
To Choose Responsibility: (Queer) Indigenous Existentialism in A History of My Brief Body

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Billy-Ray Belcourt (Driftpile Cree) begins *A History of My Brief Body* (2020) by foregrounding the ancestral with a letter to his kokum. He acknowledges his “inheritance” of her philosophy of love, which Belcourt also views as a theory of freedom that informs his (or an) Indigenous narrative of joy (6).¹ While the radical potential of affective joy is reiterated in the “Introduction: A Short Theoretical Note” where he exhorts the reader to not overlook joy in his narrative for a redundant, (settler) “parasitic” misinterpretation, Belcourt does concede that the following “pages don’t eschew sadness and sorrow: in fact, many of them traffic those hard feelings in” (9). With this context of the discordant affective “cacophony”—or an interwoven ambivalent² array of negative, neutral, and positive feelings—throughout *A History of My Brief Body*, I am interested in attending to Belcourt’s seemingly rhetorical question in “Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?” (2016): “What does it mean that my work looks mostly like the heartbreak of disappointment, like a half-written suicide note, hinting at the ways the ‘fucked-up’ is keeping me from breathing?” If his outlined theoretical underpinnings in *A History of My Brief Body* have been adhered to, an ostensible understanding of his poignant work could be its viability as (re)validating marginalized queer, Indigenous kin through the affective resonations with Belcourt’s queer, Cree body and the complexities of this embodiment.

Furthermore, though, Belcourt’s embodiment is descriptive and demonstrated survivance, as theorized by Gerald Vizenor (*White Earth Anishinaabe*), where through his textual self-narrative—an admitted affectual cacophony—there is a reiteration of the immediacy of his

(bodily) presence in the text, and in the world, as queer and Indigenous. By applying Brendan Hokowhitu’s (Māori) theory of Indigenous existentialism, a theory that offers an existentially “freeing” reconceptualization of the Indigenous present, instead of Muñoz’s “theory of queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of [merely] critiquing a present,” (Muñoz 10) it is possible to interpret Belcourt’s affective spectrum as necessary for an intelligibility of his Indigenous immediacy, or the here and now of the “everyday,” instead of merely as a reactionary resistance to the socio-political settler context that ascribes an Indigenous “‘victimhood’ [which can be] conceived of as the genealogical descendant of the trauma of colonisation” (Hokowhitu 103-104).³ The intelligibility of Belcourt’s Indigenous immediacy through his ambivalent affect offers a linguistic shift away from a Hegelian dialectic of “resistance” to the settler-colonial state to one of enacting a loving “responsibility” to queer, Indigenous kin, conceivably to put us back into relation through Kim TallBear’s (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) notion of caretaking, which then makes Belcourt’s utopic “haven of a world” tenable to a broader audience (Belcourt 128).

Many of Hokowhitu’s theoretical moves within “Indigenous Existentialism and the Body” are seemingly in concert with some of Belcourt’s own reflections throughout *A History of My Brief Body* and “Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?” In Hokowhitu’s theory of Indigenous existentialism he, like Belcourt, problematizes the tendency for ‘tradition’ and ‘decolonization’ to be the primary concepts of study, even within Indigenous studies, as it negates the consideration of Indigenous immediacy in favor of a futile “search for pure traditions and precolonial authentic identities [that] relocates an Indigenous sense-of-being in the past” (103).⁴ While ongoing settler colonial structural event(s) can lead Indigenous people to a dialectical understanding amongst the destructive and creative divide of settler/Indigenous, which again limits the Indigenous to “preservation of Self” and “resistance against Other,” Hokowhitu reiterates that these reactionary

discourses “not only fall[] on deaf ears, [they] limit[] Indigenous people to a colonised/coloniser mentality, while ignoring Indigenous responsibility in the immediate context” (106). It is through the concept of self-determination that Hokowhitu articulates the Indigenous ‘responsibility’ “for colonisation[;] not to release the coloniser from responsibility, rather to reclaim [Indigenous] freedom to choose beyond a colonised/coloniser mentality” (107). This existentialist intervention allows for attention to the immediacy of the historical and contemporary Indigenous conditions, which, he argues, can be theorized through the “strenuous analyses into the immediacy of the Indigenous body as an existing, living, breathing, playing, thinking, working, aging and dying physical agent” (Hokowhitu 113, original emphasis). Significantly, Hokowhitu reiterates that

