakes to bingo, from t-shirts to electronic powwow music—that convey a sense of what rez life is like. Both of these series begin with main characters walking on their respective rez roads. *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster* are two excellent examples of representations of contemporary rez life and how the people living it make poetry out of sometimes limited material and authority. It's a thrilling time in Native American literature and Indigenous television, and wherever we are going on this journey, it will be extraordinary to see where the rez road leads next.

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Conclusion:
An Invitation to the Rez

The rez has its own aesthetic and much of this dissertation is spent tracing its contours. I argued that studying the rez aesthetic reveals the rez as a place where folks use language, politics and humor to withstand efforts to structure and determine Native life. This is the poetry of rez life. This is rez theory. This has been an exercise in doing “theory from below”; looking at the ways everyday Native life is lived to inform our understanding of how structures of power live and die on the rez. My research begins from a similar place as that of the nationalist school of Native literary criticism, which is prominent in our field, but also diverges in certain ways. Our motivations are shared. When Simon J. Ortiz wrote about wanting to make space for his non-literary Uncle Steve in his scholarship—and described in detail his blue neckerchief, his attitude on fiesta days and his struggle to teach history—he shined the spotlight on rez folk, and their ordinary aesthetics and attitudes, in ways I do as well. Where my research diverges, however, is in the theory it creates. Nationalism generally looks to Indigenous knowledge and traditions to create the tools within its critical arsenal and, as Arnold Krupat writes in *Red Matters*, “it is these knowledges that give to nationalism its values” (11). Rez theory, instead, uses whatever scraps are available, the “odds and ends” (to quote Lévi-Strauss) that can be found on an ordinary day-in-the-life of your auntie on the rez. Often, as we saw in the preceding chapters, those materials combine everyday signifiers of indigeneity along with any number of other stray objects, like cars, ball caps and baloney. My research can more accurately be said to come out of the Gerald Vizenor school of thought, where his concept of “terminal creeds” attacks insider and outsider

strategies that try to structure Native life: his “postindian warriors” are rez folks who use tactics to outwit the system.

The radical intervention of rez theory is to suggest that such a thing exists at all, that it is possible to understand rez life as critical, tactical and theoretically significant. Its method asks scholars to pay attention to the everyday, the ordinary, the quotidian and the small stuff that often takes place in-between the monumental moments of a given cultural production. Those overlooked pieces of ephemera and off-the-cuff attitudes are what form a rez aesthetic and rez sensibilities. In my Introduction, I proposed three thematics that form rez theory: language, politics and humor. Doing rez theory involves searching for these thematics in literature, art and other cultural productions by Native people and about the rez, then asking what their effects reveal about our understandings of the organizing of power or, more precisely, how rez folks intervene in structures of power. Existing cultural theories, such as Michel de Certeau’s practice of everyday life and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *bricolage*, contribute to my elucidation of rez theory. De Certeau’s theories about users versus producers and tactics versus strategies offer a framework for interpreting how rez people, using tactical interventions, operate within the systems that are imposed upon them. Nationalism, which has been the predominant critical perspective from which much recent Native literary criticism emerges, operates as a strategy that argues for the importance of sovereignty in the context of Native literary criticism. By stressing the distinct nature of Indigenous knowledge and traditions, it made space in academia for the concept of self-determination to be applied to Native literature. Rez theory argues that now is the time to turn our attention toward the importance of tactics, those maneuvers and interventions that occur at the level of the everyday. Tactics are things that happen “in the background,” things that might be missed because they are so deeply rooted in our lives. Lévi-Strauss’ *bricolage* puts

a name to the process of making rez culture and explains how the assembly of objects, attitudes and places that we see all the time form a rez aesthetic. *Bricolage* emphasizes the creative agency rez folks have in the making of that aesthetic. Many of us know what it is like to live rez life; *bricolage* and tactics are theoretical tools that help explain how it comes together and what it is capable of.

