

Mosaics of Wholeness: Healing through Queer Indigenous Self-Telling in
Billy-Ray Belcourt's *A History of My Brief Body* and Deborah A. Miranda's *Bad Indians*

A Thesis

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Masters of Arts in English

May 2022

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Acknowledgments

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have received immeasurable support from people both inside and outside the university.

I would like first to thank Dr. Keja Valens, who has mentored me throughout my time at Salem State. Keja, your insight, generosity, encouragement, and care have profoundly influenced my ways of thinking and being. I am proud to be your student.

To Dr. Roopika Risam, thank you, especially, for engaging me in difficult conversations and offering me incisive feedback and warm encouragement when I need it most. Thank you, too, to Drs. Jan Lindholm and Stephenie Young, whose work in rhetoric, gender, and memory studies have greatly informed this thesis. And to Dr. Al DeCiccio, thank you for your wealth of writerly knowledge, endlessly kind spirit, and zest for life.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my dear colleague, Chantelle Escobar-Leswell, whose friendship and compassion kept me afloat during this project. Thank you to Chantelle and to Evan Miller for embarking on this thesis-writing journey with me.

I am deeply grateful to my family, Valerie and Benjamin Cook, and, finally, to my forever-supporter, Ryan Taylor. On the last page of *A History of My Brief Body*, Belcourt writes that freedom is “a poetics, in that it seeks to reschematize time, space, and feeling in the direction of a future driven by an ethics of care, a relational practice of joy-making that is all of ours to enact” (128). Our small and beautiful world is narrated by such poetics—a language of love and care that I learned from you. Thank you.

On Indigenous Self-Telling

If there are memories in my blood, what should I remember?
—Laura M. Furlan, “Our Wars”¹

Ohlone/Costaloean Esselen and Chumash poet, writer, and scholar Deborah A. Miranda’s 2013 text *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* names its genre in its title: *memoir*. This name signifies, as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)² describes in its various uses, “a note, a memorandum; a record; a brief testimonial or warrant” and, since the nineteenth century when the genre of *memoir* gave name to texts previously described as *confession*, “a biography or autobiography; a biographical notice.” In following the trail of the latter usage, *biography* is described in the OED as “a written account of the life of an individual” and “personal history,” with *autobiography* defined as “an account of a person’s life given by himself or herself.” In nearly all of these descriptive definitions, the notion of the individual—a singular being and their life experiences—is underscored as a certain and finite entity. *Memoir*, in fact, is borrowed from the Middle French *memoire*, which the OED describes as a “written account [or] description document containing the facts in a case which is to be judged.” In this light, *memoir*—which today is commonly understood as a self-written text that describes a portion of one’s life—suggests a fixed truth of the self that is thus documented (and written, as the ending *-graphy* denotes in *autobiography*) as fact.

Miranda’s specification of *A Tribal Memoir*, then, destabilizes the notion of the individual life story that *memoir* signifies, bringing into question the very idea of individuality and its facts. To write a memoir of a plural self, as Miranda does, is to write with a distinctly Indigenous epistemology that, as Laguna Pueblo scholar Paula Gunn Allen details in her influential text *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, is

rooted in an “essential harmony” that “see[s] all things as being of equal value in the scheme of things” and denies “the opposition, dualism, and isolation (separateness) that characterize non-Indian thought” (56). In this regard, to write with Indigenous ways of knowing and being is to produce knowledge from the standpoint of relationality in which “all sectors of [the] world” are “seen as necessary to the balanced and harmonious functioning of the whole” (31). In the author’s note for his 2020 essay collection *A History of My Brief Body*, Driftpile Cree poet, writer, and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt implicitly writes of this epistemology of relationality as producing what he calls a composite, saying: “I marshal the forces of poetry and theory to weave not a linear story, which ‘memoir’ typically denotes, but rather a series of stories and analytical scenes into a composite that exceeds the boundaries of my individual life” (n.p). This notion of a composite of stories, theory, and “analytical scenes” feels apt to describe Miranda’s *Bad Indians*, too, which assembles written and oral historical, personal, and imagined narratives with both academic and what Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million calls *felt theories*. As Belcourt says, such a composition amounts to an amorphous swirl of knowledge that, because of both its expanse and the Indigenous notion of the interdependent self, “exceeds the boundaries” of what the Western literary tradition³ terms *autobiography* or *memoir*.

In her book *Sovereign Stories and Blood Memories: Native American Women’s Autobiography*, Annette Angela Portillo follows the argument that “generic definitions of autobiography” do not accurately describe “life stories” written by Indigenous⁴ peoples (2). As Portillo explains, in the Western literary tradition, writings that recount and assess one’s lived experiences are typically categorized (and marketed) as *autobiography* or *memoir*, genres driven by “an ideology that assumes a self-conscious and self-evident subject who then uses the written text to express that self” (4-5). They are genres characterized by a mode of telling that reflects

Judeo-Christian concepts of the self in which “I” is a markedly singular subject position. Indigenous worldviews, however, do not emphasize or distinguish the self in such a manner; rather, for Indigenous peoples, identity is constructed relationally, through the interdependence of family, community, ancestors, and land. For this reason, Portillo invokes the concept of “blood memory” (citing Kiowa/Cherokee writer N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*) in her text to describe ancestral memory that is inherently “tied to the body”—the material site of inheritance—and thus “provide[s] indigenous-centered ways of experiencing one’s history” (2). If an Indigenous-written *memoir* is a text about the self, Portillo argues, it must be about a plural self produced from a blend of beings and place that is transmitted metaphorically in the blood of one generation to the next.

While Indigenous peoples have always told of their personal and collective experiences, “the notion of telling the whole of any one individual’s life or taking merely personal experience as of particular significance” was, until colonization, not a part of Indigenous lifeways (Swann and Krupat ix). As Gunn Allen explains, the purpose of traditional Indigenous literature—of ceremony, song, myth, and legends—is “never simply purely self-expression” (55). Rather, Gunn Allen contends, such literature exists as a mode of telling that seeks “to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity” (55). Contemporary writings, which use and manipulate the English language and literacy, then, join traditional orality as methods of telling that allow Indigenous people to share their “singular being” with their kin, thus constructing their community’s—their peoples’—knowledge. In this ongoing literary dialogue, Gunn Allen writes, “the greater self and all-that-is are blended into a

balanced whole” (55) that is reflective of Indigenous worldviews, which are rooted in concepts of dynamic harmony and unity (56).

When European settler-colonists invaded what is now called Turtle Island,⁵ they brought the English language and literacy⁶ with them. Throughout centuries of colonization, settlers and their descendants strategically used literacy as a tool of oppression. By “outlawing home tongues” in missions and boarding schools that forced Indigenous children to speak, read, and write only in English, settlers enacted (and, in many ways, continue to enact) a control over language that has been used “either to annihilate or assimilate” Indigenous people (Baumgartner 132). In other words, as Miranda remarks, “the tools of literacy” were used by settlers “as a kind of brainwashing technique to beat [Indigenous] languages and cultures out of” the people they sought to dominate (“Q and A”). While Indigenous people are and were “master craftspeople of language, rhetoric, storytelling, oratory, the creation of worlds” (Miranda, “Q and A”), many post-invasion⁷ Indigenous people doubly resisted using written language and English—what Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird have called “the enemy’s language”—to communicate knowledge of their collective and personal experiences.⁸

Part of Belcourt and Miranda’s manipulations of English and literacy—language anchored in the settler state—is in precisely what they do with autobiographical forms. While Belcourt and Miranda’s texts are both written from queer⁹ Indigenous subject positions, it is their similarly “genre-bending” styles—their corresponding refusal of formal convention that is, as I explore in this thesis, undergirded by Indigenous ways of knowing being and knowing—that, especially when held together, communicate far beyond the generic parameters of memoir. Because of this boundlessness, in this thesis, I will use the terms *self-telling*, *self-writing*, and *life stories* alongside *autobiography* and *memoir*, when appropriate, to describe Belcourt and

Miranda's texts. In making these choices, I encourage my reader to continue to consider how, exactly, each term may differ or overlap with the next.

In “De-Assimilation as the Need to Tell,” non-Indigenous rhetorician Holly Baumgartner asserts that because self-writing “has no traditional counterpart among Native cultures,” Indigenous people writing experiential narratives are thus constructing a form that is “a deliberate confrontation between writer and tradition” (135). While Baumgartner is right that, as I have outlined, memoir/autobiography/self-writing does not align with traditional Indigenous modes of knowledge, this thesis does not seek to frame traditional conveyances of knowledge and engagement in Western forms with the sense of hostility or argument that the word *confront* implies. Instead, this thesis aims to examine how self-writing and expressions of the self—in both Indigenous and Western definitions—can, in fact, be tied to Indigenous healing traditions. In this framework, I posit that autobiographical form is less a “deliberate confrontation” but rather a critically-developed tool for the expression of Million’s *felt theory*—the notion that Indigenous women (and, as I explore in this thesis, queer Indigenous people) are “creating new language for communities to address the real multilayered facets of their histories and concerns by insisting on the inclusion of [their] lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges” (53). While colonization (and, with it, literacy) undoubtedly interrupted and continues to interrupt Indigenous lifeways, Indigenous cultures—and thus “tradition,” as Baumgartner writes—are not static (Gunn Allen 56). In *The Sacred Hoop*, Gunn Allen describes how, for Indigenous people, the oral tradition serves as a “wellspring of identity” that is “the creative source of their collective and individual selves” (224). Such a wellspring is, according to Gunn Allen, inherently dynamic; it is “a living body” that “is in continuous flux, which enables it to accommodate itself to the real circumstances of a peoples’ lives” (225). In this regard, in insisting on communicating

emotional knowledge through manipulations of “the enemy’s language” (Harjo and Bird), writers like Belcourt and Miranda aren’t hostilely *confronting* tradition but rather locating themselves within it and considering its present reality.

Indeed, with trepidation and resistance, Indigenous people have been engaging “the tools of literacy,” particularly in what the Western literary traditions would call *autobiography* or writings of the self, for centuries, locating themselves at the intersection of traditional Indigenous storytelling and more contemporary modes of written expression. While 18th-century autobiographical writings from Reverend Samson Occom (Mohegan) and Hendrick Aupaumut (Mohican) were published and recognized posthumously and obscurely, it is Pequot and Methodist minister William Apess’¹⁰ 1829 text *A Son of the Forest* that is primarily regarded as the first published autobiography in English by a Native person (Swann and Krupat ix). *A Son of the Forest* contains descriptions and ruminations on, as the genre of *autobiography* (as opposed to memoir) usually indicates, the whole of Apess’ life. Beginning with his birth in a tent to a Pequot mother and mixed-blood father, Apess’ text is a self-portrait that both affirms the settler-constructed narratives of Native people in the United States and, particularly in terms of colonial progress Christian assimilation, disrupts those narratives by offering poignant, first-person reflections on Indigenous humanity and identity.