Indigenous theorising cannot fully develop without the possibility for existential agency, for it cannot be the atrocities of colonisation can be the defining point.... Indigenous existentialism must materialise beyond such embodied and genealogical pain. The physical endurance of pain may not be a choice, but Indigenous people can choose to live beyond the genealogical scarring inflicted by colonization. (113)

As Alice Te Punga (Te Āti Awa, Taranaki) invertedly explicates the Hegelian dialectic, while settler colonialism “must always contend with the Indigene (vanishing, exterminated, agentic, or whatever), Indigenous studies and Indigenous worlds are always bigger than experiences, and even analyses, of colonialism” (4 emphasis added).

Indigenous existentialism, as invoked through the immediacy of the Indigenous conditions/body, would presumably then be an appealing theoretical point of departure for Belcourt who is committed to the (utopic) survivance of (queer) Indigenous kin in the present, not merely just the future. Importantly for Belcourt’s commitments to a utopic future and present, “[e]ffecting an Indigenous existentialism through the realisation of the material immediacy of the Indigenous body will enable Indigenous people to live beyond the search for a pure-pre-colonial

past and the limits of a mind/body duality” (Hokowhitu 116, original emphasis). While Hokowhitu theorizes the immediacy of the Indigenous condition through an eloquently poignant description of contemporary Māori rugby play,⁵ Belcourt should also be understood as attending to the immediacy of the Indigenous condition through the theorization his own “everyday” queer, Indigenous body that feels such an affective cacophony.

Arguably, the entirety of *A History of My Brief Body* can be understood as Belcourt’s affective ruminations of his queer, Indigenous body in the contemporary “everyday.” While revisiting Belcourt’s description of his text as attending to “those hard feelings” of sadness in a declared narrative of joy, it becomes imperative to speak against any overdetermination of the negative affective as well as to posit the affective experience of ambivalence, or to feel many (discordant) feelings at once (Miller & Rollnick). The harmonious cacophony of his ambivalent affective experience is the reality of his (queer) Indigenous immediacy in the present, or “the here and now; ‘the everyday’” (Hokowhitu 103). With reference to a concise instance, I consider Belcourt’s second vignette in his chapter, “Gay: 8 Scenes,” a recounting of his Edmonton “sexual debut,” as bursting with affective ambivalence from his expansive “sexual possibility” (51):

I expand with sexual possibility. Which is another way of saying I’m incredibly horny. I have little sexual experience, but I’m not technically a virgin. I have not slept with anyone in Edmonton; I’m an Edmonton virgin. I download Grindr. For my profile picture I use a tightly framed shot of my torso with the waistband of a jockstrap peeking out at the bottom of the screen. Almost immediately my phone buzzes with a message from a similarly beheaded torso: hey, looking? He has a couple of abs, which already makes me feel as though I’m touring through a foreign world. He doesn’t have a car and can’t host me at his apartment, so he suggests we fuck in the exercise room in the basement of his building, which he

presses is rarely used, especially so late on a weeknight. This jettisons me outside the neighborhood of old feeling, where there is nothing but red flags, somewhere outside ordinary time. I vibrate with worry so much that it feels like my skin is loosening. I pick him up and drive back to my apartment, where I unfold into him, without grace, like a crumpled map, long discarded (Belcourt *A History*... 51).