After developing rez theory in my Introduction, I went on to test it in the subsequent three chapters that form this dissertation. I began, as many literary scholars do, with the Native American Renaissance and selected the novel I suspected best demonstrated a wide array of the kind of everyday, blue-collar, campy version of rez aesthetics I am interested in: *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich. Indeed, Erdrich's first novel offers settings, language, ephemera and characters that are undeniably rez. Her inclusion of the words "dis or dat" shows the intersection of rez accents and humor. Erdrich, a master of symbolism, uses the cars characters drive and the ball caps they wear to not only add texture to the rez aesthetic but to indicate to readers whether any one of her many characters is self-assured, lost or somewhere in between. *Love Medicine*, a reference to a form of Indian medicine, is not ceremony or magic. There is "magic" present in the novel but not in the literal sense. The love medicine, the magic, exists in the ordinary moments. In the closing chapter, when one character, Lipsha Morrissey, finally learns the identity of his father and finds himself driving in a (rez) car with him, he doesn't ask him about his paternity or about life's big questions. This is what they talk about instead: "We talked a good long time about the reservation then, I caught him up on all the little blacklistings and scandals that had happened" (329). The rez. My first chapter argues that *Love Medicine's* characters and setting offer a wide array of ephemera and attitudes to select from to study rez aesthetics. Erdrich's characters long for joy within and beyond the rez, but her portrait of rez life

proves that it is one worth living.

My second chapter tests the limits of rez theory further by exploring whether a memoir that takes place both on- and off-reserve can also be characterized as rezzy. Terese Marie Mailhot's memoir, *Heart Berries*, follows her from her upbringing on the rez, to motherhood, through her two marriages, and to an MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA). In an introduction, Mailhot's former writing teacher, Sherman Alexie, refers to her memoir as a form of "blue-collar mysticism" (xv). This signals the presence of the kind of blue-collar rez aesthetic that permeates many rezzy cultural productions. As Mailhot moves beyond the boundaries of her reserve in Canada to the U.S., her rezziness travels with her. When Mailhot writes of her arrival at the orientation for her MFA program, she says that she felt "more Indian" with her boyfriend beside her with a black eye and with her pregnant belly leading the way. These are markers of the rez and Mailhot notes how, even though they might be considered unsavory, they offer connection to her home. In that moment, Mailhot assembles a portable *bricolage* of rezziness that, while unsavory to some, is transformed by its referents and offers a sense of comfort for the author. Understanding unsavory signifiers, like a black eye, through rez theory changes how we think about their usefulness. *Heart Berries* is an example of the transience of rez, of how the creators of rez life make a *bricolage* that travels into new places on the bodies and in the minds of the people who are of the place.

Having established some of the contours of the rez in *Love Medicine* and testing them in *Heart Berries*, I then turned to the small screen to examine visual representations of the rez. I chose two Canadian television shows, *Mohawk Girls* and *Trickster*, that are set in different parts of the country and are based in different genres, comedy-drama and fantasy-drama respectively. Both shows depict the thematics of rez theory—language, politics and humor—as well as the

theories of de Certeau's tactics and strategies and Lévi-Strauss' *bricolage*. For instance, both the Mohawk and English languages are used on *Mohawk Girls* in ways that are rezzy. The show is dubbed entirely in Mohawk, as part of the producers' and the network's commitment to language revitalization, but characters also use the English language to create their own rez slang. On *Trickster*, we see various political perspectives in one community on a contentious topic, a pipeline: one father needs the work the oil company would provide to support his family; an urban Native activist organizes protests about which her rez peers feel apathetic; a grandmother employs tactics against the oil company as she takes a walk in the bush. In these two series, ordinary rez folks create poetry out of their everyday lives.

My analysis of these texts forms a new, rezzy narrative that challenges the dominant view of the reservation as a place of tragedy, poverty and high rates of illness and socioeconomic disparities. Instead, I focus on the Native agency that exists there and how it is exercised. With the terminological shift from reservation to rez, I highlight the language used by the people who live there. That slight change in focus draws attention to the many creative and tactical ways Native people imagine, transform and construct the rez on their own terms. For as long as reservations have existed, Native people have been undoing and undermining the construction of categories around and about them. Rez theory reveals the rez as a place where tactics rule and strategies flounder and shows how Native people destabilize the very ground that those in power aim to control.

