



REVIEW

Billy-Ray Belcourt. *coexistence*. WW Norton & Company, 2024. 176pp. ISBN: 978-1-324-07594-3.

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Following a growing number of publications across, between, and beyond genre, Billy-Ray Belcourt's most recent publication, *coexistence*, is his first full-length publication in short story form. Across the ten stories which make up this new collection, Belcourt creates characters and then revisits some of them from different perspectives. He depicts the loneliness evinced from sexual experiences with men from hook-up and dating apps, the palpability of grief, the beauty of domestic life on and off the reserve, and the many possibilities for life after prison, evoking, over and over again, the desire to care and to be cared for in the face of the impacts of settler colonialism. As expressed by Will in the short story "Young Adults," Belcourt uses the "creative practice" of this collection to illuminate "the ways Indigenous peoples make total conquest impossible" (63).

The early pages of the text set the score for how *coexistence* will confront the insistence and the horror of settler colonialism. They not only allude to what Belcourt names in his essay collection-cum-memoir *A History of My Brief Body* (2020) "the Christianizing project carried out by settlers for decades," (111) but also to the indeterminacy of death: "People don't really expire... People die, but even in death they continue aging in crooked photographs along a wall in someone's house" (2). In the first story, "One Woman's Memories," Belcourt uses grief and memory as a mirror to colonialism. He presents them - yes - as concepts and experiences which can connect people and

moments, but also as concepts and experiences which show the movement from past to present and the absence of a boundary between the two. As written in the third story "Poetry Class," it is possible to hold "a general ambivalence toward linear time [as t]he past, the present—these [a]re contestable categories. We experienc[e] them simultaneously" (35). Thus, like grief and memory, colonialism cannot be relegated to the past.

In the opening story, Louise, a widowed Cree woman living on the reserve in the subarctic whilst her son lives in Edmonton, navigates memories of her past, her relationship with her son, and her late husband, in her life after and amidst loss. This story touches upon familial relationships, their decline and possibilities for their rejuvenation, queer love, and Canada's colonial history. These themes arise as Louise moves through the monotony of her surroundings in and around her reserve: inside her home, at the grocery store, in the town where she does her shopping. As she steers through these physical locations, she reflects on her experience of residential schooling, non-status Indian rules whereby women had to give up their Indian status if they married someone who was not Indigenous, and on the role of Christianity and the cultural genocide of her people.

Whilst the story centres the present and ongoing reality of colonialism in Canada—"what is luck in the face of genocide?" (7)—and, with this, the blurring or breaking of the boundaries between the past and present, it concludes on a hopeful note. Belcourt reminds us that, in the face of ongoing loss and grief, "Sometimes to remember is enough" (11).

The second story in this collection, "Lived Experiences," brings us into the world of Tom, a twenty-something Cree university student from northwest Alberta, whose world is marked by loneliness and love. Between encounters with men from hook-up apps which tiptoe along the boundaries of non-consensuality—"he interprets my glance as consent, unzips his pants and pulls out his dick" (15)—Tom falls in love with his history classmate Will, another Cree man from a different "corner of the boreal forest" in northeast Alberta (23). "Lived Experience" elicits the desire to refuse to "self-explode," in the face of the prospect of love, and to "desire one another in opposition to the way the white gaze makes [Indigenous people] into objects of disdain" (31). It captures the potentiality for Indigiqueer love. How the experience of "relaxing, for the first time, into the publicness of... queer Cree joy," (24) and sex between two Cree queers can be transformative—"I think about a river crashing against the riverbanks, about how euphoric it is to excess your outer limits" (21)—and how all of this can reject loneliness—"we aren't lonely people, at least not today" (23).