To be young, gay, and Cree with feelings of lust, desire, and arousal that will hopefully be fulfilled with right swipes on Grindr, the feelings of surprise, excitement, and anxiety that a match messaged immediately to ask “hey, looking,” to the feelings of disappointment and worry that are overlaid on eager anticipation during the metaphorical and literal cruise, and, finally, those feelings of vulnerability and self-consciousness intermixed with feelings of excitement, joy, ecstasy, and gratification while sexually “unfolding” into him. The affective ambivalence postulated in this interpretation of Belcourt’s vignette should both restate the mistake of overdetermining the presence of any negative affect, as well as rearticulate how his Indigenous immediacy is theorized through his ambivalent affective experience throughout this particular moment and throughout his text.⁶ Through Belcourt’s narrative, it is possible to conceive of his, and other (queer) Indigenous kin’s, Indigenous immediacy through these affective experiences in all their ambivalent complexities (Hokowhitu 103). It is this reality of discordance and ambivalence in his affective experience, I posit, that foregrounds the immediacy of the queer, Indigenous conditions necessary for Hokowhitu’s Indigenous existentialism that has other world (re)making potential for Belcourt’s project. With the immediacy of the queer, Indigenous condition located in Belcourt’s affective theorization of his own body, it is possible to recognize how an Indigenous existentialism manifests in Belcourt’s text as a joyous and loving responsibility to kin.

“Please Keep Loving: Reflections on Unlivability” is a chapter that can be interpreted as Belcourt’s progression into an Indigenous existentialism that exemplifies his responsibilities to and caretaking of queer, Indigenous youth. He attends to the devastating reality of Native youth

suicide and how the biopolitics within settler and tribal nations have seemingly overlooked how homophobia and transphobia, within and outside of reserves, significantly contribute to the unlivability in this world for queer, Indigenous youth. Belcourt critiques “suicide prevention” as an analytic which “cherry-pick[s] ways of being over others” instead of “making new forms of collective NDN life” (111). Invoking the concept of choice, necessary for Indigenous existentialism, he critiques how “Reserves can be incubators of transphobia and homophobia as a symptom of the Christianizing project carried out by settlers for decades; that history, however, doesn’t absolve NDNs of making use of a single-issue focus on race that ignores to a grievous degree the pain of the doubly and triply marginalized” (Belcourt 111). While theorizing against a colonized/colonizer mindset that ignores, or inadvertently/intentionally fosters, the contemporary unlivability for queer, Indigenous youth, Belcourt asserts that “This [chapter], then, is an experiment in writing in the direction of a time and place that doesn’t produce suicide as a chronic condition, as a suitable response to trauma;” in time and place neither in the settler nation-state nor in Indian country, but beyond (104-105; Hokowhitu).

Throughout his own reflections on his evolving feelings and understandings of queer/Indigenous suicidality, Belcourt demonstrates an Indigenous existential reframe which transitions from the initial reactionary to the settler nation-state, to the realization of the limits of tribes interpellated in the present dialectic, to finally recognize his responsibility to draw upon his kokum’s philosophy of love as a theory for radical world remaking for those who are queer and/or Indigenous. The linguistic and grammatical shift away from the “haunted speech” of suicidality as ‘indigenous pathology,’ which is simultaneously normalized within settler logics of elimination (Wolfe), towards choices that humanize and recognize queer, Indigenous youth and their experiences is an initial, formative gesture of his choice for responsibility, and subsequently caretaking. This loving humanization validates rather than shames the complex, and potentially agonizing, ambivalence of existing in the unlivable, with affective resonations of a romanticized

“unconditional love” amongst kin, allows Belcourt to acknowledge 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... suicide prevention thus needs to entail a radical remaking of the world” (110-111). Belcourt’s concluding compelling plea that “NDN youth, listen:... Please keep loving” exemplifies his Indigenous existentialist choice to be responsible to queer, Indigenous youth by alluding to the joyously radical (other world-making) possibilities of affective ambivalence - of love in addition to all else - that can create the “good life” in an “elsewhere and somewhere” (Belcourt 111).