An Invitation to the Rez

Rather than offering final thoughts, I close this dissertation with an invitation to the rez or, rather, to rez theory. I am writing at a time when there is a profusion of Native American and Indigenous art, literature, film, television, music and scholarship. My hope is that the rez theory

developed in this dissertation offers a new way of seeing and thinking about the rez in our writing, scholarship and theorizing. In that spirit, this conclusion is an opening, or an invitation, that points to numerous cultural productions that I think make excellent sites for rez theory. Rez theory suggests how the everyday actions of people on the rez interrupt the systems that aim to structure our lives. The poetry of rez life is written out of both ordinary material, including the detritus we sometimes find ourselves left with, and everyday conversations we have when we visit our grandparents and cousins and neighbors. In the pages that follow, I leave you with some of the artists who demonstrate rez in action.

Fiction

Native American fiction remains the form where some of the most interesting and rezzy depictions are being written. Recent releases in genre fiction demonstrate their rezziness in more than just the novel's setting. *Winter Counts* by David Heska Wanbli Weiden is a crime thriller about Virgil Wounded Horse, a rez-based vigilante who becomes involved in a police sting operation meant to uncover criminal activity that brought heavy drugs onto his reservation. In a political side plot, Virgil and his ex-girlfriend also wind up following a tip that finds them rooting through their tribal office.

Stephen Graham Jones' horror novel, *The Only Good Indians*, follows the aftermath of an elk hunt gone wrong when a group of four friends hunts on a piece of land they were not allowed to use because it was assigned to their community elders. In the subsequent chapters, each of the four men is slowly hunted, in return, by Elk Head Woman. One section is titled "Sweat Lodge Massacre," and another, "It Came From the Rez." This novel is another great example of rez gothic as I described it in the last chapter, a form that employs the rez aesthetic in service of its ominous tone and dark plot. The characters are haunted by Elk Head Woman, but also by the

sounds of pop-tops—the tabs used to open a can—coming from inside the truck of a father as he watches his estranged daughter play basketball.

Angeline Boulley’s young adult novel, *Firekeeper’s Daughter*, set in northern Michigan and featuring a protagonist who dreams of attending the University of Michigan, also features an undercover police operation. Daunis Fontaine is a science nerd, jingle dress dancer and hockey player who uses the knowledge of plants she learned from her late uncle to solve a criminal case. Cars, the symbolism employed by Erdrich and examined in Chapter 1, feature prominently in Boulley’s novel. Unlike Erdrich, who gives us the typical rez car, Boulley chooses to highlight rez folks who drive fancy vehicles, like her brother’s Hummer. As new Native American authors emerge onto the scene, and acclaimed ones build their canon, representations of the rez become more diversified.

Nonfiction and Memoir

Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese’s is the latest work of essays by Lakota writer Tiffany Midge. The unnecessary apostrophe ‘s’ on *Cheese’s* instantly marks her title as rez and is reminiscent of “the old people [who] called them, the AIMs” (200), which I analyzed in Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior’s history in my Introduction. The opening sequence of Midge’s book is another prime example of the dethroning of the serious, as Susan Sontag writes. We meet the author in a moment of grief, at the church service for her mother’s funeral where she watches from the “musician’s belfry like a tortured Quasimodo, my grief too hideous to expose” (3). Her mother’s sisters solemnly approach the casket to add a star quilt to it, but the bulky quilt makes the casket difficult to close. Midge writes: “my aunties struggled to close the lid, both furtively cramming the ends of the quilt into the casket, tucking my mother inside. One of them gestured exasperatingly to the other, and then they both started to laugh” (3). This essay in *Bury My Heart*

at *Chuck E. Cheese's* makes a *bricolage* of grief, funeral humor and star quilts, and it could well be studied under rez theory.