Just two years after the initial publication of *A Son of the Forest*, which was edited and republished several times in Apess’ lifetime, the as-told-to memoir *Life of Black Hawk, or Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak: Dictated by Himself*, was published. The text, penned by a young non-Indigenous newspaper editor, conveys the life story of Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak, a Sauk leader also known as Black Hawk, who did not use written language (Swann and Krupat x). Upon publication, *Life of Black Hawk* was advertised to settler audiences as an autobiography written

precisely because Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak wanted ““to make known to the world, the injuries his people have received from whites—[and] the causes which brought on the war on the part of his nation”” (qtd. in Swann and Krupat x). This “advertisement” and its allusion to the historical record of war spurred an interest in Native autobiographies throughout Euro-American culture, which sought “autobiographical documents” as historical records to contribute to and affirm popular mythology about Native warriors (Swann and Krupat x).¹¹

As the frontier closed in the late 19th century, and the false and convenient notion of the “disappearing Indian” became the dominant narrative of the United States, mainstream attention to Indigenous life writings shifted from a desire for historical records to an appetite for anthropology and what was termed *salvage ethnography*—that which “sought to preserve, in the museum or library, traces of lives and cultures that could not (so it was then believed) have a continuing existence anywhere else” (Swann and Krupat x-xi). Countering the narrative that the settler must preserve the disappeared Indigenous people in museums and academic institutions was the emergence of writers like Charles Eastman (Lakota) and Zitkála-Šá (Yankton Dakota) in the early twentieth century. Such writers were engaged in self-writing in English as a means of self-definition, advocacy, and public negotiation of what Eastman calls ““moving between two worlds”” (Eastman qtd. in Baumgartner 132).¹² Both Eastman and Zitkála-Šá wrote accounts of their lives that allowed them to use English and conventions of autobiographic writing “to tell [their] truths, to sing, to remember” (Harjo and Bird 21). Zitkála-Šá, who in *American Indian Stories* (1921) writes of her experience at a forced-assimilation boarding school, published work that, as Layli Long Soldier describes, “was a coal bed searing with embers of experience” that “has become documentation for future generations of the fires she walked through” (ix). In “tak[ing] up the physical pen and paper, the objects of the ‘white man’s ways’” that were forced

upon her in “those black days” (Long Soldier ix), Zitkála-Šá carefully crafts a tone that both didactically invites in non-Indigenous readers and exactingly asserts what Long Soldier calls “a statement aimed directly at the forehead of colonialism” (xi). In doing so, Zitkála-Šá walks within the two worlds that Eastman similarly describes, using writing to relay personal experiences that point to the whole of her people, in a first-person testimony that obstructs the goal of settler ethnography.

Later in the twentieth century, particularly after Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 and “jam[med] his foot in the door” of the American literary canon “long enough so those behind him could scramble through” (Miranda, *Bad Indians* xvi), a number of autobiographical writings by Indigenous people have been and continue to be published. While writers like Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko, who first received mainstream acclaim as writers of fiction, produced successful self-writings, texts by previously unknown writers like Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973) also emerged, much like those of Apees and Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak before them, as testimonial writings. Campbell, a Métis woman, wrote the text that became *Halfbreed* as a part of a therapeutic process that began when a friend urged her to write about her experiences of personal and inter-generational trauma in order to “get control over them”—without any intention of publishing (Episkenew 77). Whittled down to a two-hundred-page text from an original manuscript of over two thousand pages (Ferris 131), *Halfbreed* reads like a diary in which Campbell uses self-writing as an avenue for healing from both personal and inherited trauma (or postcolonial stress disorder).¹³ Writing extensively from the intersection of gendered and colonial violence in mid-century Canada, Campbell’s life story begins with her impoverished but rich childhood in Saskatchewan and traces her life to Vancouver, where she works as a survival sex worker, and then to Calgary, where she struggles as a single mother and

eventually re-affirms her sense of Métis identity and belonging through her work as an Indigenous rights activist. Throughout this narrative, *Halfbreed* offers a rich and nuanced telling of Campbell's lived experiences as a Métis woman while also sharply critiquing the systemic oppression inherent to settler-colonialism and drawing attention to its symptoms (Ferris).

Campbell, like centuries of Indigenous self-writers before her and countless others who continue to publish life writings,¹⁴ asserts in her self-writing what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor calls *survivance*. Vizenor poses that while survival is a reaction and response, survivance is an ongoing practice that moves beyond mere survival to assert “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion” (1). In this regard, survivance is not a theory but rather a distinctively Indigenous “standpoint [and] worldview” (103)—one that is found in “the continuation of native stories” (1). While such stories may include trauma, narratives of survivance are ultimately “renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (1) that center Indigenous people(s) as dynamically continuing and remaking tradition, as I argue earlier, in their present reality. By asserting survivance through self-writing, Indigenous authors insist on their presence in contemporary settler-nations like the United States and Canada that seek to destroy, fracture, and erase them.

In her reflections on Indigeneity, Gunn Allen goes on to explain more broadly that, according to Indigenous lifeways, “the natural state of existence is whole” (60). When the interdependent elements that construct the Indigenous self are out of balance, the individual—and thus all of the interconnected elements that define their existence—is in “an isolated (diseased) state” (80). To treat someone or something in a diseased state of being, Indigenous peoples traditionally engage in healing rituals that seek to restore wholeness. Healing, from this perspective, is not so much a cure, as it is perceived in Western culture, but rather a

transmutation in which a person is transformed from a state of disease “to one of incorporation (health)” (80). In this thesis, I engage with Miranda’s *Bad Indians* and Belcourt’s *A History of My Brief Body* to examine how contemporary queer Indigenous writers use writings of the self as modes of healing that construct “the greater self and all-that-is” (Gunn Allen 55) into what I refer to in this paper as “mosaics of wholeness.” In this analysis, I consider how colonialism, which Métis writer Jo-Ann Episkenew calls “a pathological condition [and] a sickness that requires a cure” (72), is the isolated state from which Miranda and Belcourt have written in search of transmutation. In “Healing the Self through Story,” I examine how both authors write their (plural, interdependent) selves into a counternarrative and thus into existence, and in “Reconstructing the Body through Desire,” I ruminate on how Miranda and Belcourt’s life stories about gender and sexuality outside of heteropatriarchy seek to reclaim the Indigenous body from colonial power structures. My conclusion, “Assembling the Mosaic,” braids the previous two chapters to consider how, exactly, constructing the queer Indigenous body and self through autobiographical modes of telling creates a space for recovery that undermines the colonial imagination.

Healing the Self through Story

*You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.*
– Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Miranda's introduction to *Bad Indians* begins with the shouting proclamation that "CALIFORNIA IS A STORY" (xi). It is a statement that serves as both a warning and an assurance of the power of story, its ability to assert, affirm, erase, and emphasize certain truths. In *Bad Indians*, which itself is a compendium of stories, Miranda scrutinizes the dominant narrative of California, particularly in how the settler-glorified history of missionization is taught to California fourth-graders as a part of the state-mandated public school curriculum. Through a carefully-assembled array of poems, family stories and photos, illustrations, letters, imaginings, and transcribed recordings, Miranda works to destabilize and interrupt the commonly-accepted history of California with her "sampling and overwriting" of documents, articles, and objects from the colonial archive (Furlan 30). Imbuing these documents with the truth of survivance of her individual and plural self, Miranda constructs a counternarrative that challenges the story of the colonization of the land now known as California and, by extension, its entire existence. California, Miranda says in *Bad Indians*, is a story—one that can be shaped and reshaped by force of language.

The story of California missionization—or, as Miranda calls it, "Mission Mythology" and "the Mission Fantasy Fairy Tale" (*Bad Indians* xix)—is part of what Episkew variously calls "the settlers' authorized collective myth," the "national collective myth," and "the creation myth of the settlers' nation-state" (70-71). In all, it is a myth that seeks to justify and substantiate settler-colonialism through heroism and romance to inspire pride in the settler state's subjects (Episkew 71). As Miranda details in her text, California fourth-grade students are tasked with

creating a handmade diorama of one of twenty-one California missions, answering research questions like “Which tribes lived at the mission?” and “What did this mission grow or manufacture?” (186-7). These seemingly benign questions, written in the past tense, flatten the robust, complex story of missionization into the settler’s authorized collective myth that casually yet pointedly positions the California missions as sites of harmonious progress in the American narrative, where Indigenous people are merely long-ago objects sparsely populating the background of historical sites. In learning about missionization through a collective myth told through “diorama, glossaries, coloring book pages, timelines, thrilling tales about the discovery of gold . . . and the adventures of rowdy, good-natured frontiersman” (193), children of California (along with their parents, teachers, and “even historians” [193]) are indoctrinated with the belief that California Indians have simply—without violence pain, or death—disappeared, reifying the “vanishing Indian” trope upon which the settler myth of California depends.

A myth like the Mission Fantasy Fairy Tale that celebrates “conquest, subjugation [and] defeat” (Miranda, *Bad Indians* 193) articulates the experiences of the colonizers but not the people they colonized (Episkenew 71). In this regard, it is only logical that the survivance of Indigenous people fundamentally cannot exist in national collective myths; as Episkenew says, “our continued existence” is indeed “problematic since we are a constant reminder of those historical and contemporary events that call into question the settlers’ pride in their nation” (71). For both Miranda in *Bad Indians* and Belcourt in *A History of My Brief Body*, engaging in self-writing that is bound, published, and distributed on the literary market publicly problematizes and undermines the authorized myths of the settler state. Such writings are a form of what Episkenew calls “alternative collective myths” (72) that, especially when held together with literature from other Indigenous writers, disrupt and undermine settler narratives. If a myth is

“an arrangement of the past . . . in patterns that reinforce a culture’s deepest values and aspirations” (qtd. in Episkenew 109), then alternative myths like Miranda and Belcourt’s “disarray the world around [them]” (Belcourt 100) by destabilizing not only the settler narrative’s past, but also the patterns of the culture that upholds it. In this disarrangement, I argue, the state of sickness and isolation inherent to colonization is disrupted, which is critical to healing.

