

## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

*A History of My Brief Body* by Billy-Ray Belcourt

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## Biography

Billy-Ray Belcourt is a writer and academic from the Driftpile Cree Nation. He is an Assistant Professor in the School of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. A 2018 Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Scholar, he earned his PhD in English at the University of Alberta. He was also a 2016 Rhodes Scholar and holds an M.St. in Women's Studies from the University of Oxford and Wadham College. In the First Nations Youth category, Belcourt was awarded a 2019 Indspire Award, which is the highest honor the Indigenous community bestows on its own leaders.

Billy-Ray's debut book of poems, *This Wound is a World* (Frontenac House 2017), won the 2018 Griffin Poetry Prize (making him the youngest ever winner) and the 2018 Robert Kroetsch City of Edmonton Book Prize. It was also named the Most Significant Book of Poetry in English by an Emerging Indigenous Writer at the 2018 Indigenous Voices Awards. *This Wound is a World* was a finalist for the 2018 Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry, the 2018 Robert Kroetsch Award for Poetry, the 2018 Gerald Lampert Memorial Award, and the 2018 Raymond Souster Award, both of the latter via the Canadian League of Poets. It was also named by CBC Books as the best "Canadian poetry" collection of 2017. U.S. (University of Minnesota Press) and French (Groupe Nota Bene) editions of the book are now available.

His sophomore book, *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field*, was a national bestseller. According to Open Book, the book "cements [Belcourt] as one of the most imaginative and creative writers in the country." Of the poems, the Toronto Star says "both intellectual and visceral, [they] dazzle with metaphoric richness and striking lyricism." It was longlisted for Canada Reads 2020 and shortlisted for the 2020 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry, the 2020 Robert Kroetsch City of Edmonton Book Prize, and the 2020 Raymond Souster Award. It won the 2020 Stephan G. Stephansson Award for Poetry.

His third book, *A History of My Brief Body*, essays and vignettes on grief, colonial violence, joy, love, and queerness, published in Canada in August 2020 with Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Canada, and in the US with Two Dollar Radio. It was a #1 National Bestseller, a Globe & Mail Best Book, and a finalist for the 2020 Governor General's Literary Award for Non-Fiction, a 2021 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Memoir/Biography, and two BC and Yukon Book Prizes. It received the Hubert Evans Prize for Non-Fiction. In a starred review, Kirkus Reviews called it "elegantly crafted" and "an urgently needed, unyielding book of theoretical and intimate strength."

His fourth book, *A Minor Chorus*, published by Hamish Hamilton (CAN) and W.W. Norton (US), was long listed for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

Source: **Author's website**

<https://billy-raybelcourt.com>

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## Review by Afarin Allabakhshizadeh

### *Living Against Unlivability: A Review of A History of My Brief Body by Billy-Ray Belcourt*

In *A History of My Brief Body*, Billy-Ray Belcourt blends the literary and the theoretical into a fragmentary and irreducible collection of vignettes and lyric essays on cultivating love, self, and freedom while indigenous and queer. On a macro-level, Belcourt engages in an experiment of memoir that beckons the question: what does it mean to document life as one whose existence is suspended in an often isolating and perilous stasis?

Belcourt, of Driftpile Cree Nation, identifies the “NDN condition” as “being in but not held by the present; belonging to a past that endures and a future that moves backward” (78). Under crushing systems predicated on whiteness, straightness, and individualism, the (queer) indigenous person is made a signifier. In the collection’s introduction, Belcourt cites queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich, saying the indigenous person is an object in the “museum of political depression,” a “vessel for a vengeful past and nothing else” (7-8).

“The problem,” Belcourt continues, “is that the present is in the air, is now, which is always an empty hand opening and closing inside us, like a heartbeat” (78). In the Americas, when one cannot heal from a violent history due to its ongoing replication and is continuously barred from moving forward (as colonial violence, homophobia, and the emaciating effects of capitalism ensure a non-existent future), how does one not only live but desire life?

In “A Letter to Nôhkom,” Belcourt offers an answer: the joy of devotion to another. In the letter, Belcourt recalls his nôhkum’s joy in raising him and his twin brother, Jesse-Lee, the utter delight with which she recalls stories of their youth, as well as her desire to keep her grandson close and the persistent fear of loss that colors it.

*Nôhkom, I’m not safe. Canada is still in the business of gunning down NDNs...Having inherited your philosophy of love, which is also a theory of freedom, nôhkum, I can write myself into a narrative of joy that troubles the horrid fiction of race that stalks me as it does you and our kin. (5-6)*

Belcourt proposes that devotion to others can be a means of self-creation for those whose life trajectories have been determined by forces outside of their immediate control. Belcourt also views devotion as a way to care for those who have been historically denied it by the state. But in embarking on this practice, an inevitable yet necessary fragmentation of the self takes place. Belcourt’s task then becomes a process of documenting both the beauty and ugliness of taking on a mode of living that runs counter to individualism, that urges one to merge with another, to give freely and generously, to receive with gratitude.