Like works by her contemporary, Terese Marie Mailhot, Elissa Washuta's nonfiction essays and memoir provide examples of rezziness outside of the boundaries of the reservation. In her memoir, *My Body Is a Book of Rules*, each essay is separated by connective tissue that she titles her "Cascade Autobiography." In these short essays, Washuta reflects on her identity as an enrolled member of the Cowlitz tribe and as a member, too, of the "disappeared" Cascade people. Washuta writes of rarely finding herself around Indians outside of her immediate family until she went to a Native summer camp with Indian teenagers from across the U.S., itself a sort of satellite rez. She writes: "We all spent the summer whispering about blood quanta as though these fractions were as gossip-worthy as our roommates' boning schedules" (116). One of the adult camp supervisors gives Washuta the advice to marry a Navajo boy named Nelson to "get the quantum up in my bloodline" (116). Washuta recognizes the absurdity of her campmates' gossip and counsellor's advice, and initially positions herself as an almost impartial witness to it all. By the end of the essay, however, Washuta shows that she is not completely inured to longing for this signal of authenticity, no matter how fraught its history. She writes: "So many times after that summer, I called Nelson up late at night... I couldn't stop calling—God, one-half, that gorgeous quantum" (117). Washuta uses humor to critique blood quantum politics, while also placing her own desire—her longing for a "gorgeous quantum"—within its complicated terrain.

Television

NBC's streaming platform Peacock recently released a sitcom called *Rutherford Falls* that has Native and non-Native audiences abuzz. Creators Mike Schur, Ed Helms and Sierra

Teller Ornelas (Navajo) bring Hollywood to the rez in a series that tells the story of two nerdy best friends—one white and one Native—who each run their own small museum of, respectively, town and tribal history. Nathan Rutherford, played by Ed Helms, is heir to his small museum in an historical house in the town named after his family, and Raegan Wells, played by Jana Schmieding, oversees a tribal cultural center in a neglected commercial space in her tribe’s casino. In “Episode 6: Negotiations,” Raegan, the leading Native lady, sorts through “junk” that was donated to the threadbare cultural center after two snarky casino workers put a call out for donations on Facebook. In an effort to find out if anything is worth keeping, Reagan interviews the donors and finds that a worn-out blender fed thousands of water protectors during the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement at Standing Rock and a used candle tells a traditional lesson about going to the bathroom in the bush. The casino director’s teenaged daughter gifts the cultural center a beaded emoji medallion to inspire future generations of beadworkers. Forming a *rez bricolage*, items Raegan initially thought of as junk are assembled to tell the story of the people who made and continue to make rez history. With five Native comedy writers—Bobby Wilson, Tai Leclair, Tazbah Chavez, Schmieding and Teller Ornelas—*Rutherford Falls* boasts one of the largest Native American writing rooms in a major Hollywood production (Turchiano). The upcoming series *Reservation Dogs*, created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi, has an all-Native writers’ room (Cheung). As I discussed in Chapter 3, television is a key medium for influencing public opinion and understandings of Native people, so the impact of shows like *Mohawk Girls*, *Trickster* and *Rutherford Falls* cannot be overstated.

Music

There is a soundtrack to “Rez Theory.” Musical references were peppered throughout the dissertation, beginning in the Introduction with the question of why a non-Native rock band like

