

Review Essay: **Weaving the Present, Writing the Future: Benaway, Belcourt, and Whitehead's Queer Indigenous Imaginaries**

Billy-Ray Belcourt. *This World Is a Wound*. Frontenac House Poetry, 2017, 63 pp. ISBN: 978-1-927823-64-4. <https://www.frontenachouse.com/dd-product/this-wound-is-a-world/>

Gwen Benaway. *Passage*. Kegedonce Press, 2016, 120 pp. ISBN: 978-1-928120-08-7. <https://kegedonce.com/bookstore/item/81-passage.html>

Joshua Whitehead. *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*. Talon Books, 2017, 119 pp. ISBN: 978-1-77201-187-6. <https://talonbooks.com/books/full-metal-indigiqueer>

Joshua Whitehead. *Johnny Appleseed*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018, 223 pp. ISBN: 978-1-55152-725-3. <http://www.arsenalpulp.com/bookinfo.php?index=479>

In Ohlone-Coastanoan Esselen writer Deborah Miranda's remarkable tribal memoir, *Bad Indians*, Two-Spirit ancestors ask:

Who remembers us? Who pulls us, forgotten, from beneath melted adobe and groomed golf courses and asphalted freeways, asks for our help, rekindles the work of our lives? Who takes up the task of weaving soul to body, carrying the dead from one world to the next, who bears the two halves of spirit in the whole vessel of one body?

Where have you been? Why have you waited so long? How did you ever find us, buried under words like *joto*, like *joya*, under whips and lies? And what do you call us now?

Never mind, little ones. Never mind. You are here now, at last. Come close. Listen. We have so much work to do. (32)

The writers I engage in this review, Billy-Ray Belcourt (Driftpile Cree), Gwen Benaway (Anishinabe/Métis), and Joshua Whitehead (Oji-Cree) are taking up this important work, listening, theorizing, creating, (re)membering, and, to use Miranda's words, "weaving soul to body" while they travel, as queer, trans, and/or Two-Spirit people, through the twenty-first century. In doing so, this younger generation of artists weave Indigenous futures with a ribbon gifted them by those queer Indigenous writers who have passed on—including Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo/Sioux), Beth Brant (Bay of Quinte Mohawk), Connie Fife (Cree), Maurice Kenny (non-citizen Mohawk), Carole laFavor (Anishinaabe), and Sharon Proulx-Turner (Métis Nation of Alberta)—as well as those like Chrystos (Menominee), Qwo-Li Driskill (non-citizen Cherokee), Janice Gould (Koyangk'auwi Maidu), Tomson Highway (Cree, Barren Lands First Nation), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation), Miranda, Greg Scofield (Métis), and so many more, who continue to construct powerful Indigenous imaginaries in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps the single clearest point that arises from re-reading these four books back-to-back is that *this new generation of LGBTQ/2S Indigenous intellectuals is on fire*. They write poetry, fiction, essay, and theory, give innumerable interviews and readings, hold conferences, present talks, take MA and PhD exams, mentor each other and their peers, teach in classrooms, workshops, and through informal interactions, tweet funny and painful observations about their lives, and, far

beyond stagnating in academia, work with and for Indigenous communities and LGBTQ/2S Indigenous youth. Writers like Benaway, Belcourt, and Whitehead *inhabit* and *create* incredible energy and possibility: the four books discussed here manifest this truth.

Benaway, a Two-Spirited trans poet whose new book, *Holy Wild*, will be published before this review goes to press, was awarded a 2016 Dayne Oglivie Prize for LGBT Emerging Writers from the Writers' Trust of Canada. Currently a PhD student in the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto, she has earned accolades for *Passage*, her second book, which is a collection structured around movement and water, as the title suggests. The five sections of the book—each named after one of the Great Lakes—travel through a painfully recalled childhood, a divorce, and the author's embodied experience of love, sex, and life as a Two-Spirit trans woman.

Benaway's work is both lyrically gorgeous and haunting; while aesthetically beautiful, her poems detail childhood abuse from a father who refused to accept his child's non-cis identity, clearly showing the tyranny and danger present in the normative demands of heteromascularity. As she writes in "Gills," "you hit me for as long as I can remember / with whatever was at hand . . . // you said I disgusted you, / . . . / never wrestling with my brother / or catching the baseballs you threw" (27). Bearing witness to physical and psychological violence, then, is part of the project of *Passage*, a book that asks how one might "mourn the unspoken," and also "how to witness / be honest with the dead" (45). The layers of memory and articulation unearthed in each section propel the speaker toward a reclamation of "the sovereignty of truth / of saying it happened" (50).

Benaway is not the first Indigenous writer to do such important work, as Tanana Athabaskan scholar Dian Million reminds us. Million calls such essential witnessing "felt theory," describing it as a way to articulate Indigenous realities and subvert academic gatekeeping that would deem the deep emotions like those seen in *Passage* as something less than academic. In sharing this often-difficult narrative, which entangles connection to land and water together with themes of abuse, transphobia, and transformation, Benaway's text speaks about the power of story to engender wholeness, to "weave soul to body" and chart a new route forward.