Story as Self-Invention

At the end of *Bad Indians*, Miranda writes, “Story is everything we are: human beings are made of words and the patterns we construct out of words” (193). In this assertion, Miranda links written words and utterances (and thus language as a whole) with the very essence of creation. In *A History of My Brief Body*, Belcourt aligns himself with structuralist and post-structuralist theorists like Michel Foucault, who contend that because we articulate what we perceive through language, the system of language thus constructs reality.¹⁵ In these overlapping ways of knowing, story, which is a narrative conveyed through language, not only creates reality but also locates its subjects within it.

The authorized settler myth constructs a reality in which Indigenous people(s) are ghostly objects of subjugation that are discussed in the past tense or, if in present tense, in “narratives that hinge on proving [their] humanness” (Belcourt, *A History* 117). Through these lenses, Indigenous people thus either do not exist or “sit stilled in the role of the described” (117), “being written *about*” (100; emphasis added) as if they are “objects of study to be fed through the poorly oiled machines of analysis” (117). Indigenous writing, Belcourt argues, counteracts these machinations, positioning its subjects “against the trauma of description” (117). In her text,

Miranda similarly contends that story is a form of invention that crucially depends on who tells the story; one must ask, she writes, “who is inventing me, for what purpose, with what intention?” (*Bad Indians* xvi). In this regard, by asserting an alternative collective myth, or what Indigenous poet and scholar Laura M. Furlan calls a counternarrative of distinctly Indigenous realities (29), Indigenous people effectively *tell* themselves into existence-- as seen in Indigenous literature like *Bad Indians* and *A History of My Brief Body*. As (non-citizen) Cherokee scholar Qwo-Li Driskill suggests, this kind of telling is akin to survival in which stories “keep us alive in a world that routinely destroys and discards us” (“Stolen” 55).¹⁶ As both Miranda and Belcourt prove, self-told life stories are tools of invention that refuse erasure.

In an essay titled “Petroglyphs” from the final, most personal section of *Bad Indians*, “Teheyapami Achiska: Home,” Miranda explores the concept of writing herself into existence as a mode of both self-assertion and survival. The essay comes after “Silver,” a seven-part extended metaphor that locates Miranda, writing in a confessional autobiographical *I*, as a child, adolescent, and young adult whose life has been marked by violence and instability both inside her volatile, ever-moving family home, and outside of it, among abusive peers and adults. In “Silver,” Miranda explores experiences of fear, anger, creative drought, and, finally, the joy she finds in writing “All the dreams, actions, words [she has] kept locked up in the attic of [her] soul” (117). “Petroglyphs” leads the reader further into that attic, beginning with the assertion, “All my life, I knew I would disappear” (119). Citing her father’s incarceration and her fractured family, in which no one’s existence felt permanent or stable, Miranda describes a feeling of profound dislocation at just three years old, saying, “I knew my presence here on earth was so tentative that I was in constant danger of being devoured, absorbed, vanished” (119). But, Miranda writes, that feeling does not last: Sitting in the kitchen of her grandmother’s mountain

home in southern California, Miranda makes a “transformative leap in [her] understanding of being” (120) that counteracts the sense that she will soon disappear. Wielding a red crayon, three-year-old Miranda scrawls “D E B Y” on a paper bag (120); it is a proclamation—a four-letter missive that, Miranda later realizes, plants a stake in reality. She narrates, “It was as if, when I wrote those letters, made a written record of my self, my name, my existence, those letters grew roots and plowed down through the Formica countertop, into the wooden floor, beams, and concrete foundation of the cabin, deep into the heart of the Tehachapi Mountains themselves” (120). Here, writing—literally sketching one’s name “like the ancient petroglyphs of [her] Esselen and Chumash ancestors” (122)—generates Miranda’s being, which is inextricably bound to other elements of the plural Indigenous self: kinspeople (her grandmother), land (the Tehachapi Mountains), and the corporeality of her body. It is, as Miranda says, what she does “to muscle [her] way into reality” (120). “D E B Y,” marked in crayon, is thus a pronouncement of existence, allowing Miranda’s voice to “materialize outside [her] body” and tether her to reality (121), and Miranda’s story of this moment is itself a story of self-invention.

While Miranda describes writing as a kind of invention that is rooted in materialization, Belcourt seems to think of writing more as a multiplication that is continually taking place. In several areas in *A History of My Brief Body*, Belcourt is clear that his “field of study is NDN freedom” with a thesis that seeks to prove that “Joy is an at once minimalist and momentous facet of NDN life that widens the spaces of living thinned by the structures of unfreedom” (88). Assuming that “unfreedom” is the mission of the settler state and its violence, we can think of the “widening” effect of Indigenous freedom and joy as taking up space and, as Miranda says, staking a claim in reality (*Bad Indians* 120). Such a widening is an expansiveness that, as Belcourt writes in his introduction to *A History of My Brief Body*, serves as a kind of torch: “That

we experience joy . . . that we can identify it, if only belatedly, illuminates the dead end toward which the settler state hurls” (9). In illuminating the unsustainability of colonialism, writing becomes not only an invention of the self, as Miranda describes it, but also an assertion of the “self-in-place” (Sarkowsky 105), in locations that are both physical (tied to land) and metaphysical (spanning space and time). For Belcourt, this physical place is what the settler state calls Canada, which he hungrily writes against throughout his essays, his sights set on an “NDN utopia” (58)—a site of futurity, freedom, and joy. In doing so, Belcourt engages in a kind of self-telling that is primarily about pleasure—of the plural self, its body—that is therefore an “insistence against elimination” (9), one that undermines the monological voice (Baumgartner 132) of the settler-authorized myth. Belcourt’s goal in writing toward utopia is to reveal “the logical holes in the fabric of a colonial world”—its untruths—for what they are (*A History* 9). In this metaphorical slashing of fabric, where “wherever light rushes in is an exit route” (9), the collective *I* of the Indigenous self can replicate and find liberation in a boundless place of self-invention that is ever-widening with the inventions of story.

Episkenew notes texts like Miranda’s and Belcourt’s that assert the *I* of the Indigenous self in life stories work to construct personal myths—a term she roots in the work of psychologist Dan P. McAdams, who uses Jungian psychoanalytic theory to describe how people use narratives of the self to ““bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a personal and convincing whole”” (109). Playing with a fragmentary style that, I later argue, offers a mosaiced whole, Belcourt, like Miranda, often writes about writing, creating a personal myth guided by metanarrative that thus allows the reader to doubly bear witness to invention. In the essay “An NDN Boyhood,” Belcourt writes, “I, like a janitor, scan the darkened building of me for detritus and misplaced things, something to put me to work again” (20). Mining the

figuratively shadowy foundation of his self, Belcourt writes about the process of writing his personal myth, telling his audience how he composed the very text they are reading. Later, in the section titled “An Alphabet of Longing,” Belcourt again uses metanarrative to allude to the notion of self-writing as self-salvage—assembling detritus of the autobiographical *I*. In this essay, Belcourt aims his meta-invention at the English alphabet, where he begins, under the header “ASYMMETRY” with the insistence, “I pick myself up off the page + I throw myself at it again = I throw myself at myself. [Repeat.]” (79). In this passage, Belcourt situates the reader’s gaze from a location that feels voyeuristic, where we watch him engage in rhetorical invention with language that is intimate and, in its use of mathematical symbols, feels scrawled and rough. Here, he speaks directly to his reader, saying, “Don’t touch my skin, it is a text in the making” (79). Figuratively positioning us in his writing room, Belcourt allows his reader to follow what feels like a stream-of-consciousness tour that tears through language with furious precision, creating a personal myth that, like Miranda and her red crayon, stakes both a claim in existence and a claim of language—manipulating “the enemy’s tongue” as we bear witness to the invention of story.

Belcourt’s self-inventive path through “An Alphabet of Longing” creates an alphabetized glossary that names and describes both his subjectivity and the project of his art, which, as he asserts under “UTOPIA,” is “a ricocheting ‘no’ torpedoed at a world . . . in which NDN life is a fictive that leaves us wanting” and, at the same time, “a performance of a theory of nonsingularity” (88). For Belcourt, this nonsingularity is inherent to his location at the intersection of Indigeneity and queerness, a position from which he shouts his “ricocheting ‘no.’” In “An Alphabet of Longing,” that *no* carves a winding and chaotic trail through a number of linguistic abstractions that create a kind of lexicon of the self that ranges from ordinary language

like “TERROR” (87) and “REVENGE” (85), to academic terminology like “ONTOLOGY” (84) and “BIOSOCIAL” (80), and, perhaps most poignantly, to a reclamation of derisive language in “NDN HOMO” (83-84) and “REZ FAG” (86). The text underneath each term takes several forms; sometimes, it is a prose paragraph filled with the autobiographical *I*, while in other places, it is a succinct assertion, like “HOPE / The settler state ≠ the world” (82). Under “NDN HOMO” (pictured below), Belcourt uses anaphora to create a block of text that makes more than two dozen claims about the “NDN homo” (83-84), all without connective verbs like “NDN homo in a dead world” (84, line 1), “NDN homo an ethnographic spectacle / NDN homo a mythology of desire / NDN homo an erotic symbol / NDN homo a postmodern slut” (lines 4-7).

NDN HOMO	
NDN homo in a dead world.	
NDN homo made of corrugated sensation.	
NDN homo under the foot of history.	
NDN homo an ethnographic spectacle.	
NDN homo a mythology of desire.	
NDN homo an erotic symbol.	
NDN homo a postmodern slut.	
NDN homo nothing but enigmatic traces of others (Butler).	
NDN homo a brutal inheritance.	
NDN homo glistens inside the smokescreen of liberal empathy.	
NDN homo a cliché.	
NDN homo an ongoing degradation.	
NDN homo a poetic impulse.	
NDN homo a tenant of the terrain of bad feeling.	
NDN homo an architecture of emotion unto himself.	
NDN homo a speculative historian.	
	NDN homo a post-structuralist suspicious of form.
	NDN homo in a struggle with the appeal of always being in a struggle.
	NDN homo a haunted house, a racially saturated visual field.
	NDN homo fuckability.
	NDN homo fugitivity.
	NDN homo at the limits of political subjectivity.
	NDN homo a corrosion of personhood.
	NDN homo a sonic revolt from the future.
	NDN homo a narrative door (Halberstam).
	NDN homo in potentia.
	NDN homo an optical illusion.
	NDN homo a shape of a life, a philosophical gesture.

Figure 1: "NDN HOMO," formatted like a poem, spreads across two pages (84-5) and is positioned between prose paragraphs titled "LOVE" and "ONTOLOGY."

