

# According to Whom am I Happy? Identity Formation and Transfeminist Care Ethics in Imogen Binnie's *Nevada*

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## **Inception**

This essay was originally written in Winter 2018 for Dr. Heather Milne's class, "Queer Theory," in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg.

## **Abstract**

In this essay, I will provide an analysis of Imogen Binnie's 2013 novel *Nevada*. I argue that *Nevada* is a counter-narrative to both traditional depictions of the road narrative as well as mainstream understandings of transition narratives. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of "Cruel Optimism" and Sarah Ahmed's critique of cultural understandings of happiness in her essay "Unhappy Queers," I will show how Binnie complicates normative understandings of trans identity which rely on trans people assimilating into cisgender heterosexual society. I then read the brief connection between *Nevada*'s two main characters, Maria and James, through Amy Marvin's "Transfeminist Care Ethics" to show how Binnie rejects the impulse towards individualistic self-realization and instead posits the complicated and sometimes painful connections between transgender subjects as the real site of James and Maria's identity formation.

## Overview & Theory

Road narratives conventionally are stories of individuals overcoming inner turmoil; by going on journeys towards some mythic place away from everyday life, the protagonist is forced to confront a series of struggles and the journey will result in self-discovery and a sense of accomplishment (Brereton 2003). Imogen Binnie's 2013 novel, *Nevada*, refuses such simple trajectories. *Nevada* is a story about Maria Griffiths, a 28-year-old trans woman who abandons her life in Brooklyn, steals a car from her ex-girlfriend, Steph and, with \$400 worth of heroin, embarks on a haphazard road trip to Nevada having decided her road to self-discovery will be through acting "extremely irresponsible in her life from now on" (Binnie 95). Maria begins the novel as a cynical punk who works in a bookstore. The conflict in the novel begins when Steph tells Maria that she has been cheating on her with their mutual friend, Kieran. Steph becomes upset when Maria displays little emotional reaction to her confession: "Are you upset? I know, oh, you don't have access to your feelings, you're all shut down" (Binnie 10). Later on, Kieran confronts Maria to tell her that he didn't sleep with Steph and that Steph only told Maria this because she had become exasperated with Maria's emotional disconnectedness and was trying to spark a reaction in her. While Maria's emotional state had already begun to go downhill with her drinking and taking Adderall to repress her feelings, the revelation that Steph has lied hurts Maria far more than if she had cheated. Maria breaks up with Steph and goes to the apartment of her trans friend, Piranha. After spending a few days there, Maria decides she needs to do something dramatic to break herself out of her emotional numbness and bounce back from her breakup with Steph. This results in her stealing Steph's car and driving towards Nevada where she ends up in the small town of Star City and meets James,<sup>1</sup> a

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<sup>1</sup> Although James's gender identity is very much in question throughout the novel, I will be using he/him pronouns to refer to James throughout the

young gender-conflicted individual who looks to Maria for a possible answer to his crisis of identity. The novel ends anti-climatically with James stealing Maria's heroin and abandoning her to go have sex with his girlfriend and continue repressing his feelings about gender.

I read the attachment between James and Maria as one of cruel optimism, a term from queer theorist Lauren Berlant, defined as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss" (21). Cruel optimism shows up in the ways Maria and James seek their respective identities in relation to the other and utterly fail to actualize them. Drawing on the work of Amy Marvin who articulates a Transfeminist Care Ethics defined as "a political wisdom that links dependency with solidarity across differences" (117), I argue that *Nevada* rejects the individual self-realization that is meant to occur through the traditional Road Narrative and instead posits the encounters between trans subjects as the site of identity construction, even if those connections are fraught and seem ultimately to fail.