In charting this route, *Passage* also, then, maps a narrative of survivance. In "If," for example, Benaway writes:

if exploration isn't always conquest
if discovery can be shaped of visions,
if instinct is another word for truth.
if passage is more than movement,
I've already made it back. (10)

Thus the movement of *Passage* is not necessarily away from, but *through* and, ultimately, *to* a sense of self as a Two-Spirit trans woman. While aspects of this path to self-discovery—or perhaps more appropriately a path to revealing the self there all along—can be found throughout the collection, the two final sections of the text—"Lake Erie" and "Lake Superior"—particularly highlight tropes of transition and change. For example, considering Lake Erie's path from pollution to reclamation, the speaker notes, while "you grow / verdant again, / . . . / I've changed too, / no longer a child- / a woman with / blue eyes" (71). As this stanza suggests, Benaway's focus on her decision to make visible her womanhood marks the affective link between the human body and the more-than-human world; here, water = body = life. In this

equation, to be trans is a movement, a change, a place of growth that mirrors the shifts of land and water that Indigenous people have recognized/been part of for millennia. As Benaway says in “Ceremony,” one of the final pieces in the book, these poems bear witness to such connections. They are “the voices // of [her] grandmothers,” and, as a result, become “an offering,” “a promise,” and a blessing (110-11). Thus, while an incredibly personal book from a self-described feminist confessional poet, *Passage*, in its lyric beauty, its bravery, and its testament to survival and rebirth, is a gift to readers as well.

Benaway and Billy-Ray Belcourt often reference each other’s work and the lyric brilliance I mark in Benaway can also be seen, in a significantly different narrative form, in Belcourt’s debut collection, *This World Is a Wound*. I first encountered Belcourt when he gave a paper at the 2015 Native American and Indigenous Studies Association conference. He was an undergraduate at the time and his presentation on Indigeneity, sexuality, and haunting was one of the most thought-provoking papers I heard at a conference filled with high-powered Indigenous intellectuals. Belcourt quickly found his place among them, winning a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford, completing a Master’s degree in Women’s Studies there, and starting a PhD at the University of Alberta. In 2017, he published *This World Is a Wound*, which, among many other awards and nominations, won a prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize in 2018.

Belcourt crafts numbered lists and prose poems and often eschews punctuation and capitalization in his powerful meditation on the intersections of violence, love, and the body. Rather than considering the physical space of embodiment, Belcourt explains in his epilogue that “*This World Is a Wound* is a book obsessed with the unbodied” (58). What does it mean, he asks in poems like “The Oxford Journal,” for a Native person when a “sense of loss . . . tailgates their body” (48), when “death and Indigeneity” are conceived of as “co-constitutive categories” (58)? Belcourt writes his way to and through questions of disembodiment even as he bears witness to settler attacks on the bodies of Indigenous people like Colton Boushie, Christian Duck Chief, and Barbara Kentner, as well as to the violence of settler systems that can only imagine death for Indigenous people. The latter is seen in poems like “God’s River,” which recalls when Health Canada sent the Wasagegek and God’s River First Nations, not requested healthcare provisions, but body bags in the wake of a 2009 swine flu outbreak. In the face of this systematic failure, Belcourt writes, I “think maybe / reserve is / another word / for morgue / is another word / for body bags / - call it home anyways” (29).

At the same time, like Benaway, Belcourt offers not just the pain and daily trauma of ongoing colonization, but also a litany of beauty and humor when he considers what it means to queer, Indigenous, and twenty-something in the 2010s. In “The Creator Is Trans,” for example, he imagines a eulogy constructed “with phrases like / *freedom is the length of a good rim job* / and *the most relatable thing about him* / *was how often he cried watching wedding videos on youtube*. Homonationalism, amirite?” (24). This mixture of sex, pop culture, high theory, and humor is classic Belcourt, whose vast intellectual range is informed by a deeply caring ethos and, at times, comic self-deprecation. His poems move with a rapid-fire pace from the erotic as healing, heartbreak, and/or a mode of disappearance, to academia, contemporary politics, and Indigenous polities.

This World Is a Wound follows *Passage* in its marked interest in the body/unbodied and the intersections of the body in relationship. Both texts offer overt engagements with sex, love, and Indigeneity in the twenty-first century, but Belcourt’s perhaps more directly considers how the

parameters of these vital interchanges are mediated by the technological realities of the current era. While the explicit references to the erotic aren't new—writers like Beth Brant and Chrystos have published in a collection of lesbian erotica, Maurice Kenny published in gay zines like *Fag Rag*, and oral traditions thrive on earthy jokes—the movement between cyberspace, dating/hook-up sites, and daily life marks a new space of contemplation for queer Indigenous literature. Whitehead's poetry and prose further bears this out.