In these anaphoric lines, Belcourt both reclaims the position of “NDN homo” for himself and, at the same time, rejects the notion that to be queer and Indigenous is to exist as an object that merely takes the “shape of a life, a philosophical gesture” (85, line 28). Listing a number of reductive images of the “NDN homo,” Belcourt produces a “ricocheting ‘no’” that, in its refusal of objectification and use of irony, creates a story of the plural queer self that rejects the very

notion of description. With this framework, as Belcourt asserts soon after under the word “REVENGE,” he cultivates what he calls “Our indecipherability [that] turns out to be material for a commune of rebellion” (85). Here, in following Belcourt through his process of linguistic self-invention, the reader arrives at the first-person plural *our* in a turn of multiplication that underscores the epistemology of relationality that is present in the collective first-person—a plural personal myth that Belcourt creates throughout his essays.

Story as Reclamation

In the creation of their personal myths, both Belcourt and Miranda engage in “re-storying,” which Driskill describes as “a retelling and imagining of stories that restores and continues cultural memories” (*Asegi Stories* 3). Like Episkenew’s theory of alternative collective myth and Furlan’s notion of counternarrative, re-storying is about taking control of history and interrogating dominant narratives of the past “in order to listen to the Other stories and what they do as a tactic to transform [Indigenous peoples’] collective futures” (Driskill, *Asegi Stories* 3). To Cherokee scholar Joseph M. Pierce, the process of re-storying, by reclaiming and reorienting the past through the narrative lens of the Other, is “immanently queer” (58). In this assertion, Pierce clarifies that he does not use *queer* to signify a fixed identity position of gender and sexuality but rather to mean “a relational possibility” (58) that refuses “settler imaginaries of self” (59). In this light, we can also think of re-storying as *queering*, where writing against settler history challenges not only the heteropatriarchy inherent to coloniality (a topic I explore more in-depth in “Reconstructing the Body”), but also all of the colonial imagination. For Belcourt, re-storying takes place primarily in the present, where the essays of *A History of My Brief Body* queer stories of Indigenous life both public and private in the settler state of Canada. For

Miranda's *Bad Indians*, such a queering takes place in the settler-constructed archives of the United States and, more specifically, California. In both instances, the authors refuse "to separate history, theory, and creative work" (Driskill, *Asegi Stories* 11) and engage in queering and re-storying that reclaim knowledge from settler mythology and, in doing so, "[revise] the past and the future" (9).

Miranda's use of archival materials indicates a profound understanding of just how critical writing-as-invention was and is to California's missionization and the settler state as a whole. By redefining and queering the teachings of colonialism with personal, tribal, cultural, imagined, and felt knowledge, Miranda tells stories about stories, shaping a narrative of California, its Indigenous peoples, Miranda's ancestors, and herself that destabilizes settler-constructed reality, relocating it to a realm of recovery. In each of *Bad Indians*' four major sections, Miranda reproduces and manipulates illustrations, documents, and excerpts from settler and missionary writings that, when created, contribute to the national myth of subjugation and extinction. Using these texts, Miranda asserts that this world is colonized, and the colonizers created this world through writing; by recontextualizing them, Miranda transforms them into a palimpsest of Indigenous readings (Miranda, "Extermination" 256). Furlan writes in her essay "The Archives of Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians*" that, in making these transformations, Miranda "not only reclaims or recovers archival materials" from the monological voice of colonialism, but also uses them didactically, "demonstrat[ing] *how* to read them, *how* to translate them from an Indigenous perspective, and *how* to read them in tandem with Indigenous sources and stories" (28). In other words, Miranda instructs her readers how to engage with the archive of conquest in a mode of reading that is at once critical and questioning, generous and expansive. Such an archival recovery is vital to Miranda's re-storying of California, which is, as I argue

throughout this thesis, an act of healing.

Some of Miranda's time in the archive is spent with her ancestor, Isabel Meadows, an Ohlone and Esselen woman born in 1846 who spent the last five years of her life (until 1939) working with Smithsonian ethnologist J.P. Harrington on the cultures and languages of people indigenous to the land now called the Carmel, Monterey, and Big Sur areas of California (*Bad Indians* 27). Miranda describes Harrington as voracious for the information Isabel¹⁷ offered, noting that "in between the language lessons and Coyote stories" Harrington transcribed from the Spanish, English, and dialects that Isabel conveyed to him, Isabel "snuck in the stories *she* wanted to salvage: her own private project, a memorial, and a charmstone of hope for future generations" (28). In considering her intentions, Miranda suggests that Isabel, who told stories of her plural self much like Miranda does in *Bad Indians*, used the power of story "on behalf of her community," understanding that at such a "perilous time," written language was a way to preserve Indigenous knowledges for future generations (28). In Harrington's archives, Isabel's Ohlone stories sit only temporarily, waiting for Miranda to reclaim them for just that purpose, when she can re-story them as narratives for healing. In this regard, Miranda uses the settler-constructed archive not only as a place that preserves Indigenous stories but also as an active flashpoint of survivance, where Miranda is able to confront Harrington, asking him, "Could you imagine that the descendants of Isabel, Laura, Maria, and so many others would track your every syllable as you'd tracked theirs? In your wildest dreams, did you ever think we would survive you?" (105). Here in the archive, Miranda can figuratively rip Isabel's stories from Harrington's hands, defying the aims of ethnographic salvage and the "disappearing Indian" it sought to document.

One story of survivance reclaimed from the settler archive is that of Vicenta Gutierrez,

whose narrative (and perhaps even her self) is reclaimed by both Isabel and Miranda and re-storied into a life story of healing. In Harrington's field notes of his conversations with Isabel, the story of Vicenta appears as follows:

Dear Vicenta

R13, 98B
Apr. 35
Vicenta Gutierrez,
sister of el Huero Gutierrez,
when a girl went to confesion
one evening during cuarentena,
& Padre Real la queria
agarrar allá en la iglesia,
and next day ni ~~padre~~
rastros habia del padre
alli, & he was never seen
again. He probably fled on
horseback in the night. Some said
he fled to Spain. He was a
Spaniard. He grabbed the girl
& screwed her. The girl went
running to ~~the~~ her house, saying
the padre had grabbed her.

"Vicenta Gutierrez, sister of 'The Blonde' Gutierrez, when [she was] a girl went to confession one evening during Lent, and Father Real wanted her, to grab her over there in the church. And next day there was no trace of the padre there, and he was never seen again. He probably fled on horseback in the night. Some said he fled to Spain. He was a Spaniard. He grabbed the girl and screwed her. The girl went running to her house, saying the padre had grabbed her."—Isabel Meadows

Figure 2: This scan of Harrington's notes appears in *Bad Indians* under the subsection titled "Dear Vicenta" (30); underneath the image, Miranda transcribes Harrington's scrawled handwriting and attributes the text to Isabel Meadows. Miranda's response letter to Vicenta (not pictured) begins on the opposite page, placing it in direct conversation with Isabel's narrative of Vicenta.

Miranda presents Harrington's notes as visual evidence of how Isabel's passed-down, oral story came to exist in the settler-constructed archive. Reading Harrington's notes, Miranda's reader can envision Isabel (pictured just three pages earlier [27]) telling Harrington of Vicenta's rape in a mission; positioned in *Bad Indians* as a conversation between Miranda, Isabel, and Vicenta, Harrington's written documentation of Isabel's story of Vicenta becomes a conduit for a generation-spanning conversation between women—one that, through Miranda's re-storying in "Dear Vicenta," turns what was perhaps once a whispered story into a shout.

Miranda's letter to Vicenta begins with an ironic apology that weaves not only Miranda's personal experiences with sexual abuse to Vicenta's, but all Indigenous women. Providing statistics about the exceptionally high rate of non-Indigenous people raping Indigenous women—"Thirty-four percent of us raped; one in three! And ninety percent of the rapists are non-Indian . . . Well, I shouldn't complain . . . For you, it's probably more like 100 percent" (23)—Miranda uses dry humor to challenge the settler narrative (present in both Vicenta's time and today) that Indigenous people are "brutes" and "savages" who perpetrate sexual violence in their communities. As Miranda implicitly tells Vicenta, this narrative has been debunked by "scholars [who] write dissertations" and the fact that "sexual violence against colonized women is [now] a real field of study" (23). By including these statistics here in her letter to Vicenta, Miranda not only speaks candidly and familiarly to her ancestor about colonial sexual violence but also to her reader, in a kind of multi-pronged testimony that articulates the story of Vicenta into a larger, even more damning framework that, through Miranda's re-storying, can offer healing. She provides evidence that substantiates Isabel's tale of Vicenta's rape: "That Chumash guy, Fernando Librado—the one famous for providing J.P. Harrington with all that old-time information," Miranda writes, also told Harrington about the mission

padre's predilection for raping girls (23-24). Here, Miranda sympathizes with Vicenta, as she does throughout her letter, in an intimate, casual tone that manages to fold the distance between the women, saying, "Vicenta, I keep thinking of how you ran home, telling everyone what had happened. I have to tell you, girl, that was brave. I didn't tell for years and years" (24). In offering and interpreting evidence that corroborates Isabel's story of Vicenta, centuries after the fact, and connecting it to her own experience of child sexual abuse, Miranda situates the tale of Vicenta's rape in a contemporary framework underscored by a shared indisputable truth of survivance.

In her letter, Miranda goes on to consider what recovering Vicenta's story does, writing, "Vicenta, I don't know if the fact that your story survives . . . really brings any kind of justice to you. . . . [T]he scribblings of an obsessed white man trying to record the memories of an aging Indian woman's rape one hundred years before—can *this* change the world?" (25). In this turn, Miranda considers the limitations of story and, more broadly, the limitations of language, as she considers what *justice* means. She regales Vicenta with a brief story of the Indigenous community at Mission Santa Cruz who killed and castrated their abusive mission priest, which she calls "the kind of hands-on justice I'd like" (25). Ruefully, Miranda entertains the notion that justice for physical violence perhaps should match the crime, musing, "Now, those were some Indians who listened to the 'eye for an eye' part of the Bible" (25). Still, even in the absence of tangible justice, Miranda comes to see Vicenta's story (and the fact that Isabel told it) as an opportunity for healing, saying, "I hold onto this: Isabel remembered your story, and she told it to Harrington, and he told it to me, and I'm telling it to everyone I can find. You told first" (25). Here, Miranda underscores how story and particularly its repetition and retelling "passed down through California Indian women to California Indian women" is "as potent as any coming-of-

age ceremony, as medicinal as any gathering of women's herbs, as healing as any grandmother's caress of a fevered forehead" (29). And indeed, by taking an oral story—one that belongs to Miranda and her community—that was once written into the settler archive and re-storying it into a personal, direct-address conversation with ancestors, Miranda, too, is "engag[ing] in a very Indigenous practice: that of storytelling as education, as thought-experiment" (29). Recovering Vicenta's story, which passed orally to reach Isabel and then Miranda, may not bring Vicenta justice; it does, however, reclaim what Gunn Allen calls the "living body" of the oral tradition (224) and places it in a written framework that broadly communicates a story about colonial sexual violence. In doing so, Miranda's dissemination of Vicenta's story can effectively "tell other Native women [that their] bodies are sacred" and that they "*have a right to speak out against violence and violation*" (Miranda, *Bad Indians* 29). Thus, the healing power of story is immense.