the CCR could be considered rez. The sounds of the rez anthem “NDN Kars (Indian Cars)” by Keith Secola strummed in the background while we thought about the symbolism of Louise Erdrich’s cars in Chapter 1. In the last chapter, I referenced the music that was played on *Trickster*. *Trickster*’s soundtrack is worthy of study all its own and features veteran Native artists, like Buffy Ste. Marie and Pura Fé, alongside the contemporary music of The Halluci Nation (formerly A Tribe Called Red), Jeremy Dutcher and Tanya Tagaq, among others. The series is introduced, in part, through the hip-hop lyricism of the Snotty Nose Rez Kids when the main character, Jared, is listening to their music as he walks down a rez road. Upbeat electronic powwow music played over the scene when Jared first lays eyes on his love interest. The haunting operatic vocals of classically trained singer Jeremy Dutcher were arranged atop a scene where Jared’s mother breaks down in a storage closet, the pressure of protecting her teenage son reaching its tipping point. These new artists meld popular genres of music with their own Indigenous musical traditions. Jeremy Dutcher, for example, transcribed Wolastoq songs from 1907 wax cylinders found in the archives of the Canadian Museum of History. Dutcher is committed to Indigenous language revitalization and says of his music: “I’m doing this work because there’s only about a hundred Wolastoqey speakers left. It’s crucial for us to make sure that we’re using our language and passing it on to the next generation. If you lose the language, you’re not just losing words; you’re losing an entire way of seeing and experiencing the world from a distinctly indigenous perspective” (“Jeremy Dutcher”). In *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Dylan Robinson writes of Dutcher’s process: “their work is exactly this: a form of bringing songs back to life. Far from simply finding new forms and ways to sing these songs, this work involves negotiation between protocol and contemporary art practice” (168). They are taking styles of music traditionally considered western and making

them rezzy. The Halluci Nation, the DJ group formerly known as A Tribe Called Red, originated in Ottawa, Ontario, where they hosted popular nightclub events called Electric Powwows at a downtown bar. For one night, city events transformed into a rez bar you could find depicted on *Mohawk Girls*. The incorporation of “western” music styles with traditional Indigenous songs bends genre in creative ways and is one way to, as Robinson puts it, “bring songs back to life.”

Visual Arts

Visual artists demonstrate the relationship between tactics and strategies as they play out on the rez. While there are a wide variety of artists to choose from, I draw on examples from Nadia Myre and Kent Monkman. Nadia Myre is “a Quebec-based Algonquin artist known for using small, craft-based media to make a big aesthetic and political impact” (“Myre wins”). Myre is lauded for her impressive large-scale pieces, such as representation of a wampum belt titled *For those who cannot speak*, but here I focus on her work, *Indian Act*, due to the clarity with which it illustrates Michel de Certeau’s tactics and strategies in action. A set of Canadian laws, the Indian Act (1876), endures to this day. It determines who is an Indian and what is permitted on reserves. Printed out, it is a 56-page document; from 2000 to 2002, Myre and 230 volunteers beaded over those sheets of paper with red and white seed beads. The legislative Indian Act is perhaps one of the most blatant examples of producers employing strategies that aim to control and structure Indian life and space. The tactic lies in the beadwork, which is a deeply familiar form of artwork in Native communities. Myre demonstrates the possibilities for Native people, as users, to manipulate the strategies as laid out by, in this case, the literal colonizer. While Myre was not the first, nor will she be the last, to comment on the Indian Act in visual art, her piece—impressive in its grandeur with so many beaded pages—brought attention to everyday Native people. Viewers of the *Indian Act* installation imagine Native people, stitch

by stitch, covering the legislation that wrought harm on them, their families and communities, sewing their own impressions onto the piece.

Kent Monkman is an interdisciplinary Cree visual artist. Monkman employs his skill in landscape art to reimagine bucolic scenes of Canada's colonial past. From afar they might look like a colonial scene in rolling green hills and mountains, but when examined at closer range viewers see a flurry of activity that is far from what one might expect of the standard form. In *Sacred Vows*, a white man, whose pants are down and who is wearing what looks to be a military outfit or other colonial garb, grasps at the ankles of an Indian man, presumably his lover, who is ready to ride away on a white horse. Royal Canadian Mountain Police (RCMP) officers, with their distinctive red coats, are some of Monkman's preferred portrait figures and they can often be found tearing Native children out of the arms of their parents and grandparents, as in *The Scream* (see fig. 11), or being spanked, as in *Cree Master I*.



Fig. 11. Kent Monkman, *The Scream*, 2017.

