

Expanding Queer Indigenous Traditions as a Vehicle of Futurity

By Declan Smith¹

¹University of Minnesota – Twin Cities

Abstract: In this paper, I bring into conversation the work of Billy-Ray Belcourt to discuss Indigenous concepts of queerness. I argue that Belcourt defines queer Indigenous identities and bodies as distinct from settler concepts of queerness, and the existences of the Indigenous body indicates an Indigenous futurity (Indigenous future existence). Additionally, I draw from the works of Qwo-Li Driskill and June Scudeler. I elaborate how Native concepts of queerness are intrinsically distinct from colonial understandings and practices of queerness, connecting this to how Belcourt distinguishes Indigenous concepts and definitions of queerness from those of settler-colonial society. I also draw upon Sonja Boon and Kate Lahey’s work on drift to further explore how Belcourt evades colonial definitions and expectations. Simultaneously, Belcourt expands and reworks traditions of queer Indigeneity.

In Billy-Ray Belcourt’s *This Wound is a World*, Belcourt examines the body and unbodied throughout this collection of poetry. In the epilogue, Belcourt states “*This Wound Is a World* is a book obsessed with the unbodied” (Belcourt 55). While not explicitly defined, the unbodied may be understood as the ways that space is occupied by a person outside of or without regard to the physical body. The unbodied is not defined or limited by physical constraints. It could be a spirit, emotion, or an abstract extension of the self. However, examining the unbodied is challenging as it cannot be materialized. The unbodied cannot be called or named into existence as could a body. The unbodied must be named in relation to the body, a

photographic negative of the physical. Inversely, the body is defined by the same physical constraints that the unbodied is free from. Bodies have locations and boundaries. The Indigenous body inherently becomes marked by settler society and colonization upon contact. Settler-colonialism is a sociopolitical structure that aims to replace Indigenous peoples and Indigenous communities with a settler society primarily through the claiming of Indigenous lands (Wolfe 388). In a settler-colonial environment, all settlers share a common goal of obtaining land. Because Indigenous peoples already live on the land that the settler society desires, Indigenous peoples are marked as a problem needing a solution

by settler society. Colonization attempts to define and categorize Indigenous bodies and experiences as a way to *other* them and mark Indigenous peoples as removable. Another way bodies are marked in a settler-colonial environment is through the Western (primarily Europe and U.S.) oriented concepts of sex and gender. Judith Butler claims that concepts of femininity and masculinity are necessary for the interpretation and understanding of bodies in a social-cultural structure Butler refers to as the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 151). The functioning of the heterosexual matrix relies on the stability of these notions of masculine / feminine and male / female (Butler 151). Butler illustrates how bodies are sexed and gendered as a way to create and reinforce cis-heterosexuality as a dominant structure. The existence of Two-Spirit, tribally named, and other queer Indigenous identities is in direct opposition to settler structures of race, gender, and sexuality. By blurring the definitions of queer Indigenous bodies Belcourt does not allow colonial ideas and expectations to be pinned or mapped onto the queer Indigenous body (Boon and Lahey 35). Belcourt repurposes, reimagines, and expands queer Indigenous identities and traditions. Through the examinations, dissections, and expansions of the queer, Cree body and relationalities between queer Cree individuals, Belcourt establishes Cree ontology, the study and concept of existence and nature of being, as incompatible with colonial society and that the presence of these bodies alone signify a Cree futurity.

In June Scudeler’s doctoral thesis, *Oskisihcikêwak/New Traditions in Cree Two-*

Spirit, Gay and Queer Narratives, Scudeler claims that Two-Spirit and queer indigenous identities exist outside of colonial ideas of queerness (Scudeler 15). Indigenous peoples and communities may have different concepts of gender and sexuality than the Western binaries of male / female and gay / straight. Scudeler elaborates that Two-Spirit and tribally named identities are not centered around colonial binaries and are instead defined through their own communities (Scudeler 14). Because Indigenous ideas of gender and sexuality may differ from Western ideas, some Indigenous identities are distinct and specific to Indigenous peoples. An example of an Indigenous identity outside of Western concepts is Two-Spirit. Generally, Two-Spirit is a term used by some Indigenous peoples to describe their gender and/or sexuality. Qwo-Li Driskill describes the term Two-Spirit as an:

... umbrella term for Native LGBTQ peoples as well as a term for people who use words and concepts from their traditions to describe themselves. Like other umbrella terms—including queer—it risks erasing difference. But also, like queer, it is meant to be inclusive, ambiguous and fluid. (Driskill 72)

Therefore, it is important that Two-Spirit and other tribally named identities remain specific to their communities because these identities are not able to be accurately

represented by the Western concepts of gender and sexuality.