Portillo calls stories like Miranda's letter to Vicenta and its inherent message to all Native women "communal storytelling," which she says is a mode of cultural production that "provide[s] spaces where writers and activist-scholars reclaim their subjectivities across cultural, national, and digital boundaries" (2). For Belcourt, whose slim volume of essays is, I continue to argue, a mosaic of writing about *taking up space*, claiming and reclaiming queer Indigeneity through story allows him to connect his self with others across settler-conceived boundaries of time and space. Just as Miranda first invents her self through writing her name on a kitchen table in the Tehachapi Mountains of California, Belcourt similarly invents his self all over Canada, in a scattering "territoriality of selfhood" (Sarkowsky 104) that refuses colonial borders and, thus, reclaims space. In "Please Keep Loving: Reflections on Unlivability," an essay on suicide, Belcourt considers how his writing (his art) reproduces and transposes his self, saying, "Perhaps

if Billy-Ray Belcourt is a concept that shouts and dances and philosophizes, I'll in the end have been scattered in thousands of pieces across the nation. Everywhere will be my graveyard. I'll have lived and died as that which is more than the sum of my body parts" (103). In this imagining, Belcourt examines the boundlessness of knowledge production, and the transcendent possibility of "shouting" and "philosophizing" that knowledge in written language. For Belcourt, such literary "shouting" is an act of physical expansion that, in the tradition of "the literature of radicals for whom the present is a mistake, a ruse," gives Belcourt "one overdetermined reason to suffer the mode of aliveness" (103). In other words, it is writing—producing art that destabilizes the dominant culture's limiting "romance of the present" (7)—that Belcourt uses to claim a territory of the self. By doing so, Belcourt seems to reclaim life itself from the grip of coloniality, moving towards healing.

Like many of Belcourt's essays in *A History of My Brief Body*, "Please Keep Loving" begins with Belcourt's meditative *I* but does not remain there; rather, it moves to discuss suicide in a kind of story that works to recover Indigenous people, queer Indigenous people, and trans Indigenous people from the dominant narrative that "produce[s] suicide as a chronic condition" that can easily be pathologized (105). The fragments that comprise the essay are primarily stories of Indigenous communities—the Attawapiskat Cree, Neskantanga, Wapekeka, and Cross Lake First Nations—who have experienced what the Canadian state insufficiently names a "suicide epidemic" (109). In highlighting these communities and naming them in a mode of journalistic storytelling, Belcourt examines the conditions and "aspirations that animate suicide" (109), re-storying them within his essays of self-telling. Belcourt writes, there is "an ethical problem at the core of Canadian modernity" in which Indigenous people, tasked with survival in an unlivable world, are "enticed by the freedom of non-existence" (104). While Belcourt is

careful not to romanticize or simplify death by suicide, his storytelling is an edifying thought-experiment (as Miranda might call it) of the unlivability of Canada and the Western world that nonetheless pushes back on the notion that suicide is “the loss of a life that could still be here” (110). Belcourt seeks to “talk about suicide as both devastating and as a kind of politically-charged reaction to a world that makes living . . . untenable” (110). To “save” Indigenous people from suicide, Belcourt argues, means not preventing them from killing themselves “in the world as it remains” (110) but rather radically and collectively remaking the world into a livable, joyful place.

While Belcourt’s “Please Keep Loving” is not epistolary prose like Miranda’s “Dear Vicenta,” it does contain some elements of direct address, particularly in its concluding paragraph that pleads, “NDN youth, listen: to be lost isn’t to be unhinged from the possibility of a good life. . . . There isn’t only now and here. There is elsewhere and somewhere too. Speak against the coloniality of the world, against the rote of despair it causes, in an always-loudening chant. Please keep loving” (111). After recovering narratives of Indigenous suicide from newspaper headlines and the language of “emergency” and “crisis” that “sensationalize rather than humanize those who exit the world” (110), Belcourt offers a loving request that promises of a livable and joyful “elsewhere” that is foregrounded by agency. In between relaying facts about Indigenous suicides and his wonderings-aloud about unlivability, Belcourt includes a poem from his poetry collection, *This Wound Is a World*, written in 2017 in response to news of a suicide pact by two twelve-year-old Wapekeka First Nation girls. The poem, as Belcourt narrates, is “an attempt to use poetry to get at a deeper understanding of why some NDNs choose death,” which is conveyed in lines like, “what is suicide / but the act of opening up / to the sky? / what is suicide / but wanting to live / more than once?” (108, lines 4-9). In this poem, Belcourt

generously considers how death becomes an avenue of freedom and, obscurely, survival in the unlivable conditions of First Nations reserves (which, Belcourt argues, further sink in the mire of homo- and transphobia [109]). By reclaiming these stories from the flattened state-articulated language of “epidemic” and “crisis,” Belcourt holds together and contemplates both the profoundly oppressive conditions of reservation life and the complexity of asserting agency over that unlivability, as a way to communicate survivance in his community, much in the same way that Miranda, with Vicenta and Isabel, does. In such an assertion of agency over unlivability, Belcourt re-stories the fractured reportage of a First Nations “suicide epidemic” into a distinctly Indigenous story imbued with care. Such a re-storying is a kind of healing that, as Episkenew argues, highlights the sickness inherent to coloniality and, in turn, advocates for a future founded on joy.

Mosaics of the Self

The avenue for healing that Belcourt offers in “Please Keep Loving,” and indeed in most of *A History of My Brief Body*, does not resemble, as Belcourt comments in his author’s note about memoir, the Western literary canon’s conception of *story*; Belcourt’s text is non-linear, fragmented, and does not have a discernible plot or storyline. And while the four major sections of *Bad Indians* are arranged in a linear timeline that echoes the authorized settler myth it seeks to disrupt, the “internal structure of each section unsettles linear understandings of time” (Heberling 6) in a fragmentary and recursive style that, like Belcourt’s essays, is underscored by an Indigeneity that challenges and refutes the conventions of Western story. When both texts are held together, it becomes clear that both Belcourt and Miranda’s writings follow the “circular structure” that Gunn Allen asserts is the hallmark of “traditional tribal narratives” that

“incorporate[s] event within event, piling meaning upon meaning, until the accretion finally results in a story” (79). As meaning is “piled,” as Gunn Allen says, through the prose and poetry of story, Belcourt and Miranda assemble a wealth of Indigenous knowledge that creates, to borrow a word from Miranda, a “mosaic” (*Bad Indians* 136). I posit that Belcourt and Miranda’s piled-upon life stories are *mosaics of the self*—whose pieced-together assembly embodies wholeness.

Gunn Allen’s assertion about story as a convolution of events and meaning mirrors Indigenous conceptions of time. This connection between story and time is innate: if language is how humans name and make sense of reality, then story, which articulates our perceptions of reality into narratives, reflects how we experience time. Silko has described time as an ocean in which “History [is] not distant but all around. . . . People who have experienced time as an ocean, you know, what happened five hundred years ago is right here—just as much as what happened five minutes ago is right here” (qtd. in Portillo 12). Miranda, in describing story, similarly uses water as a metaphor. Story, she says, “is a river where no gallon of water is the same gallon it was one second ago. Yet it is still the same river. It exists as a truth. As a whole. Even if the whole world is in constant change. In fact, *because* of that constant change” (*Bad Indians* xvi). In both writers’ comparisons of time and story to bodies of water, Silko and Miranda point to wholeness, which is foundational to Indigenous worldviews; while the body of water that comprises oceans and rivers cyclically change (evaporates, condenses, precipitates), it exists as an infinite whole, just like time and story.

Locating herself in the present in the stream-of-consciousness essay “A California Indian at the Philadelphia Airport” in the section titled “Teheyapami Achiska: Home,” Miranda looks back at the narratives and knowledge she has re-storied in her text and, thinking “about the

shattering and fragmentation of California Indian communities since Contact” (135), considers the notion of wholeness. Here, in an essay seemingly composed while waiting for a flight (a physical space of transience and impermanence), Miranda observes the “racially predictable” people around her—where “the white people are travelers” and “the black people are workers” (134)—and notes how her own identity exists outside of that paradigm, saying, “I’m not white or black. I’m a half-breed: half California Indian, half white European” (134). Then, Miranda turns to thoughts about Ishi,¹⁸ a California Indian man indigenous to the Deer Creek region, who, in the last years of his life in the 1910s, was a subject of anthropological study at the University of California Anthropological Museum, where he was publicly sensationalized as the last living member of his tribe.¹⁹ Ruminating on him, Miranda comments, “I’ve been reading about Ishi’s brain, how it was removed from his body against his wishes . . . despite promises from his white academic ‘friends’ that his body would be left intact” (134). As Miranda details, Ishi’s brain was sent to the Smithsonian and was abandoned in storage for decades with “several other brains” until repatriation activists arranged for Ishi’s ashes “to be reunited with his brain” (134). As a result of these activist efforts, Ishi’s now-complete remains are reburied in the ancestral land of his people, who had spent “their last few years in exhaustion and fear, hiding from the culture that had genocided them” (134). In this brief re-storying, Miranda gestures at how colonization seeks to divide Indigenous people from each other and desecrate their bodies from their minds (a topic I examine at length in the next section of this thesis), enacting a physical fracturing on multiple levels. To reunite these fractured parts, Miranda seems to suggest, requires a concerted effort.

Looking out the airport window at clouds, Miranda thinks about the work she has produced in *Bad Indians* thus far, in which she has re-storied not only narratives retrieved from

the settler archive but also stories from her sisters, father, grandfather, and considers whether efforts to recover, reclaim, or recreate a “genocided” people (134) are “doomed to fail” (135). In her articulation of these ruminations, Miranda comes to form a metaphor of the mosaic—an object created from parts of other broken things—to describe both herself and her community.

