



Reseñas / *Book reviews*

A History of My Brief Body (Billy-Ray Belcourt), Columbus: Two Dollar Radio, 2021, 142 pages. ISBN: 978-1937512934. PRECIO 18,52 €. *Reseñado por Anesa Muslimovic Ortega, Universitat de València.*
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0871-5399>

Reseña recibida el / *Review received:* 2023-01-13

Reseña aceptada el / *Review accepted:* 2023-02-13

In today's multicultural reality, in which the subject is surrounded by a great deal of viewpoints that attenuate the coexistence of different peoples and cultures on the same level, the claim of equality among all these groups is obscured by the underlying image of the "other" that continues to permeate society. Many have been the attempts to suppress indigenous community identities, such as those of Native Americans, by retrieving the opposition of the "self" against the "other", which persists to this day in the hierarchical organization of North American society. Yet, as much as such alienation is still present, a resurgence of voices is also evident in the literary field, seeking to subvert misrepresentations of commonly othered identities. Creativity, poetry and words themselves are seized as weapons with which to enter a new world and not just challenge those who seek to make the experience of the white "self" prevail at the expense of the silencing of the "other".

This is represented in the work of Driftpile Cree Nation member Billy-Ray Belcourt, who through a seemingly

memoir mixes his own experiences with theory, history and a spirited postcolonial resistance embodied in fourteen short essays. Perhaps one of the most relevant facts is that each essay takes a different form: while the first one is presented as a letter in which the author introduces his fundamental thesis—that is, the importance of letting love of all kinds prevail against colonizing attempts at destruction—, others are presented as checklists in which he exposes the ravages caused by the effects of not only colonialism but also the latent homophobia in the U.S.A. Taken as a whole, Belcourt's experimental proposal in *A History of My Brief Body* (2020) leads to the necessity of critically analyzing issues such as queer identity and sexuality; colonial brutality and the possibility of fighting to escape from the "Canadian cruelty" (5) in which those any type of minority is still submerged today.

Belcourt explores this first-hand in an introductory essay written as a letter to his *nôhkom*, in which he sets out the work's main thesis: how is it possible to find the basic joy that every creature should experience if his life has been defined from

the outset by otherness at both the family and community levels? From his perspective, to be indigenous is something that has led him to be taken as an “other” whose existence represents a nuisance in the imagery of white hegemony. Yet, beyond that, the very fact of being queer means that he is subjected to a greater level of violence by his own community. If being NDN implies a fragmentation of the self for those who are victims of past and present violence from which they cannot escape, Belcourt tries to turn this fact around by showing it as a necessary step for the reconfiguration of the “self”.

It is through his poetic storytelling that the author explores this idea in the first three essays of the work, “An NDN Boyhood”, “A History of My Brief Body” and “Futuromania”, where he draws the readers into his own experience and feelings of loneliness present at a crucial moment in the forming of every individual such as adolescence. His awareness of the trauma still underlying the Native American communities resulted in the author himself falling into a well of loneliness in which the fact of feeling estranged from his own world and community, leads him to neglect the body in which his identity is embodied. It is here where the main metaphor on which his work revolves is introduced, i.e., if not only he but the world as the dominant external force has rejected his existence from the very beginning, because of his departure from the accepted canon, what way could he find to maintain his liberty and feel devotion for something that has no value for him?

Furthermore, this also has an impact on his future, as reflected in the following four essays, “Gay: 8 Scenes”, “Loneliness in the Age of Grindr”, “Fragments from a Half-Existence”, where he takes the readers through situations in which not only the fact of

being queer or NDN leads him to violent scenarios in which one party dominates over him, but the combination of both, which turns him into an artificially fetishized object from the White Gaze. It is at this point that the author draws on his more academic side, recalling such theorists as Foucault or Maggie Nelson, to establish parallelisms between the past of the indigenous communities and their descendants’ present. In the same way that the white man colonized the land of the Native Americans and the “uncivilized savage” (Sieger, 2020) to exploit them in his exploitations, Belcourt exposes that such dominance is translated to his own body as a queer BIPOC as he allows other men to exert such force on him so as to feel closer to what is considered as “natural” by the majority. Thus, the author conjures up a physical fragmentation of his identity that is none other than evidence of the intergenerational trauma still prevalent in the daily lives, interpersonal relationships, in the greater intimacy of the Native American communities’ members.

However, such objectification does not cease when the author discusses how he allows his body to come under the control of others. It is noteworthy that in the second of these essays, Belcourt introduces an explicit denouncement of the lack of support on the part of the state as far as the sexual health of Native Americans is concerned. In seeking assistance for a possible STD, the author shows that he is denied the necessary medical attention, for as he states, his “body, too brown to be innocent, enflames the nurses’ racialized curiosities” by considering that “there’s always the possibility that [his] pain is illusory, dreamt up in order to get [his] fix” (84). In this essay of a more academic nature -due to the many scholarly references to support his denunciation-, the following question is posed to the reader: if the American continent and, especially,

Canada every one of its citizens, how can such citizens find happiness if the state itself deprives them from access to basic human rights? Or, as the author himself asks, does this image hide behind a utopian society? In this way, Belcourt shows that the past—a reality marked by ruling classes that tried to expropriate them from their lands, driving them to the utmost poverty, despair, alcoholism and drug addictions—is still dormant as they are dealt with in biased ways as descendants of victims or survivors of mass genocides against these communities.

This is reflected in the work's ninth and tenth essays, "Notes from an Archive of Injuries" and "Please Keep Loving: Reflections on Unlivability", where the author exposes and recognizes one of the foundations that still prevails today not only in regard to Canadian indigenous communities, but to virtually all minorities on a global scale: there is a high risk of death in a world where otherness is still in place, but that risk is raised even higher if you happen to be BIPOC or queer.

At this point in the piece, the work takes on an elegiac tone, for in "To Hang Our Grief Up to Dry", the author devotes several paragraphs to mourn the harassment, suicide and shootings with casualties from First Nation youth not only for the harassment suffered because of their ethnicity, but

especially due to their sexuality. Here Belcourt quotes Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese writer, who considers that "our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication" (139). To Belcourt, however, who observes that the past keeps repeating itself and suicide rates among his community are ever increasing while the authorities do nothing but categorize such death drive as "emergency", "crisis" or "epidemic" (137), such replication proves impossible if the death of his people only has a sensationalizing value. This past is inextricable from the human experience and invites us to reflect on how our own as a resurgent nation are shown as the ideal place to attain new opportunities for each and

experiences and identities continue to be constructed from the events of the past.

To conclude, with an experimental formal character, this collection of essays offers renewed perspectives and a hopeful message with which the reader can critically ponder on the present policies for the preservation of human rights. The reflections provided—easily understandable by the public given the frankness of the author's words—together with his lyrical and impeccable prose make Belcourt's work a point of inflection within contemporary American literary productions.

REFERENCIAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

- Belcourt, B.-R. 2021. *A history of my brief body*. Two Dollar Radio.
- Butler, J. 2015. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "Sex"*. Routledge.
- Sieger, L. 2020. "Rediscovering America: Recognizing the Sovereignty of Native American Indian Nations". *Sovereignty for Survival*, 152–172.
<https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300216219-010>
- Vuong, O. 2021. *On Earth we're briefly gorgeous: A novel*. Penguin Books.