The claims made by Scudeler and Driskill are paralleled in Belcourt's poem *The Cree Word for a Body Like Mine is Weesageechak*. Here, Belcourt examines the Cree, queer body in relation to the Cree concept of the *weesageechak*. By intertwining the body and Cree history, Belcourt establishes the Cree body and particularly the Cree, queer body as distinctly Cree and therefore entirely separate from colonial structures of identity. Cree concepts of queerness cannot be related to colonial concepts of queerness. Throughout this poem, Belcourt refuses to define the speaker's body or identity within Western constructs of gender or identity. The speaker's body is only named as *weesageechak*. While the concept of *weesageechak* is specific to Cree culture and cannot be fully conceptualized by settlers, Scudeler presents a loose translation as the genderless or gender subversive trickster (Scudeler 46). This trickster is an important Cree figure and motif that reappears in many Cree stories and histories. While Belcourt does use this term in ways that align with Scudeler's translation and traditional uses of the term, Belcourt also translates *weesageechak* as "sadness is a carcass his tears leave behind" (Belcourt 4). By redefining and repurposing a traditional Cree narrative, Belcourt reimagines and reclaims Cree traditions. The Cree, queer identity and body are not simply intertwined with Cree history or narratives; they become active writers and editors of Cree narratives and history. Through these intimate connections between the Cree, queer body and Cree

narratives and only using Cree concepts to describe the body, the Cree, queer body becomes innately Cree. Belcourt implies that colonial constructs are not sufficient at capturing the intricacies and details of Cree identities. In the case of *The Cree Word for a Body Like Mine is Weesageechak*, Western concepts of gender and sexuality cannot capture or depict the significance of *weesageechak*. More broadly, because Indigenous gender and sexuality are described and defined for which there is no Western concept or equivalent, Western gender and sexuality fails to comprehend these identities and thus often attempts to erase them.

In *The Impossibility of a Future in the Absence of a Past: Drifting in the In-Between*, Sonja Boon and Kate Lahey explore the concept of drift across several literary works, including Belcourt's *This Wound is a World*. Boon and Lahey describe drift broadly as "... a way towards understanding the impossibility of a future in the absence of a past" (Boon and Lahey 33). Many Indigenous peoples must navigate a world where there is little record of their culture in the past, and their future is threatened by colonization. The two authors further explain that drift is not passive and aimless but is rather intrinsically decolonial (Boon and Lahey 33). This movement and refusal of stagnancy becomes a way to resist settling (Boon and Lahey 33). Drift becomes a means to evade and resist colonial structures that attempt to erase Indigeneity. Boon and Lahey also emphasize that drift adapts depending on the author and their lived experiences (Boon and Lahey 34). Within the context of Belcourt's work, Boon and Lahey claim that Belcourt

drifts Indigenous desire, relationships, and identities by obscuring colonial definitions, boundaries, and categories of gender, sexuality, and desire (Boon and Lahey 35). Although not explicitly discussed in their article, Boon and Lahey's concept of drift is apparent in Belcourt's poem *The Cree Word for a Body Like Mine is Weesageechak*. As previously discussed *weesageechak* is used to name and identify the speaker's body. By naming a body with a term that is not comprehensible in Western concepts of gender, sexuality, and identity, Belcourt drifts Cree identity outside Western structures. Belcourt evades colonial and Western attempts to settle or take claim over this Indigenous identity. Additionally, often in Cree literature and history, *weesageechak* is a character or figure. *Weesageechak* is not traditionally a word used to describe a person's body. In the act of the speaker giving *weesageechak* their own definition and using it to depict their own body, Belcourt goes beyond drifting Cree identities from settler-colonial expectations and additionally expands upon Cree identity, building up and revitalizing Cree traditions. Belcourt shows how definitions and labels can be reshaped to expand upon and broaden concepts of queerness within Cree ways of knowing. The continuation of Cree traditions as well as the expansion and renewal of these traditions and identities actively promotes Cree futurity.

In her doctoral thesis, Scudeler explains that historically Two-Spirit and Native individuals that did not conform to colonial ideas of gender or sexuality have been targets and remain targets of extreme settler violence because these identities

cause confusion and disrupt colonial gender and sexuality (Scudeler 12). In Belcourt's poem, *Oxford Journal*, the speaker recalls two day-to-day moments of violence that demonstrate how the existence of the queer, Cree body in the colonial structure poses a crisis of being for the settler and the Indigenous body. In the second stanza of *Oxford Journal*, a stranger approaches the speaker, touches the speaker's skin, laughs, and runs off (Belcourt 41). The ultimate goal of settler-colonialism is acquisition of land. This interaction is a form of settler violence against the body and demonstrates that not even the settler can reconcile colonialism with the existence of the Indigenous body. However, to obtain land, the Native must be removed through whatever means necessary. The existence of an Indigenous person represents a failure of the settler-colonial structure.

The second interaction occurs in the sixth stanza of *Oxford Journal*, a man confronts the speaker. Enthralled by their race and cultural identity the stranger calls the speaker "wonderfully exotic" (Belcourt 42). In both interactions, the settler becomes fascinated with and fetishizes the queer, Indigenous body. The body becomes almost alien, something that the settler can poke, prod, examine, and test without fear of guilt because they are not like the settler. Bearing witness to the Indigenous body in a settler-colonial setting not only forces the settler to question the existence of the Indigenous, but simultaneously the settler is forced to question their own existence. The settler must answer why they exist in a space with Indigenous peoples. The settler must attempt to answer for their own ontology. The settler

is forced to acknowledge that they do not belong. This interaction shows how even in the mind of the settler there is no ontology or place for the existence of the queer, Cree body in the settler world. This does not mean that queer, Cree people cannot exist within a settler world but that this existence becomes more like survival.