She writes:

Maybe, like a basket that has huge holes where pieces were ripped out and is crumbling to dust and can’t be reclaimed, my tribe must reinvent ourselves—rather than try to copy what isn’t there in the first place. We must think of ourselves as a mosaic, human beings constructed of multiple sources of beauty, pieces that alone are merely incomplete but which, when set into a new design together, complement the shards around us, bring wholeness to the world and ourselves. (136)

For Miranda, the construction of the mosaic is a way of creating wholeness within the legacy of colonialism. While settler violence and genocide have produced Indigenous people as fragmentary—scattered, incomplete, and innately broken—a mosaic, in its multiply-sourced construction, allows for a kind of wholeness that does not absolve the harm of colonialism but rather includes it as part of the story. It is a kind of wholeness related to Vizenor’s *survivance*: it is not merely about preservation or reclamation (i.e., survival), but rather about composing “a new design” of a re-storied plural self. In constructing this mosaic, its architects are staking a claim of wholeness—of Indigenous selves both plural and singular—in *this* reality, where “multiple sources of beauty” assemble to insist on an active presence.

The *OED* describes *mosaic* as work produced by “the process of creating pictures or decorative patterns by cementing together small pieces of stone, glass, or other hard materials of various colours.” In this sense, a mosaic is something that is made of many parts that, when

solidified into a state of wholeness, create a total image. What seems especially important in this description is that the pieces are cemented (hardened, solidified) to one another but are not melded or fused; the pieced-together nature of a mosaic remains evident, even in its state of wholeness.

A mosaic of the self, like the ones Miranda and Belcourt create in *Bad Indians* and *A History of My Brief Body*, then, will always look like a mosaic: the fractures and damage of colonialism will always be evident among the many shards whose stories are steeped in counternarratives of joy, freedom, love, desire, and utopia. These shards invent, reclaim, and re-story the self; they are, as Belcourt and Miranda make clear, evidence of living through colonialism. In these mosaics of wholeness, the shards tell stories of overcoming, offering a whole image that, like Gunn Allen says of the oral tradition, tells of a “living body” that is ever-present in this reality.

Reconstructing the Body through Desire

Nothing I desire, but desire.

—James Thomas Stevens, “Regent’s Canal”²⁰

In her essay “Decolonizing the Queer Native Body (and Recovering the Native Bull-Dyke),” scholar and Colville Confederated tribes member Chris Finley, through the prism of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and his concept of biopower, examines how colonial power depends on the logic of heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity (32). Citing the work of Andrea Smith,²¹ Finley argues that such logic “naturalizes hierarchies” (33) to the point where “without heteronormative ideas about sexuality and gender relationships, heteropatriarchy, and therefore colonialism, would fall apart” (34). This naturalization has become ingrained and, as Finley writes, “institutionalized” in Indigenous communities, where the colonial state and its hegemony pressure Indigenous peoples to conform to the ideology of the nuclear family and its related hierarchies. In this sphere of colonial heteropatriarchy, Finley argues, “colonialism disciplines both Native people and non-Native people through sexuality” (34). In the colonial imagination and its narratives of control, Indigenous women, for example, are “sexually available for white man’s pleasure” (34), while Indigenous men are viewed as feminine and weak for “‘allow[ing]’ matriarchal structures to govern” their communities and families (36). In the former narrative, Indigenous women are untamed sexual objects for the heroic settler man to manage (along with, of course, her land), while in the latter, Indigenous men are “seen as sterile members of a dying race” who implicitly need colonial intervention for survival (36).

In imagining Indigenous women as purely sexual objects and men, conversely, as sexless subjects, the colonial project thus seeks and justifies domination not only by robbing Indigenous people of sexual autonomy, but also by metaphysically divorcing Indigenous people from their material bodies. In Indigenous spirituality, the body, along with the communal self, is

inextricably tied to land, where Driskill writes, “I have not only been removed from my homelands, I have also been removed from my erotic self and . . . my first homeland: the body” (“Stolen” 52-53). In this pronouncement, Driskill links this sense of disembodiment—in which “Native bodies ‘disappear’” (Finley 37)—with dispossession, calling it, as Driskill’s essay title “Stolen From Our Bodies” indicates, a kind of theft.

For Driskill, recovering from this theft, in which the Indigenous people are figuratively un-bodied, requires healing. According to Finley, who writes that “an explosion of identity politics” will not end “colonial domination,” such healing must engage in a “purposeful deconstruction of the logics of power” (34), particularly by way of (re)claiming Indigenous peoples’ sexuality from colonial frameworks. In this chapter, I examine how Belcourt and Miranda use story to make such purposeful deconstructions, particularly in framing queer desire as a freedom of the body that is deeply rooted in joy. In doing so, I argue, both authors re-story and reconstruct the body as a material assertion of autonomy—pieces of Miranda’s mosaic of the self—freed from colonial logics of domination. In their assertions of the queer Indigenous body and its desires, Miranda and Belcourt show that the logics of colonial power indeed break down, as Belcourt says, poking holes in the fabric of the settler state where “wherever light rushes in is an exit route” (9).

Negotiating a Territoriality of the Body

“Let’s start with the body,” begins the titular essay of Belcourt’s collection, “for so much is won and lost and lost and lost there” (24). The line is a fragment, carefully arranged, like much of *A History of My Brief Body*, alongside other shards of thought that beg the reader to consider how its pieces engage with one another.²² In its echoic final words—“won and lost and lost and

lost”—there is further fragmentation, a rubber-band snap of syntax in which the sentence’s subject (the body) is a site of battle. This incongruous bounce of words—the notion that the body both wins and loses—is one that Belcourt plays with his collection, in which he places embodiment and bodylessness side by side, forgoing conclusions of whether that site is a place, as he says, for wins or losses. With the imperative of “Let’s start,” Belcourt begs participation in his narrative, centering his reader and his self in the ambiguous space of inhabiting a body. Here, Belcourt seems to say, we will not only start but circle, shape, and consider the territory of the body, where one can be (un)bodied, through the power of story.

One of Belcourt’s theses in *A History of My Brief Body* is that the colonial project sought and seeks to rob Indigenous people of their embodiment, just as Finley, Driskill, and other scholars of Indigenous sexuality have posited. For Belcourt, this disembodiment distinctly places Indigenous people in the ghostly and liminal space of “ideas,” where, as he asserts, “If I’m a writer, it’s because to be an NDN is to be a concept that speaks. I live in the world of ideas because it’s the world of my people” (28).²³ In the essay “Fragments from a Half-Existence,” for example, Belcourt describes an encounter on an airplane with a white woman who, upon hearing that Belcourt is an Indigenous writer, offers that, as a teacher of therapists-in-training, she has recently (re)considered trauma as it pertains to Indigenous peoples. “Trauma isn’t something you acquire,” she tells Belcourt, “trauma is literally *who you are*” (77). After a bit of deadpan humor—“*Later, over Winnipeg, she asks if she can purchase food for me*” (77)—Belcourt describes how the woman’s command—telling him who he is—seeks to disembody him and, by extent, all Indigenous people. “Suspend[ed] . . . in an existential limbo,” Belcourt turns to second person:

There’s the material you in the airplane who is called into an openness you have no

power over, then the abstract you the white woman conjures from a bank of public ideas that are injurious. What's more, a third you exists—the “lyric you”: he who observes, keeps watch, analyzes from afar, takes in data, then writes from the distance. In the end, all that matters is that all of you are bruised. (77)

As Belcourt's conclusion indicates, this forced disembodiment is ultimately unsuccessful: even as the colonial violence of the white woman's statement tries to reduce him—an Indigenous subject—to a mere approximation constructed by trauma, it *bruises* “all of you,” leaving an (ephemeral, heal-able) physical mark on each plane of “your”—Belcourt's, colonized peoples'—existence.

That Belcourt suddenly utilizes the second-person to describe “existential limbo” seems to underscore what it means to be (un)bodied. Pivoting for just one paragraph from “I,” Belcourt creates a linguistic separation from his self to “your”—some unknown yet familiar other's—self. In doing so, Belcourt seems to be using a kind of communal voice; while it is not the plural self that *we* connotes, the abstract “you” that Belcourt uses is nonetheless a plural form. He begins with the “material you,” the body where, as he says in the opening line of this essay, which is the first named essay of the collection, everything implicitly begins. Here, the “material you,” the Indigenous body, is perceived by “the settler public” (76) as available, accessible, for the taking. The white woman on the plane, we can assume, asks questions to a body that she reads as Indigenous or, perhaps more ambiguously, Other. In connecting the “material you” to what Belcourt calls the “abstract you,” the Indigenous body is both connected and disconnected from the “bank of public ideas”—the colonial imagination that positions the Indigenous subject as the “concept that speaks” (77). As Belcourt notes, the third existential element, the “lyric you,” serves not to bridge the gap between the bodied and unbodied yous; rather, it serves as observer,

intellectualizing the experience, but again, not reaching any kind of conclusion. To be an Indigenous person in public, Belcourt says in his story, is to float within these three dimensions, irresolute and vague.

In another fragment from the essay “Futuromania,” Belcourt puts himself in conversation with Roland Barthes’ *Mourning Diary*—a text similarly comprised of fragments—to consider what it means to engage in a “struggle with aliveness” (40). Here, Belcourt writes that “to be NDN is to be without a ‘sense of life’ from the get-go,” an experience he says is underscored by “our tortured embodiment, our bodylessness, which is televised and made into bad art” (40). In again weighing the simultaneousness of embodiment and disembodiment, Belcourt questions to whom his body—racialized, ethnicized, colonized—belongs. Through the lens of the settler state, Indigenous bodies like Belcourt’s exist only as corporeal reminders of domination and extinction, which frames Indigenous bodies as artifacts of “a vengeful past and nothing else” (8). Like the white woman on the airplane who sees Belcourt as a walking embodiment of trauma, the colonial imagination shackles the Indigenous body to what the authorized settler mythology calls *history*, thus robbing Belcourt’s “material you” of physical autonomy. In this lack of autonomy, Belcourt writes, “I don’t subscribe to the fantasy of self-sovereignty, knowing fully that the past stares into my brief body like a knife. My hands are made up of a set of hands that puppeteer me. The hands aren’t God’s. They are History’s. Its sores are mine” (26). As Driskill emphasizes, the body is a territory that settler-colonialism seeks to control (often in the name of God); if the body has been metaphysically eliminated, only to be possessed by the settler state, then to be Indigenous in the colonial imagination is to occupy a “brief body” of non-sovereignty, suspended in a form that looks like aliveness, but is bound to a nation that seeks its extinction.