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*My kink is an annihilation of my core sense of self. (73)*

Belcourt non-linearly recounts his queer coming-of-age in Edmonton, Alberta: the hookups, flings, and established partnerships that launched his venture into love and “self-making” (49). Along the way, he weaves in the work of theorists such as Foucault, José Esteban Muñoz, and Maggie Nelson, and a diverse host of writers and poets. These inclusions serve as the framework to understand the contradictions of queer and indigenous life.

Within these relationships, Belcourt gorgeously renders moments of tenderness, anticipation, longing, and pleasure. But he doesn’t bypass the hazards of saying “yes” to love in the absence of futurity, or of surrendering oneself to others in the name of self-creation. He traces the various things his body comes to signify: a fetish or “moaning object” to a white, colorblind lover (“Gay: 8 Scenes”); a painful physical “reminder” of his “unending penetrability” (“Fragments from a Half-Existence”); a sexual medium for those harmed by racist standards of beauty and a “battlefield” of “risk” in the absence of queer medical and educational resources (“Loneliness in the Age of Grinder”).

But risk doesn’t only exist in the unease and exhilaration of hook-up culture or the haze of romantic surrender. Belcourt recognizes the fundamental inextricability of risk and death from the lives of queer BIPOC. In “To Hang Our Grief Up to Dry,” he meditates on how queer BIPOC are denied not only justice but the ability to mourn, citing the murder of Colten Boushie, the victims of Bruce McArthur, and those who were killed in the shooting at Pulse in Orlando, Florida. When danger lurks in the privacy of one’s bedroom and the outside “world,” does it remain possible to create a self without endangering both one’s corporeality and psyche? In “Notes from an Archive of Injuries,” Belcourt cites Judith Butler’s *Senses of the Subject*: “What does it mean to require what breaks you?”

Butler gives us an idea in her essay, *The Desire to Live*, stating that “...without the death drive, there is no struggle for life. If life itself is this struggle, then there is no life without the death drive.” Thus, “life requires the death drive, but it also requires that the death drive not triumph.” (Butler 73). While the risks of living as a queer, indigenous person persist, Belcourt finds agency in engaging with said risk in the name of love, pleasure, and joy. Grief, heartbreak, and fear take on a new meaning: no longer simply weapons waged against the queer, indigenous body, but symptoms of the painful yet fruitful process of creating a self. While there are instances in the text when theory overpowers the energy of Belcourt’s lived experiences, these moments largely serve as reminders of the incredible feat of “self-making” – to do it alone is not only impossible but contrary to Belcourt’s principal undertaking.

More interested in the prospect of who one can become, as opposed to who one is, Belcourt doesn’t care to distill the complexities of queer, indigenous life. “All my writing is against the poverty of simplicity,” he writes in “Fatal Naming Rituals,” an essay that highlights the ways in indigenous writers have been historically barred from defining their work. To reduce the complexities of queer, indigenous life would concede to what state purports to be true: that the possibility of abundance is not only unimaginable but naïve, that “self-making” is a hopeless endeavor in the face of the settler state’s signifiers. Here, Belcourt offers himself and readers of his work, specifically those ensnared in state

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violence and sanctioned from institutional resources and care, a way to experience the emancipatory potential of joy, to “write against the unwritability of utopia,” to live against unliveability (9).

*In the end, care promises nothing, but this doesn't mean we must put a restriction on it. Care is a disruptive thing because it frees the analytic of the world from a state that is overdetermined...But always, with care, we perform high-stakes processes of world-making – in the hope that, in our dying days, we might feel freer. (98)*

Belcourt is also concerned with the role of writing within his pedagogy of love and joy. The poet, writer, and scholar frequently grapples with what writing can and cannot accomplish, the stories that can be told and the stories unable to be told, for telling them would be “an anti-nation undertaking” (3). What purpose does writing serve when violent systems continue to rage? The same purpose as attempting to care and understand another despite feeling unaware of how to care for or understand oneself: a reminder and declaration of our malleability to one another, our interconnectedness, and ultimately, of our humanity.

*The settler state =/= the world. (82)*

*That we experience joy...that we can identify it, if only belatedly, illuminates the dead end toward which the settler state hurls. In our insistence against elimination, the logical holes in the fabric of a colonial world are revealed. Wherever light rushes in is an exit route. (9)*

When faced with the question of whether or not to live under a system that necessitates our alienation from one another, that fortifies with evidence of our impotence, that tells us to hold still, that help will one day be on its way, Belcourt beckons readers to refuse. Instead, he urges us to race toward one another, toward the light. There, our refusal reverberates. Our joy does, too.

Source: **Michigan Quarterly Review**

[Living Against Unlivability: A Review of \*A History of My Brief Body\* by Billy-Ray Belcourt – Michigan Quarterly Review \(umich.edu\)](https://mqr.umich.edu/2021/03/living-against-unlivability-a-review-of-a-history-of-my-brief-body-by-billy-ray-belcourt/)

Allabakhshizadeh, A. (n.d.). *Living against unlivability: A review of A History of My Brief Body by Billy-Ray Belcourt*. Michigan Quarterly Review. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2021/03/living-against-unlivability-a-review-of-a-history-of-my-brief-body-by-billy-ray-belcourt/>



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## Review by Cody Lee

### *A Poetic Smorgasbord: A History of My Brief Body* by Billy-Ray Belcourt

August 12th, 2020

I guess I should start with the fact that Billy-Ray Belcourt's *A History of My Brief Body* made me feel dumb. In a good way, like reading Borges or any of the fifty or so philosophers Belcourt references. To sum the book up, it's about being Indigenous and queer, but most importantly, it's a collection of essays focused on the future, one in which there's absolutely no way this book, any book, or anyone could be summed up with two fucking words.