How does one represent oneself, read others, find connection, fuck and get fucked in the blue-green glow of the digital present? Like Belcourt, Whitehead, too, addresses these questions of technological mediation and (dis)embodiment. For Whitehead, who is currently a PhD student at the University of Calgary, we see this focus in both his debut poetry collection, *full-metal indigiqueer*, and his first novel, *Jonny Appleseed*. Far from being some utopic version of a present in which electronic interactions allow for an escape from racism and ideological violence, Whitehead reveals how Grindr and other online sites for dating, hookups, and web-shows reanimate colonized ideologies—as the protagonist of *Jonny Appleseed* comments: “These men are all too easy; they're all a bit voyeur and a bit voyageur” (151).

Though *full-metal indigiqueer* and *Jonny Appleseed* are, of course, vastly different—they are poetry and novel, code and story—they overlap in meaningful ways both with each other and with Belcourt and Benaway's texts. In an essay entitled “The Body Remembers when the World Broke Open,” Belcourt comments that:

In supposedly reconciliatory times like ours, Indigenous artists are burdened with answering the call to envision a good post-colonial future, but we are still hurting in the present and we are not finished trying to figure out how to activate collective survival.

Whitehead speaks to this over-determined queer Indigenous present by considering intersections of loss, pain, and hope. In fact, as the book jacket to *full-metal indigiqueer* explains, Whitehead creates “a sex-positive project that sparks resurgence” “for those who have, as Donna Haraway once noted, ‘been injured, profoundly.’”

A brilliant, experimental journey through the present and the future, *full-metal indigiqueer*—which was shortlisted for the Stephan G. Stephansson Award and Indigenous Voices award—is narrated by a hybridized Indigiqueer digital trickster, Zoa, who communicates in code, hashtags, and textspeak. If Benaway is overtly confessional, and Belcourt occasionally confessional, Zoa offers us something new—the third-person confessional—as they rocket through life, a “steeltown ndn moloch / [a] supersonic thunderbird / [a] graveyard scrapyard cyborg” (“thegarbageeater” 35). In the process, Zoa writes the present and initializes an Indigiqueer future.

This collection demands and rewards reader participation: *full-metal indigiqueer* is not for those hoping to sit back, skim, and be spoon-fed ancient Native wisdom (a fact equally true of every text reviewed here). When opening the collection, readers follow a trail of code encased in white circles that gradually increase in size on an otherwise entirely black page. This visually provocative introduction leads us to Zoa, our guide through Whitehead's world. In the first section of the text, Zoa finds their name, initializes their programming, and hurtles into a queer coming-of-age journey filled with first encounters and the deeply evocative presences/absences experienced by the queer Indigenous speaker. We see, then, a story of adolescent parties and first

misogyny, and settler hegemony that cause a non-cis femme person to be attacked for rejecting a violent masculinity. While Two-Spirit roles and identities have at times been simplified and romanticized, Whitehead extends no such trite answers; thus, his readers encounter twenty-first century Two-Spirit realities, which are named and highly valued in his writing, *and* they simultaneously see the infiltration and violent ramifications of Judeo-Christian prohibitions against queerness.

Passage, This World Is a Wound, Passage, full-metal indigiqueer, and *Jonny Appleseed* represent just one aspect of the rich and complex worlds engendered by these authors' lives, writing, and activism. I want to urge you, then, not only to read the texts discussed here, but also to seek out that wider intellectual community. Thus I offer just a few pieces for further reading.

In the past year Belcourt has published numerous essays including (but by no means limited to), for *Canadian Art*, "Settler Structures of Bad Feeling" and "What Do We Mean by Queer Indigenous Ethics," co-written with Lindsay Nixon (Cree-Métis-Saulteaux curator, editor, writer, and McGill art history PhD student). In this same period, Benaway's long-form essay "Between a Rock and a Hard Place" won *Prism International's* 2017 Grand Prize for Creative Nonfiction, and her powerful 2018 essay on her experience of surgery, entitled "A Body Like Home," is no doubt soon to follow. Benaway also edited and wrote an introduction for a special issue of Indigenous trans/queer/Two-Spirit writing and art for *THIS: Progressive Politics, Ideas, and Culture* that highlights the work of emerging writers, like the aforementioned Nixon, whose memoir, *Nítisânak*, was released September 2018 by Metonymy Press, and Kai Minosh Pyle (Métis/Anishinaabe) among others. (Pyle was first runner-up for the *Prism International* prize.) Meanwhile, Joshua Whitehead's open letter on his rejection of a major award nomination, "Why I'm Withdrawing From My Lambda Literary Award Nomination," offers a highly nuanced theorization of the difference between Cree Two-Spirit and trans ideologies.

I began this essay by noting "*this new generation of LGBTQ/2S Indigenous intellectuals is on fire.*" I conclude by arguing that, in their essays and the four books reviewed here, Gwen Benaway, Billy-Ray Belcourt, and Joshua Whitehead craft some of the most important creative and theoretical interventions in Indigenous studies today.

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