While Belcourt is perceived in “Fragments From a Half-Existence” as an Indigenous

body whose existence is inextricable from the violence of settler history, in both public and private spaces where Belcourt's queer sexuality is apparent, his body is similarly read by the non-Indigenous public as a ghostly object of colonial subjugation. In the essay "Loneliness in the Age of Grindr," Belcourt relays the story of a hookup initiated on Grindr, an app that, as Belcourt describes, "has made sex easy to come by for men who've been told their desires were to be shunned from public life" (61). In the story, Belcourt uses present-tense, close first-person narration to guide his reader through a condition he calls loneliness. This experience of loneliness begins with a spontaneously-arranged meetup for anonymous sex—which is typical for both queer men and Grindr users—with a white man who, upon showing up at Belcourt's apartment, aggressively proceeds to make Belcourt into "a one-sided project of his desire by ceasing to say more than a couple of words at a time to [him]" (61-62). What follows is an uncomfortable encounter that careens on the blurry border of consent until the man finally "jerks off, and, without warning, ejaculates on [Belcourt's] asshole" (62). The man laughs off what happens, complaining, "*I didn't even get to fuck you,*" as Belcourt tries to clean himself off and "avoid semen sliding into [his] anus" (62). When they part ways soon after, Belcourt tries to ascertain whether the encounter was safe, asking the man if he is "clean." The man jokes that he hopes he is, laughing "without compassion" when Belcourt says, "*I wouldn't have let you do that if you had asked. Cum on my ass*" (62). In this exchange, the white man—who Belcourt notes is "a twink, one of the most fuckable body types on Grindr" (61)—uses Belcourt's body as a receptacle for his desire alone, while Belcourt is left at a loss, feeling both "violated" and "sick with worry" (62) about the ramifications of the man's actions.

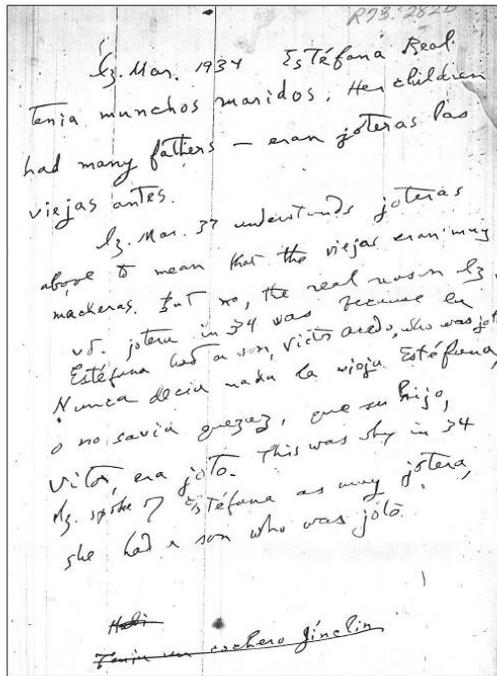
In the aftermath of the encounter, Belcourt, racked with worry, finds himself seeking care in an institution fraught with the settler-state's violence: the medical establishment. In search of a

post-exposure prophylaxis drug (commonly referred to as PEP) that can “prevent HIV from latching onto your body” immediately after suspected exposure (63), Belcourt learns he must be deemed eligible to get the short course of drugs, and eligibility, Belcourt finds out, must be approved by the government-run health services. Seeking permission, Belcourt spends the day visiting two clinics and an emergency room, all of which deny that Belcourt’s concerns are severe enough to warrant the use of PEP. Instead of receiving care, Belcourt unsuccessfully tries to assert himself in settings where he feels “utterly without agency” (64)—where he is interpreted as both a person of stigmatized sexuality and (perhaps even more so) as a body of alterity that is “too brown to be innocent” (63). In this light, there is a cruel punishment inherent in the final doctor’s decision that Belcourt will “*have to wait about eight to ten weeks to be tested*” (65). Belcourt describes his care-seeking journey as one of existential loneliness, where “everywhere [he] went became a zone of abandonment” (65). Here, he links the “deleterious way men vie for sex” (65) with the coldness and isolation he feels when seeking medical care for his visibly Indigenous (or, at least, visibly Other), queer body. It is a loneliness underscored by “the embargo of care” (8) imposed by the settler state, where “a body isn’t a body but a battlefield” (60). Loneliness, then, is a “sore” of history that is not merely individual but rather communal—it is the wound of living in an unlivable world. By writing about that loneliness and situating it in a narrative about both sex and sexual healthcare, Belcourt refuses those metaphorical sores, re-storying and thus reclaiming his queer Indigenous body as a territory of his own in the mosaic of his self.

In *Bad Indians*, Miranda similarly seeks to disengage the puppeteering hands of what Belcourt calls “History” from Indigenous bodies by re-storying her Two-Spirit ancestors into a heritable narrative of survivance. In “The End of The World: Missionization,” after introducing

her reader to Isabel Meadows and Vicenta, Miranda again utilizes Harrington’s field notes from his work with Isabel to create a counternarrative—in this case, one that considers, articulates, and extends the legacy of third gender²⁴ California Indians, whose gender and sexuality was illegible, and thus untenable, to the colonists and the mission padres. She calls that counternarrative “Cousins” and dedicates it to her ancestor, Victor Acedo.

Notes, Isabel Meadows speaking to Smithsonian ethnologist J. P. Harrington, 1935, about my great-great-great-great aunt Estéfana Real’s son Victor, born March 1846



Isabel [consultant]
 Mar. 1934
 Estéfana Real had many husbands. Her children had many fathers—they were *joteras*, the old ladies before.

Isabel
 Mar. [19]37
 understands “*joteras*” above to mean that the old women were very macho. But no, the real reason Isabel used “*jotera*” in 34 was because Estéfana had a son, Victor Acedo, who was a *joto*. The old lady Estéfana never said nothing, or she didn’t know, maybe, that her son, Victor, was a *joto*. This was why in ’34 Isabel spoke of Estéfana as very macho, she had a son who was a *joto*.

Harrington R73:282 B

Figure 3: As she does in “Dear Vicenta,” Miranda includes a scan of Harrington’s field notes of his conversation with Isabel (30). Miranda chooses to translate some of Isabel’s words to English in her transcription, while others remain untranslated. “Cousins” begins on the opposite page (not pictured).

Harrington's field notes describe how, in 1934, Isabel told Harrington a story about Estéfana Real, Miranda's great-great-great-great-great aunt. Harrington's first note is written in a mix of Spanish and English that Isabel likely used; Miranda translates: Estéfana "had many husbands. Her children had many fathers—they were *joter*as, the old ladies before" (qtd. in Miranda *Bad Indians* 30). It is unclear what Harrington thinks *joter*as means, or if he even attempted to interpret Isabel's description. Three years later, however, he makes an addendum, writing that Isabel "understands '*joter*as' above to mean that the old women were very macho. But no, [it]. . . was because Estéfana has a son, Victor Acedo, who was a *joto*. This was why . . . Isabel spoke of Estéfana as very macho, she had a son who was a *joto*" (30). By including Harrington's notes and a type-written translation of his handwriting, Miranda allows her reader to extrapolate meaning from the scant text. We can glean that Harrington is trying to define *joter*a and *joto*, two Spanish (and thus colonial) terms of description that, judging by their context, seem to be related to gender and sexuality. In Harrington's framing of Isabel's story, *joter*a is implied to be a derogatory term, suggesting sexual permissiveness (Estéfana had "many husbands"); a presentation of gender outside the bounds of heteronormativity (she is "macho"); and, finally, tolerance of homosexuality (she is the mother of a *joto*—a man read as feminine and/or gay in the colonial imagination [Miranda "Extermination" 255]). In simply providing this document, Miranda allows the reader to surmise that the knowledge offered by the settler myth of California is one that is fundamentally confused about gender; even in the 1930s, generations after initial missionization, Harrington doesn't seem to grasp how to consider or even make sense of a *joter*a and a *joto*—through Isabel's story, he tries to understand.

Harrington's document fails to convey the nuance and humanity of Estéfana Real and Victor Acedo; instead, it relegates Miranda's ancestors—and the notion of *joter*a and *joto*—to a

place in settler history where they “sit stilled in the role of the described” (Belcourt 117). Through the act of re-storying, Miranda animates them from that place, disrupting the ways in which settler institutions like the mission padres and, later, Harrington at the Smithsonian, sought to name, codify, and, as Miranda argues, exterminate the Indigenous bodies that didn’t fit into their concepts of gender and sexuality. Harrington’s field notes from his work with Isabel offer one illustration of what, to Harrington and others like him, is a mystifying conception of gender that doesn’t fit into the dominant culture; it leaves a deficit with innumerable unanswered questions. By offering an alternate reading of Harrington’s papers, Miranda demonstrates how to use “non-Indian archives to tell an Indian story” (Miranda, “Extermination” 254)—in this case, one of Two-Spirit²⁵ ancestors. Refusing the journalistic and historiographic reporting style of the mission padres and Harrington, Miranda tells her Indigenous story by engaging, as she often does in *Bad Indians*, with a kind of prose that does not always didactically convey information. The result, rather, is a poetic and intimate gift that Miranda offers her readers, her ancestors, and herself in which she connects with Victor, her generations-ago cousin, in a first-person plural narrative that puts *joto*—Spanish slang for *faggot* (Miranda, “Extermination” 255)—into a generous and queer counter-history that exceeds the graveyard of ethnographic salvage.