*A History of My Brief Body* starts out with a letter to Belcourt's nōhkom, or grandmother. In it, he writes, "Having inherited your philosophy of love, which is also a theory of freedom, nōhkom, I can write myself into a narrative of joy that troubles the horrid fiction of race that stalks me as it does you and our kin." The idea of love is mentioned a lot throughout the letter, and the collection as a whole; the book itself reads, oddly enough, like a love letter. It made me wonder whether *all* letters are of the love-sort, seeing as how, generally, writing and sending one feels like going out of one's way.

Another central theme in this collection is joy. Belcourt poses the question, "How do a people who have been subject to some of the country's most programmatic and legal forms of oppression continue to gather on the side of life?" I think of all the Black and brown families grilling at the park, their kids playing tag. Everyone's full of laughter and hidden beer. How?! When basically no one wants you alive, how and why would you celebrate? Belcourt goes on to say, "Joy is art is an ethics of resistance." Every time we choose to smile, we're choosing to fight for our children, ourselves, and those who have had the fight beaten out of them.

He discusses the Indian residential schools in Canada, something that I previously knew nothing about. They were government-sponsored religious schools that aimed to "kill the Indian in the child." These schools were overcrowded, unsanitary, and within their walls many students were beaten, chained, and sexually abused. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, more than three thousand children died, mostly due to diseases like tuberculosis and influenza, though TRC Chair Justice Murray Sinclair suggests that the number may be closer to six thousand. When Belcourt asks his grandfather if he'd been forced to attend, he replies, "Yes, but I don't want to talk about it."

Excuse how short and selfish this paragraph is, but the first line of the title essay is, "Let's start with the body, for so much is won and lost and lost and lost there." Isn't that so good?

I was trying to figure out what the title meant. Whether "Brief" had more to do with the body being ephemeral (Belcourt's specifically? The bodies of the marginalized?) or with his age. Belcourt is young. He's the youngest-ever winner of Canada's Griffin Prize for Poetry, which reminds me: this is prose written by a poet, and it shows. Each sentence is calculated; each word explodes. But back to the age thing: it shows. There is an immediacy to the book, and a hope—like utopia is possible, and I want to see

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it. Belcourt's first book of creative nonfiction reminds me of Kendra Allen's *When You Learn the Alphabet*. She has this wonderful piece called "How to Workshop N-Words" wherein she talks about being in class, and listening to non-Black students read stories with the n-word in them. Allen's frustration is evident but, similar to Belcourt, her true motivation is love and faith in a better tomorrow.

Another line from Belcourt that struck me: "My hands are made up of a set of hands that puppeteer me. The hands aren't God's. They are History's." Everything we do, we do because of a past that has nothing to do with us, but then, I suppose it does. It's the old free will debate, but almost unarguable. You can easily say, "God isn't real!" but, unless you are racist and want to deny that slavery and colonialism happened, you have to admit that Belcourt's argument makes sense. White, Black, or Indigenous, you act a certain way because of an invisible force that either shoved your ancestors down—which might make you now want to rise up, to make yourself heard—or your ancestors did the shoving, and so it feels okay to follow suit. Of course there's some in-between, but who wants to talk about that when we could talk about sex instead?!

Sex is everywhere in this book. Penises. Buttholes. It's great. I have a hunch that Belcourt does this in order to balance the mind and body. It seems that, like many of us, Belcourt's thoughts take him to these dark depths that only a numbing, carnal overload can dig him out of. There's one part where he says, "Fucking won't rescue me from my longing[,]” then goes into a rant about engineered catastrophe, and how "no one can apologize for or administer a cure for the racialized and sexualized condition of existential ennui." That if any "puppet" or "political actor" does try to apologize for something that *they* created, it is a mere work of fiction. And as soon as he's done, he goes, "Back to the fucking."

Dating apps such as Grindr and OkCupid play a major role in the collection, particularly in the chapters "Gay: 8 Scenes" and "Loneliness in the Age of Grindr." There's a scene where the author has a random, uncomfortable hookup, then asks the other guy if he's clean, to which the man, in a joking manner, responds, "Yeah. Well, I mean I hope so." Belcourt goes to the STI Clinic to ask about post-exposure prophylaxis, but the nurse explains that PEP is only administered to patients whose risk of infection is exceptional: "a prisoner raped by an HIV-positive inmate, for example." He then waits an hour in the emergency room at the University of Alberta Hospital, and is told that his case is not life-or-death, that he's still breathing, and that the doctor would probably send him home untreated. So, finally, he drives to a nearby walk-in clinic and talks to a doctor whose attention seems to be elsewhere, and coldly explains that he'll have to wait eight to ten weeks to be tested. This calls to mind a sentence in one of the later chapters, "To Hang Our Grief Up to Dry," which examines the gunning down of gay men, from the Orlando nightclub shooting to Bruce McArthur's killing spree in Toronto. Belcourt writes, "I felt as though I was a part of an endangered species. I still do."