Belcourt contrasts presence and dissociation to demonstrate how colonial violence attempts to smother the ontology and ways of existence for the queer, Cree body. As previously discussed, the Indigenous body becomes marked by settler-colonial society. Because the body is marked as the target of violence, the body becomes imprisoning and synonymous with confinement. Belcourt describes the body as a “death trap” (Belcourt 41). The queer Cree body becomes saturated with and almost immobilized in the present as colonial violence cannot be escaped when the body is a beacon, alerting those to do harm.

Contrastingly, Belcourt also exhibits how colonial violence causes dissociation and discrepancies between the body and mind. Because violence is enacted against the body, being able to escape the body may be a way to cope with or alleviate the damage caused by colonial violence. Belcourt describes colonial violence as a force that “pulls you from outside yourself” and causes a need for the body to escape itself (Belcourt 41, 43). The speaker begins to inhabit spaces outside of their body. The speaker tries to sever themselves from their body. This separation becomes necessary for survival but is never fully achievable. Additionally, *Oxford Journal* is told entirely through the second person.

This second-person perspective forces the reader into situations and instances of violence that are experienced by the queer, Cree body. However, this second-person perspective simultaneously serves to emphasize this dissociation that colonial violence creates. This perspective could be the speaker narrating their own experience or addressing themselves from a place outside of themselves.

This contrast between hyper-presence and dissociation of the queer, Cree body within colonial society creates an irreconcilable paradox of existing or what Belcourt refers to as an “ontological rupture” (Belcourt 41). The body is both confined and fixed within the present, yet the body can become separated from itself and the present time. This lacks a consistency. The speaker is whole and complete but always displaced. The speaker never fully inhabits the present and takes up space outside of their body. At the same time, the speaker is always overly present, taking up too much space or being too deeply engrained in space. Through this, Belcourt shows there are no ways of being for queer, Cree bodies in settler societies. Belcourt illustrates that to some extent there are no ways of being or at least reduced ways of being of queerness even within Cree communities. In *Sacred*, Belcourt describes a Native man that refuses to hold the speaker’s hand during a round dance, and another Native man tells the speaker “. . . to be a man and to decolonize in the same breath” (Belcourt 11). Belcourt shows how adequate space is not made for queerness in Cree communities and that colonial concepts of gender and gender roles have tainted Cree and Indigenous communities and their

traditions. The Indigenous body cannot peacefully or simply exist within the colonial society, as stated earlier. The queer, Cree body becomes a signifier of otherworldliness to the settler and of the possibility of other worlds.

In the epilogue of Belcourt's book, he states "It seems difficult to speak of or ontologize indigeneity without conjuring sadness and death" (Belcourt 55). *Oxford Journal* attempts to illustrate living with violence that seems to never leave. As previously described, the speaker experiences both moments of intense dissociation and hyper-presence as a response to violence. Here, Belcourt blurs space, time, and presence to evade the violence that is enacted against Indigenous peoples and in doing so drifts relationalities with violence. Across time, place, and settings, the speaker is stalked by and ambushed by violence. A desk, a café, a walk outside all become battlegrounds and crime scenes where violence is perpetuated. Spaces are repeatedly invaded until even the speaker's own body is not sheltered from attacks. Belcourt refuses the colonial narrative that Indigeneity is defined by or somehow made complete by violence. Instead, violence is portrayed as a relationality between time, space, and the Indigenous body, in which the Indigenous body experiences a warping of time and space as a result of settler society attempting to remove the Indigenous body from time and space altogether. The persistence of Indigeneity through violence that aims to deteriorate the nature of being of Indigenous peoples indicates that a continued

Indigenous existence and an Indigenous future are possible.

In *OkCupid*, the speaker recounts an intimate interaction with another queer Native person to demonstrate that through relationships and connections between Indigenous bodies, settler structures begin to rupture. In this poem, Belcourt identifies the queer, Cree body and utilizes intimacies shared between these bodies as a form of protest because these relationships and intimacies cannot exist within colonial structures. Belcourt describes these intimate interactions as "a world within themselves" (Belcourt 29). These intimacies create spaces that are not untouched by colonialism, but these spaces become worlds where the violent structures of colonialism are not recreated and reconstituted. In these spaces the queer, Cree body can exist as a body and not as a target of violence. Belcourt identifies other portals to these worlds, such as his *kookum* [grandmother] and the shared grief of Cree women (Belcourt 20, 43). However, Belcourt asserts that these portals exist because of the connections between Cree bodies. Through the intimate connections between Cree bodies, other worlds in which a Cree futurity exists become possible.

In the collection of poetry *This Wound is a World*, Billy Ray Belcourt expands upon and redefines queer Indigenous bodies and identities to establish these experiences as distinct and incompatible with colonial structures. Additionally, through persistence in the face of violence and intimate relationalities between bodies, new worlds without the restructuring of colonial violence

can be kindled and in which a Cree futurity
can exist.

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