In this paper I will be situating *Nevada* within the literary trope of the road narrative. Road narratives typically centre around a single white cisgender male protagonist who is made to leave his home and go "on the road" often without a specific destination. In the course of his journey, the protagonist of the road narrative will encounter a series of obstacles that must be overcome in order for him to achieve personal enlightenment or transformation. Scholar Pat Brereton argues that the individualism of the road narrative makes this convention into a "utopian space for narcissistic self-fulfillment" (105). The road narrative can be seen as an iteration of the trope of Joseph Campbell's conception of the hero's quest (1949), which involves an individual, or group of individuals, seeking out a specific lost object and, through the struggles to attain this, they transcend

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essay since those are the pronouns Binnie continues to refer to him with by the end of the novel.

from ordinary humans into mythic heroes. The road narrative can be seen as a particularly American iteration of the hero's quest, which often "idealizes the landscapes of the American West as sites of rejuvenation, self-discovery, and transformation for city folk and other outsider-pilgrims" (Seymour 15). Key texts in the road narrative tradition include Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Road narratives have been a feature of many cinematic works as well as novels. I argue that *Nevada* is part of a counter-lineage of feminist and trans interventions in the conventional road narrative. By refusing the individualistic self-fulfillment of the road narrative and instead centring the messy but hopeful relationships that exist between trans women, Binnie creates an alternative form of self-discovery for her characters through connection.

### ***The Medical Model: A Road to Happiness?***

There is a long history of trans women in the public spotlight from Christine Jorgensen to Caitlyn Jenner who present their journeys as a linear process of receiving medical diagnoses and undergoing surgery as the only way for them to feel that they are "in the right body" and can attain happiness. This articulation of trans identity is generally known as the medical model.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Maria, the

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<sup>2</sup> The medical model for trans identity comes out of the inclusion of gender dysphoria as a medical disorder in the DSM-V (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition*). While the inclusion of Gender Dysphoria in the DSM-V has allowed trans people to convince healthcare practitioners to take them seriously and to access hormones and surgeries that some trans people want, Johnson argues that the medical model "remains focused on embodiment as the vehicle of discomfort and distress. This focus positions discovery and distress surrounding the incongruence between assigned sex category and gender identity as resulting from a lack of access to medical interventions rather than the social consequences of gender ideology, transphobia, or cissexism" (804). In short, while the DSM-V has allowed trans people to access healthcare by presenting their gender

central protagonist of *Nevada*, mocks and rejects the medical model saying: “people tend to assume that trans women are either drag queens and loads of trashy fun, or else sad, pathetic and deluded pervy straight men, at least, until they save up they [sic] money and get their Sex Change Operations, at which point they become just like every other woman. Or something?” (Binnie 4). Sara Ahmed argues that “the promise of happiness directs us towards certain objects, as being necessary for a good life” (“Unhappy Queers” 90). Maria identifies the medical model as what Sara Ahmed calls “the promise of happiness”—in other words, that which is supposed to allow trans women to become “just like every other woman” (Binnie 4). Maria’s sarcastic conclusion “Or something?” (Binnie 4) self-consciously questions whether following the medical model really is a ‘happy ending’ for herself, or just what society expects of her as a trans woman.

Maria recognizes that “the happiness of the straight world is a form of injustice” (Ahmed, “Unhappy Queers” 96). This “happiness” requires trans women to conform to specific expectations of what femininity means and reduces womanhood to simply what genitalia a person has. However, Piranha finds out that, due to medical complications, surgery is not an option for her. This news is devastating for Piranha, as she tells Maria:

I’ve been saving for bottom surgery for like a decade...and you know I’ve got a fuckin chronic pain fucked-up health thing...Well it never occurred to me until this week to look into whether one would complicate the other... And it turns out they do. (Binnie 91)

Sandy Stone has pointed out that, for the cis-sexist heretopatriarchy, “the highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase

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identities as the result of a mental disorder, studies such as Johnson’s suggest that presenting gender dysphoria as a mental disorder ignores the possibility that some of the distress felt by trans people might be caused by transphobia and lack of acceptance in society.

him/herself, to fade into the ‘normal’ population as soon as possible” (Stone 230). While Maria shares Stone’s critique in the novel, for Piranha, surgery is important for her to live the life she wants and being unable to access bottom surgery because of medical complications is deeply upsetting. By juxtaposing the trauma Piranha experiences by not being able to receive affirming surgery and Maria’s flippant rejection of the medical model, *Nevada* walks a careful line in exploring how different trans women might desire different things when it comes to feeling affirmed in their identities; trans identity is not reducible to a single process all trans individuals must go through in order to find happiness.