It is this appeal to experiencing affective ambivalence of seemingly incompatible feelings and longings, here amongst other locations throughout the text, that encourages his audience, specifically those who are queer and/or Indigenous, to acknowledge their immediacy through their own complex affective experiences which might bring about an Indigenous existentialism for themselves. This is to say, through the disentanglement of Indigenous selfhood from the “colonized mindset,” there is radical potential for Belcourt’s aspirations of world re-making to occur as more Indigenous actions shift away from a dialectic of “resistance” to those of existentialist “responsibilities.”⁷ For freedom, in addition to responsibility and choice, as a necessary constituent to an Indigenous existentialism (Hokowhitu), “is itself a poetics, in that it seeks to reschematize time, space, and feeling in the direction of a future driven by an ethics of care, a relational practice of joy-making that is ours to enact” – even right now (Belcourt 128). Throughout *A History of My Brief Body*, Belcourt engages in an atemporal relational practice of joy-making, as informed by his inherited philosophy of love, which not only demonstrates his freedom to choose responsibility to kin(ship making) through an Indigenous existentialism of caretaking relationality,⁸ but also conceivably provokes Indigenous existentialism in his readers that makes his aspirations for “start[ing] anew in the haven of a world in the image of our own radical art” enduringly tenable (128).

Circling around,⁹ I conclude with ruminations on Belcourt’s question, “what does it mean that my writing looks this way,” to offer not a definitive answer but to instead emphasize the radical possibilities that his ambivalent affective experience offers for radical world remaking when read through Indigenous existentialism. For his sadness and sorrow, not to be overdetermined as debilitating to his narrative of joy, are integral aspects of his affective spectrum as he locates the immediacy of the present Indigenous condition through his own queer, Indigenous body. The Indigenous existentialism that manifests throughout *A History of My Brief Body* allows “for the holes in the fabric of a colonial world [to be] revealed” to see an illumed exit route (9): By choosing to regard Belcourt’s “HOPE settler state ≠ the world” with atemporality, we can not only hear the “rallying cry” for a utopic future but also a liberatory potential for the present, contemporary Indigenous conditions as well (82).

NOTES

¹ “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.... It’s likely that you might feel confused at times by my style of writing, its dexterity, its refusal of easiness, but I know that you’ll sense the affection bubbling up inside each word. That affection is joy, and it started with you. Now, I see it everywhere” (Belcourt *A History...* 6).

² “Ambivalence is simultaneously wanting [/feeling] and not wanting [/feeling] something, or wanting [/feeling] both of two incompatible things. It has been human nature since the dawn of time” (Miller & Rollnick 6).

³ Where, “The idealism Indigenous people locate in the pure-past limits how we conceive of ourselves through the *immediacy* of [contemporary] experience” (Hokowhitu 103, original emphasis).

⁴ “Native Studies, putatively defined against the neoliberal university, is a discipline from which renegade knowledge is to be generated, one whose foundational object – the Native – shores up modes of intellectual production meant to depart from, and, in this, attack the colonial episteme itself... However, I intend to argue... that the Native is the subject, intelligible in form, who comes into being prior to the study in order to conduct that study. *There is a history of coming-into-being that needs to be fleshed out*” (Belcourt “Can the Other...” emphasis added).

⁵ “Produced as Māori *culture*, but never conceived of as ‘Māori culture’” (Hokowhitu 115 original emphasis).

⁶ Where Belcourt experiences the simultaneity of wanting and not wanting (Miller & Rollnick).

⁷ “What will matter in the end isn’t how many days I endured in the battleground of linear time, but what every fiber of me aspired to – something more than the gift of mortality... something

only fully and fleetingly realized in the hands and mouths and chests of those whom I encountered as a mark on this ghostly page” (Belcourt *A History...* 103).

⁸ “If one refuses Indigenous elimination and a de-animating possession of us, then a new redemptive narrative, a different creative move is required” (TallBear 36).

⁹ Where stories, and research, go in circles (Wilson 6).

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