From "Futuromania": "I have a phobia of the police. How could I trust he who disavowed personhood to instead be a gun? ... To be a gun is to be against life." I think that when a lot of people criticize the police, they're criticizing the idea of law enforcement perpetuating a BS sense of entitlement rather than officers as individuals. And this is that, sure, but it's also the complete opposite. It's the extremely individualistic notion of choice (which, as we've discussed, may be a lie, but nonetheless), of *choosing* to

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be a gun, that's what makes Belcourt and N.W.A., I won't say *right*, but pretty close to it. I recently attended a protest in honor of George Floyd in Chicago, and there was a speaker who said: "How can you say, 'Blue lives matter' when blue is a color? I was born Black."

Belcourt also brought to my attention the suicide crisis within the Attawapiskat First Nation, and how on April 9, 2016, eleven of its residents attempted suicide. He writes, "[S]uicide emerges as a political response to structurally manufactured sorrow where joy has been shut out of everyday life for a long time." A list of these "manufactured sorrows" include inadequate and improperly constructed housing, overcrowding, and state mismanagement of funds. From September 2015 to April 2016, more than a hundred people at Attawapiskat (whose population is 1,549, according to the 2011 census) tried killing themselves. Within the Wapekeka First Nation in January 2017, two twelve year old girls carried out a suicide pact. The Cross Lake First Nation in Manitoba declared a state of emergency in 2016 in response to one hundred and forty suicide attempts in the preceding two weeks. Some people believe these suicides and attempts have to do with funding shortages for mental health facilities, but Dr. Alex Wilson of the University of Saskatchewan insists that many of the youth involved identified as LGBTQ, and that no one factored this in to their analysis of the situation. Belcourt argues that "suicide prevention, then, can't simply be about keeping NDNs in the world if it remains saturated by that which dulls the sensation of aliveness for those who are queer and/or trans and/or two-spirit... [It] needs to entail a radical remaking of the world."

I don't think Belcourt presumes to know exactly how to remake the world, nor do I think that's what he's trying to prove. I do, however, think he's presenting us with everything he is conscious of: the Indian residential schools, the medical field's apathy toward STIs, how terribly frightening the police are, the suicide rate among NDNs; Belcourt's taking all of this stuff and presenting it as a poetic smorgasbord, full of love and joy, so that if one aspect doesn't resonate with you, another will. Above all, he knows there's something wrong, and he's warning those he cares most about, meaning us.

I work at an independent bookstore in Chicago, and have for about two years now. I'm one of maybe eight booksellers of color in the city. I'd say I read a fair amount. More than your average person, but less than many others. This is only the second book I've read by an Indigenous author, following Natalie Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Now, a lot of you are going to think: Whoa, not me! I've read tons of books by Indigenous people, and my response to that is: Why? Really think about it. There's a section of *A History of My Brief Body* where Belcourt describes some of the men he's dated, and their hidden fetishization of NDNs. He writes, "One white man from Atlantic Canada spoke proudly about how all his male partners had been NDN, unable to diagnose his own desires as dehumanizing, unable to discern that when he fucked me, he made me into a moaning object." This may be a stretch, but I believe the same applies here. Read books by writers of color not to brag about having read them, in that not-so-subtle way white readers do; read these books not to, once again, have ownership of their authors and their stories, but to learn from them! I had a conversation with my father the other day, and I asked him whether or not people change. Together, we came to the conclusion that learning equates to change, and you can always learn, if you want to.



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I think we need more booksellers of color. I don't know an Indigenous bookseller. We need these stories told. We need them recommended. And not on the front table in November for one month. I say knock over a Native American Heritage, a Black History Month, a Women's History Month table. When will these stories be placed front and center year-round, instead of temporary displays, instead of voices to be silenced when they're done trending?

Source: **The Rumpus**

[A Poetic Smorgasbord: A History Of My Brief Body By Billy-Ray Belcourt - The Rumpus.net](https://therumpus.net/2020/08/12/a-history-of-my-brief-body-by-billy-ray-belcourt/)

Lee, C. (2020, August 12). *A poetic smorgasbord: A History of My Brief Body by Billy-Ray Belcourt*. The Rumpus. <https://therumpus.net/2020/08/12/a-history-of-my-brief-body-by-billy-ray-belcourt/>



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## Interview by Jade Colbert

### *Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt's memoir imagines a more intersectional future*

January 4, 2021

Billy-Ray Belcourt is a poet and scholar from the Driftpile Cree Nation. His first collection, , won the 2018 Griffin Poetry Prize, which he followed up with 2019's *NDN Coping Mechanisms*. His new book, *A History of My Brief Body*, is a memoir pairing life and theory in a style reminiscent of Maggie Nelson. It tells the story of a young queer Indigenous man yearning for utopia amid a broken world.