While she rejects the medical model as a pathway to happiness, Maria doesn’t have a clear idea about how to move forward with her life since she does not have enough money to get surgery even if she wanted it. Transitioning has not solved all the problems in Maria’s life and, after she loses her girlfriend and her job, she decides to undertake reckless measures towards self-exploration:

Her bottom surgery fund is not enough for bottom surgery. Like, tens of thousands of dollars not enough. And she’s going to be living on that money until she gets another job, which means, eventually, starting over with saving up. So she might as well enjoy blowing it. On heroin. (116)

The positioning of Maria’s options as either a hopeless wait to save enough for surgery or escaping her life in New York by driving to Nevada with a bag of heroin doesn’t give a very optimistic view of the possibility of Maria achieving any sort of long-term self-fulfillment. Amy Marvin’s *Transfeminist Care Ethics* offers “a political wisdom that links dependency with solidarity across differences” as a way to understand the critique of individualism and the road narrative in *Nevada* not just through rejection and failure but through centering the importance of meaningful, if fraught, encounters between trans women, first between Maria and Piranha, then between Maria and James (Marvin 117). These connections each involve unstable subjects who are trying to come to terms with their

gender identities in the face of personal trauma and economic/social barriers. Therefore, each are dependent and seek support through one another despite none having the answers. However, a mutual reliance of dependency forms solidarity and care between these characters.

While Maria experiences oppression as a trans woman and is not able to fit the cis-hetero criteria for happiness, scholar Nichole Seymour points out in her article "Trans Ecology and the Transgender Roar Narrative" that "our hipster protagonist enjoys many economic privileges, participating in the processes of gentrification that have driven immigrant and working-class groups out of their historic neighbourhoods" (7). Maria is aware of this as the narrator informs us that she was part of a people who:

grew up middle class, chose a broke-ass bohemian life, and now have to deal with the fact that they can't afford the comforts they grew up used to. So they're colonizing those normal people's neighbourhoods, colonizing their experiences. It's pretty gross. Maria's aware that she's implicated. (Binnie 12)

Maria's unhappiness with capitalism, patriarchy, and middle-class suburbia is also implicated as a potential cause of unhappiness for those who suffer from the effects of gentrification. While Ahmed argues that "you might refuse proximity to somebody out of fear that you will be infected by unhappiness, or you might seek proximity to somebody out of hope that you will be infected by happiness," Maria's experience reveals how gentrification can invert this relationship since her middle-class life has driven her to identify with those already marked as 'unhappy,' whereas her relative privilege further pushes the lives of others into the category of "the unbearable life" ("Unhappy Queers" 97). For Maria, her unhappiness is real, but is also coded as 'aesthetic' and 'hipster,' whereas the unhappiness of the colonized is coded as attractive to replicate, but not truly bearable in itself.

## **Care & Cruelty: James's Search for Identity**

Lauren Berlant states in her essay "Cruel Optimism" that "life in the contemporary world, even of relative wealth as in the U.S., are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject" (23). Maria is one such subject who has been worn out by the social and economic pressures in her life. This manifests in feeling that she is unable to change certain things in her life which becomes the catalyst for the termination of her romantic relationship with Steph: "she probably doesn't hate Steph. Like, as a couple they are fucked, and obviously Maria sucks at changing the things in her life that she really needs to change" (Binnie 24). While Maria clearly performs failure and queer unhappiness, Steph, in some ways, embodies an ideal of success: "It's been obvious that neither of them is growing anymore in this relationship; in fact, that's been obvious for a long time, which is why Steph's actually decided to start to have a career, a life—a wardrobe that she likes" (Binnie 118). While Steph's life has taken a turn towards a more conventional trajectory towards happiness, Maria relishes in failing to conform with society. This might not necessarily lead Maria to stable or happy outcomes, but she recognizes that "queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us" (Ahmed, "Queer Feelings" 155). However, the constant attention to the struggle of finding work as a trans woman throughout *Nevada* suggests that Maria's rejection may be more than a choice against conformity and instead a somewhat futile raging against the impossibility of existing in a situation where the path to happiness is presented as following the medical model, which is both unappealing and too expensive for Maria. Rather than rely on the cruel optimism of saving for surgery, Maria finds a degree of empowerment through choosing and trying to honour her life outside the conventional scripts for happiness.