By the third and fourth story of the collection, we can begin to piece together glimpses of Belcourt amongst his writing. Alongside the familiarity of his theoretical, philosophical, and poetic voice, we see “Sex Lives: An Anonymous Chorus” feature—much like *A History of My Brief Body* and his debut poetry collection *This Wound is a World* (2017)—the use of numbered sections to fragment the stories that he puts to paper. But, more than familiar stylistic and form choices, we can see elements of Belcourt’s own life and experiences in his writing too. Whether it be characters who live on the west coast but grew up in northern Alberta, doing a second degree at Oxford, stories of queer Cree men, or characters who are poetry professors, he can be found in glimmers right across this collection. I reflect on this as I was reminded, in reading this book and as a creative writer myself, how all writing features a part of ourselves: we are in all of the stories we create or choose to tell. How much of *coexistence* is fiction and how much of it is fictionalised?

It is likely that these musings on writing come from digesting “Poetry Class,” which is a story packed full of rumination on the power of poetry—“A poem could destabilize the appearance of the world’s immutability. A poem, spun with enough care and power, could architect a small refuge” (35). Alongside some astute assessments of the place of colonisation in or as a vehicle for poetry—“Maybe poetry that requires dispossession isn’t poetry after all but propaganda”—it is ultimately words, language, and poetry, and Belcourt’s relationship with and to them, which gift insight into the professor-protagonist’s relational and emotional world in this story. In the midst of several shifts in his relationship with his partner of twelve years, the protagonist reminds his class, and indeed himself, how “A poem... is at the very least a record of one’s survival. It brings about an *I*. It is the process of generation and survival” (47).

The poetry professor protagonist resurfaces in “Literary Festival,” which is set in the aftermath of his separation from his partner, S, and which also features some reflections on the form of poetry, as both “a literary activity” and as “the way people creatively resist colonial-capitalist enclosure” (80). This, coupled with the presentation of poetry as personal, political, and necessary to existence, translates the essence of Belcourt’s own feelings about poetry, as being something which has the power to “invent” the “future” and to resist “obliterat[ion]” in the “present” (74).

Perhaps the most literal commentary on the horrors of the colonial past of northern Alberta comes in the story titled “Summer Research.” As an unnamed queer Cree PhD researcher travels to his parents’ new house—a historic home for the nuns who worked at the local residential school—we are confronted with the legacy of colonialism in varying ways. It is through racist interactions with white locals—“I swear I saw him make

a gun and point it at me" (120)—the protagonist's reflections on his queerness—"to be queer in rural Alberta was to be a one-person protest against the normative" (112)—his attempts to get acknowledgment from the church for the abhorrent history of the residential school—"What do you make of the legacy of residential schools?" (122)—and finally, his nightly encounters with the figure of a woman who resembles a nun—"there was a woman dressed in a long black gown standing in the tub, dripping with water" (113)—that the continuing presence of colonialism is illuminated.

There are undertones of horror in this story which give you chills, and which gesture towards the non-figurative nature of the colonial horrors imposed upon Indigenous people across Canada. This story, like others throughout the collection, collapses the divide between past and present. The gowned figure of the nun is not just a figment of the protagonist's imagination, some relic of the past, or some symbol of history appearing in his dreams to haunt him. Wide awake and in the early light of day, he is met by her and what she signifies. Wide awake and in the early light of day, he meets her again, except this time, he can "see her face" (124); he is made to confront the inescapability of time and a history which has not yet ended.

coexistence, in summation, is a book which brings its title to life. The meaning behind it permeates the pages of every story in the collection: each one is dedicated to it. Whether it be the synchronicity of the past and present, grief and love, or "the world's beauty and terror," (18) Belcourt's newest publication, shows us that to be "Indigenous in the twenty-first century means that a single hour can be governed simultaneously by joy and sadness" (25): these feelings and experiences of the world "can [and do] coexist" (18).

Whether you are looking to delve into the distinct voice and fragmented, poignant poetics of Belcourt's writing for the first time or to further expand the Indigiqueer section of your bookshelf, the insights that this work provides into the varying possibilities for contemporary Indigiqueer experiences, alone, makes it worth reading. Amongst jarringly beautiful prose and reflections on the co-occurrences of colonisation and reclamation; annihilation and the vividness of loving and of living, Belcourt crafts a work which is saturated with a commitment to perseverance and hopefulness.

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Works Cited

Belcourt, Billy-Ray. *A History of My Brief Body*. Two Dollar Radio, 2020.



---. *This Wound is a World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.