#### **Your work draws attention to the significance of the body. Why is that so important to your writing?**

Because it has been left out of the political and legal discourse about native life. To talk about the body is to talk about gender, sexuality and sex. Opening up that discourse to those concepts is to make space for those who occupy multiple intersecting categories of identity. I'm always interested in moving beyond a single-issue focus on race toward an intersectional focus on the complex web of identities and bodies that make up the native world.

#### **This is also a work of theory. Some might consider body and theory as opposites. Do you?**

No, I don't, because I think a theory of the body is a theory of freedom - and freedom is one of our most communal desires. I hope my book can begin to dispel some dominant anxieties about theory and push us to think about theory as an embodied practice itself, as a lived experience, and that embedded in all our social and political choices is a theory of living. Elsewhere, I've written about the body as a conceptual trap door, thinking about the ways that the body is paradoxically both a site of precarity and flourishing. Precarity, because sometimes settler-colonialism, in which we all live, can be felt as pressure inside our bodies. But then there are moments that manage to exceed that structure, when we can feel in our bodies the possibility of another world, another kind of arrangement of ideas and feelings.

#### **You write, 'If I'm a writer, it's because to be an NDN is to be a concept that speaks.' Can you explain?**

There are particular normative ways in which the mainstream public has been authorized by history and anthropology to understand Indigenous peoples. The effect of that is to bring us out of our bodies and into the world of ideas. We existed primarily as ghosts of a sort, partly because for so long we were shunned from public life and our writing was not published. We did not occupy political discourse in the way we do today. Now, we native writers write against that philosophical tradition. I'm deeply aware that what I say needs to breach that past and open up space for something else. I don't want to be a concept that speaks. Part of how that ends is if we are allowed to be complex, joyous people in the minds of others.

#### **Two threats to life vie for public attention right now: the coronavirus, and the police - particularly their threat to Black and brown life. You write about the latter. What do you make of that juxtaposition?**

Firstly, the catastrophe of white supremacy has not ended because of the pandemic. In many ways, it has been exacerbated.

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We've seen how it has disproportionately affected communities of colour all over the country. Just recently, a family in a remote Manitoban First Nation who contracted coronavirus highlighted the inadequate health care infrastructure, not just in that particular place, but all over the country on reserves.

Secondly, though this predates social distancing, I think about the Wet'suwet'en solidarity rallies and blockades that happened across the country in February and the deployment of a kind of militarized police at many of them, and the ongoing brutalization of Black and brown people across the country in the last few months. It shows that we - we racialized people, queer people, trans people - continue to need each other in ways that don't mean immediate proximity. That's a radical politics in and of itself. The pandemic throws into relief the urgency of that kind of politics. It makes me think of Claudia Rankine's definition of loneliness as that which we can't do for each other.

**There's a vision running through your book that another world is possible. What would you want change to look like?**

The pandemic goes to show the global form of racial capitalism operating right now can only ever engender disaster. And that we need a politics that is first and foremost against disaster! (laughs) And we need a politics that is for flourishing. At the level of Indigenous sovereignty, this country is presented again and again with proof of its own criminality against us as native people, and there needs to be a shift that gives way to a understanding of Indigenous political life as sovereign and national. That way we can build communities that don't bear the burden of inadequate health care.

In the face of all that's happening right now, publishing a book can seem small. But if we're committed to revolutionary ideas and literature, however small the gesture is, there still can be some ripple effect - especially in the case of writing by queer Indigenous people, for queer Indigenous people.

Source: **Globe and Mail**

**[Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt's memoir imagines a more intersectional future](#)**

Colbert, J. (2021, January 4). Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt's memoir imagines a more intersectional future. *Globe and Mail*, A13.



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## Interview by Layli Long Soldier

*Billy-Ray Belcourt by Layli Long Soldier*

October 12, 2020

I first met Billy-Ray Belcourt at the 2018 Griffin Poetry Prize ceremony, where we were finalists in different categories. Billy-Ray was kind, disarming, and, most of all, true to himself. When he won the Canadian prize for his first book, the audience rose in gleeful, ecstatic cheering. Billy-Ray's acceptance speech began not with a single word but with an open, vulnerable sob. He thanked the women in his family and community for supporting him as he wrote poems that allowed him to be in the world. "It is a world that many of us who are Indigenous did not want. But [this book] was written also to try to bring about a world that we do want, collectively."

Through his new collection of essays, *A History of My Brief Body*, I have come to view Billy-Ray as a trusted intellectual and scholar, a prolific creative, and a necessary voice of resistance. "My field of study is NDN freedom," he writes. "My theoretical stance is a desire for NDN freedom. My thesis statement: Joy is an at once minimalist and momentous facet of NDN life that widens the spaces thinned by structures of unfreedom. I will spend the rest of my life enfleshing this argument." It was an indescribable joy, and nothing less, to speak with him about this desire, this lifelong argument.