James, the other protagonist, feels optimism upon meeting Maria as he sees her as someone who has moved past the stage of denial he is currently in and thus James's connection with Maria opens up the potential for him to come to terms with his own gender identity. James recognizes that his attachment to Maria is one of cruel optimism early on: "this is probably James's first clue that this girl isn't going to give him the adventure in personal growth, or at least the cool story, that he was sort of hoping for" (Binnie 187). Maria and James both are in a place of dependency where they are searching for something, or someone, who will make sense of their lives for them. This dependency is what initially draws them together, however James's hope that Maria will lift him out of the uncertainty around his gender identity becomes cruel optimism as he begins to realize Maria can't overcome his denial for him. Conversations with Maria open up new possibilities for James to explore his gender identity as he reflects upon hearing that Maria had a girlfriend: "if you can be trans *and* into girls then, like, that makes it more possible that he [James] could even be trans" (Binnie 179). The connection that forms between Maria and James is not one that lasts but for each of them it is the first time they have moved into a new role in relation to others in their lives. Maria acts as a mentor figure and James openly discusses his questions around gender identity with her—something he has never done in person before. The temporary state of mutual dependence between these two characters falls under Marvin's account of care for trans people where she emphasizes that: "community caregiving and mutual caregiving by peers and friends as part of the historical and contemporary fabric of trans lives and trans communities, as well as people who do not cleanly fit into the category of 'trans' but nonetheless are brought into similar communities and conversation" (112). Care in this sense is not based off of any formal structure, nor will it necessarily result in a perfect or 'correct' process of coming to terms with one's identity. James is still a long way from understanding his gender identity and Maria has not transformed herself into the wise trans mentor that she thought she could be. However, this anti-conclusion is a site of

rupture for both of them that, while not providing conclusions, has opened up the right questions that will have to be explored over a longer period of time.

The way James has currently configured his identity is also a relationship of cruel optimism. James has had the misfortune to encounter Ray Blanchard's autogynephilia theory<sup>3</sup> which, amongst a great deal of other criticism, a study by Jaimie F. Veale, David E. Clarke and Terri C. Lomax found to cause "a significant amount of hurt and anger" (134) in MtF trans participants for the way it tried to explain trans womanhood as a sexual fetish (Blanchard 443). James understands his relationship to gender identity through the autogynephilia theory and has labelled himself as a 'pervert.' This identity acts as a sort of fill-in for the potentiality of any other sort of sexuality or gender identity that James could inhabit. Maria reveals that she at one point had to go through a similar process: "I just wanted to be a woman, which gets framed as a priori quote unquote 'perverted'" (Binnie 214). In labelling himself as a 'pervert,' James has collapsed his experiences of gender and sexuality into one

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<sup>3</sup> Maria explains the origins of autogynephilia theory on page 215 of *Nevada*. The theory was initially created by the psychologist Ray Blanchard ("Early History of the Concept of Autogynephilia") and later popularized by J. Michael Bailey in his book *The Man Who Would be Queen*. While a more robust critique of Blanchard's theory is beyond the scope of this essay, Binnie is highly critical of it in *Nevada* shown in a passage where Maria tells James that Blanchard's study ignores "the glaring fact that queer theorists, and generations of feminists before them, have shown clearly that sex and gender are separate from each other," the basic damaging effect that the theory has had on James and countless other gender questioning individuals is that it reduces trans women's identities into a conversation solely about their sexuality which Bailey determines as 'perverted' (Binnie 215). This way of categorizing a whole identity into one part and then laying a heavy moral judgement on it obviously makes it very painful for individuals like James to come out to themselves as trans if this is the only language they have to contextualize their experience.

category and given them a negative moral judgement which makes it exceedingly difficult to embrace a trans identity for himself. If cruel optimism is characterized by a relationship of “projection onto an enabling object that is also disabling,” then identifying with Bailey’s conception of trans women as ‘perverts’ is enabling for James as it allows him to have an identity, but it is also deeply limiting as it remains an identity that foregoes the possibility of exploring other, more positive, forms of self-definition (Berlant 21).