Although Monkman's art clearly takes aim at some large targets, like Canada's residential school

system, the backdrops and figures in these works of art reveal hints of rezziness. In *The Scream*, the action is taking place in front of a dilapidated rez house with patchwork roofing, torn window screens and siding in variegated colors. A rez dog barks as a nun and RCMP officer pull two young children apart from one another. Reminiscent of the ending of D'Arcy McNickle's novel *The Surrounded*, three Native children in jeans and sweatshirts are running toward the bush in the opposite direction of the violence.

Social Media

One of the writers and actors on *Rutherford Falls*, Bobby Wilson, is also a member of the comedy/arts troupe *the 1491s*, who are best known for producing YouTube videos. "Slapping Medicine Man" is a physical comedy sketch that shows Native people asking for a medicine man's help. Rather than delivering them the sage advice one might expect of an elder, the medicine man slaps sense into them—literally—and provides them with the simple answer to their problem. In addition to their comedy, *the 1491s* produce a series called "Represent" that features Native people mixing their traditions and modern life. They have several videos that show Native college students living their traditions while on campus, for example, jingle dress dancing in plain clothes across Dartmouth College. Some of my favorite of *the 1491s*' collection of videos are their spoken word poetry. In the video poem "Geronimo E-KIA" writers Ryan Red Corn and Dallas Goldtooth take issue with the U.S. military's use of the name Geronimo as the code name for Osama Bin Laden in the U.S. military operation that resulted in the latter's death. In a poem that reclaims the name and legacy of Geronimo for Native American people, we see a variety of Native people reading lines of the poem that redirect the audience's attention away from bin Laden and toward the ordinary Native people who are the living legacy of the famous Geronimo:

Geronimo was not killed in Pakistan
Geronimo is a college student in Lawrence
Who refuses to be a statistic
Geronimo was not killed in Pakistan
He is alive in a woman from Oakland
Who tutors and mentors Indian kids growing up in the city
...
He is a paramedic from Wide Ruins
Who drives the ambulance faster because he knows no other help is coming

This is some literal “poetry of rez life,” as the lines name the extraordinary lengths everyday Native people take to ensure the wellbeing of their people and their community. The poem ends on a beautiful “cliff-hanger” when the one narrator looks directly into the camera and explains: “And his real name wasn’t Geronimo. His people called him—” She takes a breath, about to speak, but the camera cuts to black, indicating there is still some knowledge that is kept among the Native community, knowledge that belongs to the rez. With its many users, social media is a trove of touching and funny content about rez life.

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In *Love Medicine*, one character, Lipsha Morrissey, tells readers: “Nobody else ever knew us. Nobody, if they don’t read this, ever will” (277). For outsiders, the rez is a misunderstood or virtually unknown place. Basic history education focuses on the treaty-making and policies that created the shrunken and scattershot maps of Native land we have today, and news media show its poverty and socioeconomic issues. But if you turn to contemporary Indigenous artists and storytellers, a different view of the rez comes into view: Louise Erdrich’s baseball caps and rez cars represent the complicated intersections of love and anger, endurance and humor; Terese Marie Mailhot redeems markers of Indian-ness typically deemed unsavory in her memoir *Heart Berries*; the television series *Mohawk Girls* brings feelings of rez conformity and the challenges of rez dating to the small screen, while *Trickster* depicts the horror of rez gothic. Given the fact

that so many non-Native people are “functionally illiterate,” to quote Lakota satirist Tiffany Midge (84), on the everyday Indigenous experience, especially on the rez, these contemporary works of literature and other cultural production fill a critical gap in knowledge about Native people, history and issues.

Part of that day-to-day Indigenous experience is that Native people move through the world with the sense that “nobody knows us,” as Erdrich’s Lipsha describes, and rez theory is one avenue that foregrounds our people, communities, history and everyday lives. Rez theory shines a light on how Native people construct an aesthetic and sensibility of their own lives that, while made of ordinary things, becomes quite extraordinary. This dissertation puts a scholarly term, rez theory, to the place and processes that Native people are already familiar with through lived experience, but that have been overlooked and undervalued in academia. Through rez theory, Native people define what is rez and how it is made.

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