—Layli Long Soldier

**Layli Long Soldier** Billy-Ray, you know already that one of my favorite topics to talk about is love, which is a unifying thread in your essay collection, *A History of My Brief Body*. I want to start our conversation with a quote from your book that says, "To love someone is firstly to confess: *I am prepared to be devastated by you.*" That's a very hard proposition for me to accept, but I think there's truth in it.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** That line is from the essay "An NDN Boyhood" and tries to get at the paradoxical experience of being deeply loved but also misunderstood. I was thinking about the fundamental alienation you experience when you're the only queer person in your family. When I was a teenager, it felt as if there was a social script—one that was not unique to but still distinctly rural Albertan—that didn't allow for the kind of queer love that my body longed for, that my body knew as the shape of desire before my mind did.

We could also think about the calculus of love equals devastation vis-à-vis the ways that systems of oppression, indifference, and cruelty govern the contours of intimate life for Native people, queer people, and queer Native people. Growing up, queer Indigeneity seemed impossible to me because I didn't see queer Indigenous love in my immediate social world or in literature or media—it was negated. Queer Indigenous love wasn't even there as a ghostly presence. It was just absent.

**Layli Long Soldier** Forgive me for this understatement—queer Indigenous love has existed forever. It's wrenching to think that one would ever need to search for it, its traces, or even its ghost.

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**Billy-Ray Belcourt** The loneliness of the closet, to feel that one will not actualize what one wants and needs the most, is a structuring experience, unfortunately. But I don't think that love *has* to be devastating. In certain instances—because of history, because of politics—love can be devastating, and that sometimes feels inevitable because it is so over-determined.

As I was writing this book (the first essay was written in 2015 and the last in late 2018), all of my experiences of love had ended in heartbreak. Those experiences often had to do with the incommensurability of people coming from different places with different values and desires. Their modalities of relating and loving emerged from distinct and, at times, conflicting histories. What often bound us together, or what defined the experience of intimacy, were dating apps. Dating apps operate partly through the racialization and the eroticization of data, but often in different directions. When one is racialized by dating apps one becomes either de-eroticized or fetishized, both of which are forms of marginalization. So there were all these compounding forces that made love seem like a structural impossibility to me. Of course, that outlook would make me pessimistic, whereby I would write a line that conflates love with devastation. (*laughter*)

**Layli Long Soldier** Do you feel like you had to leave your family and community in order to find that connection? I'm thinking about the hero's journey, how one must travel into another world in order to learn about one's abilities—one's latent powers. The hero doesn't abandon their home world but returns with new skills and powers that allow them to function and participate in *both* worlds. I'm thinking about this in terms of what you experienced as a young person, needing to have that desire fulfilled, even though you couldn't necessarily name or define that desire.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** I think queerness constitutes a definitional problem. It is the conundrum of the embodied self, a self yearning for not just other bodies but a different world. Part of the queer experience is allowing oneself to be moved by that shapeless desire, and a lot can go wrong when you're pulled by invisible forces toward something that you don't know.

**Layli Long Soldier** But in a way aren't we all? I often feel like I'm a salmon going upstream, and I don't know why. It's instinct. I'm being pulled.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** Totally. (*laughter*) There's something earthly or deeply human about that, as if we're living in a kind of metaphysical darkness. It's not exactly darkness, but it can feel that way.

**Layli Long Soldier** Maybe it's not always darkness. I like what you said earlier, when you referred to it as an invisible force. Would you say that you were following your instinct?

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** I knew that the life I wanted to live could not be realized where I grew up. I moved to Edmonton, Alberta at seventeen to start university. Between eighteen and nineteen, I toggled between staying closeted and not staying closeted. I didn't yet have the emotional intelligence to know that one choice means a life of rotten solitude and the other doesn't. I was still in that psychic space where a rotten solitude felt livable. Through learning about feminist theory and queer theory, I underwent a

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process of unlearning and undoing. That finally led me to dating, and, as I detailed in the book, the different kinds of agony that one experiences as a queer Native person when dating. I encountered a series of existential dilemmas. For instance: In order to be with this person, does my Nativeness have to be disappeared or delimited?

**Layli Long Soldier** Those are big questions to confront.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** I hope that most of us as a Native people have an experience where we finally say, “Feeling like I cannot fully be who I am when I’m in a relationship is an act of oppression.” It makes me think of Dionne Brand’s *The Blue Clerk*, in which she asks, “What would the world be with us fully in it?” For Native people, what would *love* look like for us to be fully in it? Early on, I had all these experiences of not being fully in the world, in the world of love. I’m finally in a place where I know what is deleterious and what is nourishing. Unfortunately, one can only come to that place—or at least *I* only came to that place—after having experienced relationships I couldn’t survive because I was viewed as either a fetish or a compromise. One can’t find a sustainable joy when one is made to live in either of those positions.

**Layli Long Soldier** In my life, I feel most loved when I feel *understood* by someone. When I feel seen and understood, there’s an intimacy that it is not a consumption, and I’m able to return a compassionate gaze. As Native people, coming from very particular cultures and communities, that is very important to me. There are some things I cannot compromise anymore or lay at the feet of erasure.