Susan Stryker identifies danger in the labelling of trans identities as ‘perverted’ or ‘monstrous’ saying, “such words have the power to destroy transsexual lives” (Stryker 246). At the same time, Stryker calls for a reclaiming of the ‘monstrousness’ of trans identity, “words like “creature,” “monster,” and “unnatural” need to be reclaimed by the transgendered. By embracing and accepting them, even piling one on top of another, we may dispel their ability to harm us” (Stryker 246). While Maria argues against the autogynephilia theory saying it “just is basically designed to reinforce the idea that trans women are men, and that women don’t have sexualities, and that straight dudes are good people to talk about queer women’s sexualities” (Binnie 216-217), James responds by saying “I didn’t even say I was transgender...I don’t know what I am, but I do know that autogynephilia kind of fits or whatever” (Binnie 217). This raises the question of whether a term like ‘autogynephilia’ can be reclaimed. James doesn’t appear to ‘reclaim’ or even really ‘claim’ any identity. Autogynephilia, as he says “just kind of fits” (Binnie 217). Gender identity appears to be deeply connected to James’s sense of self-esteem and it seems reasonable to argue that certain ways of labelling oneself can cause a cruelly optimistic attachment, particularly if those labels carry the connotation that trans people are ‘perverts.’ Maria warns James of how claiming certain labels can actually be stifling for understanding oneself: “once you start using their [Blanchard and Bailey’s] terms...you’re putting yourself into this restrictive box they made up that doesn’t leave room for figuring out who you are or what you want” (216). While trans theorists such as

Stryker argue for reclaiming terms used to harm trans people, Maria points out the limits to how some terms might never be truly freeing for trans people and embracing them might mean restricting more healthy ways of understanding one's identity. Near the end of the novel, James comes close to coming to terms with his identity when he is sitting in a cafe with Maria wondering if strangers can tell she is trans and by extension, if they think he is trans:

I am. Sort of kind of trans or whatever. Like it wasn't just, they might figure out that I'm into the kind of embarrassing porn that I'm into. It was like, they might figure out something way more embarrassing and fucked up about like what a fucked up fake human being I am, or something. (Binnie 232)

While this passage still clearly shows that James is in a complicated and damaging relationship with his sense of identity, he has begun to separate sexuality from gender allowing for the possibility that being trans might not just mean being a 'pervert.' Even if an alternate possibility at this point is even more terrifying for him, the potential for an alternate future is present in some form.

### ***On the Road to Nowhere***

It seems vague as to how Maria thinks her road trip to Nevada will improve her life in any meaningful way. As her ex-girlfriend Steph observes, Maria wants to:

have some weird epic adventure that doesn't really make sense to anyone who isn't her. By the end of it Maria will feel like she's really accomplished something and like everything is different now, like she's figured out her shit. Only nothing will change. (Binnie 118)

Perhaps Maria wants to experience the kind of self-fulfillment and sense of accomplishment that transitioning didn't fully bring for her. Instead of the grand self-revelation of the road trip, Maria's drive to Nevada becomes just one more fleeting attempt to feel at home in her body on her own terms and not those predetermined by the medical model of trans identity. While Maria is ultimately still

dependent upon the medical model's definitions of trans experience and relies on unstable income to access hormones which are themselves only accessible through medical institutions, Maria's ongoing struggle to reject the limits placed upon her through this erratic and 'irresponsible' road trip does pose a challenge to "antitrans feminists and their claims that trans people are hopelessly dependent upon patriarchal medicine and culture, taking on a rich life of [her] own stressing self-determination and agency" (Marvin 102-103). Maria is attempting to reject labels and systems she is ultimately dependent upon.

