

Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2021. 192 pages. ISBN 9780735237803. \$17.95 paperback.

Billy-Ray Belcourt is a distinguished young writer, the first Rhodes Scholar selected from the First Nations, a Driftpile Cree, in 2016. Belcourt is the youngest winner of the Canadian Griffin Poetry Prize in 2018 for his debut poetry collection, *This Wound is a World*. Belcourt is masterful at conveying feelings and thoughts using as few words as possible in his critically acclaimed poetry. He writes about what it is like to be a young, gay, Indigenous man, or as Belcourt prefers, an “NDN” (7). *A History of My Brief Body* is the writer’s first attempt at non-fiction in essay form.

*A History of My Brief Body* is a memoir that takes us through Belcourt’s first twenty years and focuses on his sexuality and indigeneity. Belcourt’s perspective as “queer” and “NDN” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century speaks for a generation and a people rarely included in the broader discussion of LGBTQ issues, let alone in academia (24). Belcourt weaves his personal experiences within the context of two serious problems besieging First Nations: suicide and depression. According to Belcourt, “For many the ‘suicide crisis’ on reserves is a crisis of trans- and homophobia” (110). Belcourt ties his exploration of suicide to the violence and trauma of colonization and to a settler-imposed prism of mental health. “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 NDN’s of making use of a single-issue focus on race that ignores to a grievous degree the pain of the doubly and triply marginalized” (111).

The writer supports his heart-piercing essays with staggering statistics pulled from news headlines. Belcourt recounts an astonishing number of suicides—140 attempts—reported by the Cross Lake First Nation in Manitoba, Canada in March, 2016. Belcourt notes that Liam Stack in the *New York Times* March 18, 2016 edition, reported that Cross Lake has a population of 6,000 people and an unemployment rate of 85 percent, but “the town’s only full-time mental health worker has no medical or psychological training, just a bachelor’s degree in social work.”

Belcourt similarly points to a suicide crisis faced by the Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario, Canada also in 2016. Ben Spurr of the *Toronto Star* reported on April 18, 2016 that the council declared “a state of emergency” because of an “epidemic of suicide attempts on the reserve” with “11 suspected attempts in 24 hours” including seven children. Spurr reported “100 suicide attempts” from September to April 2016 on a reserve with 2,000 people and a 15-bed hospital that has “no fulltime doctors.”

What is missing from these news reports is a voice such as Belcourt’s. Reportage lacks the context and history laid out in his book. Belcourt identifies multiple layers of identity triggers as key in the high

suicide rate of Indigenous LGBTQ people. He suggests First Nations and reserve leaders can't adequately provide treatment and counseling because of colonization. Desperately needed are "culturally safe mental health facilities" (109). Belcourt argues, however, that the crisis is seen through a settler-imposed Christian lens which judges LGBTQ people. "The emergency isn't one emergency but a pileup of emergencies. On the other hand, the state of emergency can be understood as a singular emergency; it is the emergency of Canadian history" (108).

The 2016 news reports did not mention the possibility that these suicides could be connected to LGBTQ issues. If Belcourt's analysis is correct, it begs the questions: did these reporters miss that detail, did tribal leaders miss it, or did the Canadian government and society at large? Based on the author's perspective, they may all share in the blame.

Belcourt's book provides some much-needed context on why the suicide rate is so high among young Indigenous people in Canada.

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Emil' Keme, *Le Maya Q'Atzij/Our Maya Word: Poetics of Resistance in Guatemala*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 248 pages. ISBN 9781517908089. \$25.00 USD paperback.

*Le Maya Q'Atzij/Our Maya Word: Poetics of Resistance in Guatemala* by Emil' Keme (a.k.a Emilio del Valle Escalante), whose Spanish Edition was awarded Cuba's Casa de las Américas literary criticism prize in 2020, is a book that, from a personally implicated perspective ("The reader will notice that my position is not merely academic when I employ "I", "us" or "we"', states the author) offers a significant evolutionary and critical overview not only of Mayan literary production in Iximuleu/Guatemala from 1960 to the present, but also of the discriminatory and violent culture in Iximuleu/Guatemala that, according to the author, mainly explains the diversity of the literary expression of the ten Mayan authors studied in the book. This causality not only articulates an explanation of the studied phenomenon (the literary work of contemporary Mayan authors), but also seems to shed light on the motivation of the book itself, as can be deduced from the personal ideological position of denunciation that the author manifests against colonial and Guatemalan nation-state violence. In conjunction with the adoption, without nuances, of decolonial theory and practice as a privileged