Billy-Ray, I’ve been going crazy over this particular quote from “*A History of My Brief Body*”: “There are over seventeen million results when one googles *Is it possible to cry oneself to death?*” Let me tell you something: I’ve been there. But I didn’t think to Google it.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** I can’t remember precisely if that came out of any sort of lived experience. That essay in particular, the titular essay, charts the early tragedies I already alluded to: when one wants love but is given a rougher form of it. In the ongoing experience of devastation, of heartbrokenness, one is confronted again and again with the body’s capacity to manifest grief and sorrow. I think that line—and the seventeen million results—stands in for that. There’s also a flipside to being hurt that means: I had been willing to love, to be in that position of non-sovereignty, to be vulnerable. I’ve learned from feminist theory that being vulnerable is a small rebellion in a hetero-patriarchal, toxically masculine culture that wants men to inhabit positions of cruelty and joylessness. There’s also a shadow claim that if there’s seventeen million results when Googling “can one cry oneself to death,” maybe there’s also as many, if not more, results for something as simple as “how to be happy.”

**Layli Long Soldier** When we’re in an environment that encourages a sterile existence, when we’re alone in our little boxes, hell yeah we feel like we’re crying ourselves to death!

You write about your dad’s house as a haven for Native and Brown people. It was a place to feel comfort

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and share with one another, free of judgment. It's important to have those places, those homes, and that sense of family and community to come to, at whatever time of day.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** You could go to my dad's house in emotional distress and simply the spirit of the place would free you from that feeling, at least momentarily. Though I've spent a lot of my adult life living alone, I've always wanted to architect a home that models that ethic of communality. At the risk of over-intellectualizing, I think there's something quite defiant about that in our capitalist world, where possession and private property negate the togetherness that might allow us to do more for one another. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Claudia Rankine defines *loneliness* as "that which we can't do for one another." To me, decolonization, or utopia perhaps, is a politics by which we can do more for one another. It makes sense to me that that starts in the home. We must detonate the ways in which the domestic sphere replicates the structures of incarceration and capital that keep us from one another.

**Layli Long Soldier** What is beautiful about that model is there's also an acceptance of failure that is so freeing and liberating. Those of us who have pushed ourselves to move beyond our difficult histories and the ruptures in our past, have also created internal pressure to not fail. I can feel that pressure in my body—this divide I've created. I want to do my best, my best, my best. But I also want to have room for my failures, my totality, my humanity. And I desperately want to obliterate this sterile box that I sometimes put myself into.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** That makes me think about the literary world and how it's different from places like my dad's house, where status and accomplishment don't matter and the terrain on which we speak to each other is much more human. As a Native writer in the literary world, so much of my experience has to do with refusing to perform the kinds of Nativeness that institutions have been desirous of—at least in Canada—since the mid-'90s when reconciliation emerged as a primary mode of liberal governance. It's similar to bad kinds of love, where one is in this bind that is both existential and political, where one has to carve out a space to speak and to write that doesn't reify all these grammars of deficiency and brokenness that have come to dominate popular conceptions of Native life. Does that resonate for you?

**Layli Long Soldier** Yes. In all honesty, the literary world is sometimes lonely for me.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** Yeah.

**Layli Long Soldier** It is. I'm tired. Traveling to these places, institutions, where many times I'm the only Native person there. The questions I have faced at public events are *shocking*. I once saw a black-and-white photograph from the early 1900s, in which two Native children had been put on display as a carnival attraction. People paid money to watch them, as if those children were novelties. That photograph pierced my soul. As I stared at that image, in a flash, I could see how that still occurs even now, just in different contexts. The settings may be more sophisticated, more academic, but the function is the same. It's difficult, and I'm trying to find my way. I have more that I can say, but I'll save that for personal—

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**Billy-Ray Belcourt** Off the record. (*laughter*)

**Layli Long Soldier** However, let's jump back to where you left off with the literary world. That makes me think of your education at Oxford. You left your family, your community, your country. Journeying on one's own to acquire specialized skills and knowledge can be difficult.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** My time at Oxford was my first experience of being utterly unknowable. Many in the UK, and at Oxford in particular, don't have robust understandings of contemporary Native life. Because of that, I was sort of an ethnically ambiguous blob haunting the streets of Oxford. That's one kind of racial over-determination, whereas in Canada, I was racially over-determined in a very physiological and political way that felt more immediately existential. I was a philosophical conundrum unto myself in the heart of the empire (Oxford being the epicenter of colonial education). And though that burden was incredibly difficult, that experience gave me space for theorization and poetic study. I wrote so much when I was at Oxford; much of my first book, *The Wound Is a World*, was written, or began, while I was there. In the end, however, I knew I had to come back to Canada, that being in a place with other Native people, where I wasn't misunderstood or misapprehended, would allow for a more dignified life.