David Laderman argues that the road narrative as a genre is situated in a "dialectical tension between...a rebellious critique of conservative authority and a reassertion of a traditional expansionist ideology" (qtd in Seymour 2). While the road narrative carries this baggage with it, *Nevada* situates itself as part of a counter history of queer and feminist subversion of the genre that includes primarily cinematic works such as *Transamerica*, *Thelma and Louis*, and *By Hook or by Crook*. Seymour comments directly on the subversive nature of *Nevada* saying: "the quest for masculine authenticity is replaced by an increasing interrogation of the very basis of gendered identity, desire and sexuality" (3). *Nevada* is a narrative of anti-authenticity. It draws no conclusions, instead emphasizing that "the present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations" (Muñoz 27). Maria's whole adventure is deeply irrational. She has stolen her ex-girlfriend's car, purchased \$400 of heroin with no secure plans for a stable future with only her bottom surgery savings for a safety net which is pitifully not enough. Maria's haphazard road narrative functions as a rejection of a world in which queer lives are marked as unhappy reflecting Sara Ahmed's call for the queer subject to "stay unhappy with this world" ("Unhappy Queers" 105). *Nevada* flirts with the expectations of the identity fulfillment road narrative but ultimately confounds them by refusing to close the narrative with any

decisive ending. Instead of ending with a moment of revelation, Maria is abandoned by James in a casino and James is “back in Star City, suppressing his genderqueer feelings and having sex with his girlfriend” (Seymour 17). Both Maria and James’s identities are not yet recognizable to themselves. As Muñoz argues “we have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). Both James and Maria must struggle through their past conceptions of self, the different boxes of identity that they have placed themselves into. Ultimately their own understandings of their identities are still on the horizon of the highway, but not yet here.

While Binnie’s subversion of the road narrative and the explorations of futurity give a sense of unresolved hope to the novel, *Nevada* still constantly reminds the reader of the conditions queer people live in and how this affects their lives. The challenges Maria faces in saving up enough to afford her bottom surgery and the medical complications Piranha has run into reminds the reader that even while straight society expects trans women to go through a specific process so that they can become “just like every other woman” (Binnie 4), it does not even allow them the material resources necessary for such a clean end to be imaginable. While driving off into the sunset may be seen as a hyper individualistic act, *Nevada* demands a queerness that is based in relationality, in a Transfeminist Care Ethics (Marvin 101). A utopian vision of queerness must not culminate in one hero’s individual triumph over the hardship of capitalism, patriarchy, etc, but instead must constantly be “insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity” (Muñoz 11). Maria’s individualistic impulse is reined in by Piranha when she reminds her “you are not the only one with problems” (Binnie 91). The switch to the second part of the novel jumps over a month of time where Maria is on the road. All the truly ‘epic’ adventuring, the dazzling scenery, potential moments of deep insights into the self are entirely skipped over to make way for the awkward and only partly realized connection

between Maria and James. In this way, Binnie refuses to indulge on the more individualistic aspects on Maria's road trip and instead focuses on the complexities Maria faces when she has to figure out her relationship to James. Seymour concludes her argument about the transgender road narrative by saying: "thus, *Nevada* does not track an individual journey of gender transformation or even personal/emotional/spiritual transformation...but rather the formation of a web of interconnected, mutually affecting and sustaining lives—or, more properly, the impediments to such formation" (Seymour 17).

*Nevada* is a road narrative that subverts common tropes of masculine identity formation and individualistic impulses. It explores the lives of characters who seek out others to confirm their self-identity but end up finding this to be a cruel optimism where identity itself is shown to be an unstable category. This is shown through how James and Maria look to each other for identity formation but find this to be a less revealing process than hoped. While interpersonal relations are complicated, these encounters are not entirely fruitless and often are the sites where future selves can be glimpsed, even if they are far away from being realized. *Nevada* is a story about queer unhappiness and the lack of clear resolution at the end emphasizes the reality that not all is well for queer people in patriarchal, capitalist America. While Maria's road trip is, in many ways, an irrational way of handling her life situation, this rejection of rationality creates a space outside of ordinary life where new identities can be tried on even if they remain not totally realized. Maria's subversion of the road narrative reveals self-identity to be an inherently unstable state and one person is not capable of fulfilling another's uncertainty about their identity. However, *Nevada* still remains hopeful that these interactions can still lead to positive self-formations. These moments of uncertainty create the possibility for futurity to be seen and for harmful self-images to be questioned, even if any real resolution is far down the road.

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