**Layli Long Soldier** That sense of dignity and integrity translates to a sense of wholeness, right? It allows us to interact with the world in a way that is comfortable and natural to us. The way in which we honor our nature is so important in our life's journey, in love's journey, in our profession. I'm thinking about a passage from your essay "Futuromania," in which you quote Claudia Rankine, whom you mentioned earlier. You're telling a friend about a dream and you say:

*I had a dream recently in which I was bent backward, my arms perpendicular to the floor. This is how I wander about, I tell her. What others see is out of sync with the interior of my body, which is rarely still or upright. It sounds to me, she says, like you're plagued by a kind of dysphoria with the world. Loneliness, I wonder out loud. Yes, she answers, yes. I'm reminded, she adds of a line in Claudia Rankine's Don't Let Me Be Lonely: "deep within her was an everlasting shrug." Not a shrug, I protest, but a bark, a primal shout.*

Elsewhere you write, "All my writing is against the poverty of simplicity. All my writing is against the trauma of description." The idea of that deep shrug, that primal shout, feels connected to this stance against simplicity.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** When a Native person is lonely, it's often because we are in a world that we did not want, a world that we did not build for ourselves. The original scenes of dispossession, the theft of land, and all that unraveled from that, all the terror and sacrifice and compromise on our part as Native people emerges from that. That loneliness is less an individual experience and more a social collective one.

**Layli Long Soldier** That's right.



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**Billy-Ray Belcourt** It's unsurprising to me that the primary way that settler publics in particular have attempted to interpret or understand our work has been within the confines of a world that isn't ours. There's this ongoing desire for assimilation, and literary analysis is absolutely caught up in that. I'm tired of Native literature being read as if it is simply and solely sociological.

**Layli Long Soldier** An artifact.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** Totally. And that what it's useful for is the enlightenment of the settler. In "Futuromania," I begin to trace how this optic of simplicity has dominated literary analysis or cultural criticism for decades now. In Canada, some of our first major, classic Indigenous books had the same treatment that my work has had. My first book was described in a national magazine as simplistic, and as making meaning not via language but suffering. So there's something about the shrug or the moan or groan—

**Layli Long Soldier** —or bark—

**Billy-Ray Belcourt**—when one has to write as a Native person *knowing* that we have to write against this matrix of ideas that wants to swallow the work even as we try to make something that feels artful.

**Layli Long Soldier** Exactly—*artful*. I recently read *A Treatise on Stars*, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's new book, and there's a line in there that brought me such solace. If I don't read anything else ever again in my life, this idea is enough to carry me through! She wrote, "When no one observes us, not even ourselves, our particles regain their wave aspect." I understood that. In the space of creating, of making, when I'm able to come to the page and mentally free myself of others and even my own self-judgment, I feel a frequency change. My "particles" return to a natural flow. Maybe that's the good place I'm looking for. Is it utopic to think that we can be free of the outside gaze, or even our own gaze? Just talking about it feels good. Are there times when you're able to enter that place in your work?

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** Yes. I'm working on a fiction project about northern Alberta. I ended up there after about a year and a half of trying to write a novel and always hitting dead ends. I was so unsure of what my subject matter was, and then finally I ended up coming to this metafictional idea where a narrator interviews the residents of a rural town in order to write a novel about a place where people think of themselves as outside of history and politics. Landing there, a place so specific that it seems unlitrary to write about it, I felt an openness I had been longing for. It felt as if there was no longer any pretense or superimposition of any sort of aesthetic structure. I was able to write with more truthfulness after I gave up writing something that could have larger commercial appeal. I think there's a kind of beauty and power in the humility of writing for five or six people.

**Layli Long Soldier** The power is in its truthfulness and honesty, and in the simplicity that comes when you deliberately relinquish ideas of aesthetic structure and commercial appeal. And that's interesting, too, because isn't that a kind of paradox? A refusal of the settler's "optic of simplicity," while embracing

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simplicity in one's personal creative process. I wish I was there to give you a hug in person. I want to thank you for being who you are. You're so beautiful, inside and out.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** Thank you so much, Layli. Your work is such a beacon to me as well.

Source: **Bomb Magazine**

**Billy-Ray Belcourt by Layli Long Soldier**

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<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/billy-ray-belcourt/>



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## Discussion Questions

1. In his Introduction, Billy-Ray Belcourt writes, "Joy is art is an ethics of resistance." He wanted this book to be full of joy and enactment of care. Which part of the book most successfully conveys that to you?
2. How does the form of Billy-Ray Belcourt's essays work within or open up the genre of memoir?
3. The quote in the back of the book reads, "To love someone is firstly to confess: I'm prepared to be devastated by you." How does Belcourt present love and queerness?
4. In referencing and citing seminal queer texts and NDN texts alongside his experiences, what effect does it have on your reading? Are you familiar with any of the thinkers and writers he cited?
5. How does Belcourt position himself and his work in relation to Canada?
6. What does he say on the act of writing and his life as poet and author?
7. The future is frequently mentioned in Belcourt's essays. What kind of future does he describe or imagine?
8. In the interview in Globe & Mail, Billy-Ray Belcourt says, "I hope my book can... push us to think about theory as an embodied practice itself, as a lived experience, and that embedded in all our social and political choices is a theory of living." What theory of living can you piece together from Belcourt's essays? Does it make you reflect on your own embodied practices and your own theory of living?

## Discussion Themes

*Queer and NDN identity | Racism | Love in various forms | Joy and desire*