In “Cousins (for Victor),” Miranda reconnects the self of *Bad Indians*—the first-person plural, tribal *we* of Indigenous epistemology—directly with the body, where “We dressed in shirt of tule or deerskin, worked hard, side by side with our sisters: gathering and pounding acorns . . . weaving tight baskets and caring for the sick child or wandering toddler. We shared secrets about men, stories about lovers, remedies for our broken hearts” (*Bad Indians* 31). The *we* in this narrative—Victor, Miranda, and their ancestral sisters and Two-Spirit kin—are represented as clothed, working, caring for one another, and talking about desire; they possess speaking,

moving, nurturing, desirous, capable bodies. Their roles in their communities, as Miranda goes on to describe, are as spiritual caretakers of the body: they worked as both birth and death midwives, “carry[ing] each body tenderly from this world to the next without risking contamination” (31). Illustrating their importance to their people, Miranda positions third-gender people like Victor as vital members of their communities, whose gender, which exists outside of the Euro-Christian gender binary, allows them to occupy a spiritually liminal space in which they are “always in two worlds at once, poised between, keeping our balance on those slippery paths between life and death” (31). The Spanish soldier and priests, who failed to understand that to be “*'aqi, coia, cuit, uluqui*” was to be a “treasure” (31), force them from their indecipherable, untranslatable bodies, where, Miranda writes, “In the missions, we were stripped bare, whipped . . . pointed at, cursed” (31).²⁶ Stripped of gender-affirming clothing, their bodies beaten, the *'aqi* (the Ventureño Chumash word for third-gender [Miranda, “Extermination” 255]), who were already robbed of their land by missionization, are also stolen from their bodies, which the soldiers and priests rename “sodomites, *nefando pecados, mujerados* . . . monsters” (Miranda, *Bad Indians* 31). In naming these bodies, battered and removed of all context, the Spanish claim them, stripping them of their cultural selves. “Cousins,” then, describes the “regendering, renaming, and murder” of the *'aqi* (Miranda “Extermination” 266) in just a page and a half, ending in a place of hope that reestablishes the corporeality of the queer Indigenous body and thus contributes to the mosaic of healing that Miranda constructs throughout *Bad Indians*.

Using the plural *we*, Miranda writes of how, at “the end of the world,” the *'aqi*—with whom Miranda includes herself—were humiliated and disowned, disappearing either through murder, self-isolation, or forced assimilation (*Bad Indians* 31). Here, Miranda finally recalls Harrington’s notes about Isabel’s story of Estéfana and Victor, saying, “when only the shame

remained with its stench of fear, we became *jotos*” (31). But where *joto* languishes at the end of Harrington’s field notes—leaving Victor “stilled in the role of the described” (Belcourt 117)—Miranda seeks restoration; she keeps going. She writes, “How strange it is, now, to hear young voices calling to us . . . 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?” (32). It is a call from Miranda and her kin that reaches beyond the destruction of colonization—the work that made the *aqi* not even an unbodied “concept that speaks,” as Belcourt writes (*A History* 77), but a concept so “buried under words like *joto*, like *joya*, under whips and lies” (*Bad Indians* 32) that it has taken this long for them to be unearthed. In this piece of narrative prose, by reaching Isabel Meadows through Harrington’s scrawled notes, Miranda wrenches Indigenous queerness from the grip of history and, by joining the voices of her Two-Spirit ancestors, stories the queer body and (re)establishes it as a place of wholeness, where Victor and his kin can whisper, “Never mind, little ones, Never mind. You are here now, at last. Come close. Listen. We have so much work to do” (32). In these closing sentences, Miranda and her queer ancestral kin claim the territory of the body as their own, looking to the future from a place of re-storied wholeness.

Storying Queer Desire

In an interview promoting *A History of My Brief Body*, Belcourt notes that “To talk about the body is to talk about gender, sexuality, and sex” (qtd. in Colbert). While this is perhaps an obvious connection, it is one that Finley says is critically important, especially in the field of Indigenous studies and literature. Colonialism depends on heteropatriarchy and heterosexuality to reify hierarchical power, and one of its primary tools of enforcing these structures is shame.

According to Finley, sexual shame began, for many Indigenous peoples, at boarding schools (and, as Miranda details, in the similarly forced assimilation of the California missions), and “has been passed down for generations” among Indigenous communities (32). To survive the many forms and iterations of violence inherent in colonialism, Indigenous people have constructed layers of silence surrounding sex, especially when it comes to queer sexuality. In understanding that silence around queer sex—and, as I will outline here, around equating queer sex with joy—is a logic of colonialism, healing can begin.

Calling on Audre Lorde’s notion of erotic knowledge, Driskill names this reclamation of queer desire “a Sovereign Erotic” (“Stolen” 51). If the erotic, as Lorde says, is a kind of knowledge that “empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meanings in our lives” (Driskill, “Stolen” 57), then a Sovereign Erotic is an Indigenous-specific “erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive” (57). It is, Driskill says, connecting the Indigenous body back to what colonialism seeks to sever: Indigenous peoples’ “nations, traditions, and histories” (53). In other words, a reconstruction of the body—which is, as Belcourt names, the embodiment of sex, gender, and sexuality—is a critical element of wholeness, propelled by the erotic and, as I argue here, desire.

The *OED* describes *desire* as a “feeling or emotion which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected; longing, craving; a particular instance of this feeling, a wish.” My use of *queer desire* in this thesis centers precisely at the intersection of *longing* and *pleasure* that the *OED*’s definition implies, particularly as it relates to how embodied pleasure—of physical and sexual joy—exists queerly, outside of heteropatriarchy. According to queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, whose work Belcourt

engages with throughout his essay collection, queerness itself is future-oriented and thus implicitly about longing. Writing that “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing,” Muñoz posits that queerness is thus “a structured and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1). To desire queerly, then, is to engage in a kind of longing that is underscored by an imperative to “dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (1). If the present, as Belcourt writes in “Please Keep Loving,” is unlivable for queer Indigenous people who do not adhere to the colonial logic of heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity, then queer desire is a longing for another reality, one that seeks pleasure—which is, itself, a kind of wholeness—beyond now. While both Belcourt and Muñoz insist that such pleasure (which they both call “utopia”) implicitly exists in the future, for Miranda, that longing also relates to the past, where she, Driskill, and Finley advocate for “A *return* to our bodies as whole human beings” (Driskill et al. 3; emphasis added). In this sense, both writers agree that queer desire is a longing for that which is *not here*. And, as Finley and Driskill both outline, if the colonial imagination has robbed Indigenous people of corporeality—and thus the body’s capacity for physical and sexual pleasure—then to write about queer desire, as both Belcourt and Miranda do, is to heal the body, putting fragments of that which is *here* and *not here* in the same mosaic of wholeness.

In an inner-jacket blurb for *A History of My Brief Body*, Cowlitz Indian Tribe member and writer Elissa Washuta comments that “Settler colonialism demands we believe we’d be better off without our bodies—their needs, their feelings, their raucous disobedience and ungovernable change” (n.p.). As Washuta’s endorsement highlights, Belcourt’s essays refuse these demands, particularly in exploring and embracing the body as an uncontainable and

unpredictable site of joy. In the essay “Robert,” for example, Belcourt again engages in the second-person, this time writing in an epistolary style that chronicles, through direct-address letters, Belcourt’s romance with the titular Robert. The essay begins in medias res with a three-paragraph recollection of what Belcourt refers to as “our second date,” which, like the beginning of many love stories, is foregrounded with delight: two people, “positioned, cautiously, a couple of feet apart on the couch” are “bowled over with laughter” (89). What they are laughing at is, as Washuta says, the “raucous disobedience” of the body and, more precisely, its sexual desire—a moment of embarrassment-cum-pleasure that they revel in. To explain, Belcourt writes of leaving Robert in his living room while he goes to the bathroom:

Buzzing with glee, I fashioned this text message to one of my best friends: “MAJOR EMERGENCY! CALL 911!!! We ended up back at my apartment and I’m feeling very FRISKY!” Much to my alarm, this wasn’t sent to its intended recipient, but to you, Robert. I flushed the toilet, washed my hands, and then quickly opened the bathroom door to say GOTCHA—my unimaginative attempt to smother the sense of embarrassment flowering in the pit of my stomach. (89)

While in an earlier essay, Belcourt writes that “Desire is heavy, dark, serious” (81), here, desire—in this case, the thrill of sexual arousal—is light, unencumbered, and silly. While embarrassment “flowers” in Belcourt’s stomach—another kind of embodiment—his vulnerability is met with love and care, where Belcourt writes, “Grinning, you brush it off as a quirk of mine—and you’re not wrong, I do silly shit like this all the time” (90). That Belcourt accidentally sends the text to Robert speaks to the unwieldiness of desire, how it takes over, “runs in all directions” (80) and, in its confluence with joy, overpowers the body, undermining its intellect. In writing of this embarrassment, Belcourt constructs not a confession of shame, but

a portrait of joy found in the freedom of the body and, more specifically, in the revelry of queer sex. Despite being “Racked with nerves and struggl[ing] with basic motor skills,” Belcourt’s narrative of his second date with Robert begins and ends in shared bodily ecstasy—of laughter and orgasms—that stories the queer Indigenous body as a site of possibility: of safe, warm, and loving erotic power.

If the settler state and its mythology have “stolen people from [their] bodies,” as Driskill says, then to write about the body as a site of queer desire—of longing that exists outside the bounds of heterosexuality—is to engage in a performance of freedom that steals back the body. In the letters that make up “Robert,” Belcourt shows readers his erotic self in concert with someone he loves, storying desire as a site of fullness—of fearless joy—that is free from the settler state. In a fragment labeled “*August 2017*,” Belcourt writes:

You arrive sexually aroused, so we ignore our emptied stomachs in the name of another type of emptiness, a non-sovereign one, an irreparable one. I burrow my face into your butt, my closeness to which drowns out the soundscape of downtown Edmonton.

Suddenly I feel a small metal object tumble up or down my nose—direction is eschewed in this sexual configuration. I politely ask you to jump off of me, which is when I realize that one of the studs on my septum ring has come loose in the ebb and flow of anilingus.

I excuse myself only to swallow the stud in the bathroom. When I return to bed we’ve both lost our hard-ons. Potentiality, I learn, can bloat and then burst at any given moment.

(92)

In his illustration of this moment, Belcourt writes about anilingus, an act of queer sex, not with shame or fear, as the settler state’s heteronormative framework insists, but rather with tenderness, levity, and, as Belcourt’s rumination on “potentiality” underscores, profundity. In a

short paragraph, Belcourt manages to convey an intimate moment that is deeply significant to the story of his relationship with Robert and, at the same time, illustrative of his body as an everyday site of pleasure. While swallowing part of his septum ring makes the situation unusual, anilingus, for both Belcourt and his partner, is ordinary: it is one of many ways that queer men engage in pleasure. The body, too, is a complex site of both reliable pleasure and utter unwieldiness; in illustrating it as such, Belcourt contends, the erotic is embodied simultaneously by an ecstatic fumbling of sensuality and hilarity, which are expressions of joy and wholeness.

While Belcourt writes explicitly of the joy of bodily pleasure in his essays, Miranda's personal life stories about queer desire and her body are more lightly peppered into the expansive narrative of *Bad Indians*. In the first-person essay "Silver," Miranda writes a self-narrative that follows an extended metaphor of a silver knife as her anger that ends in an embodiment of queer desire as healing. In its sequentially-numbered parts, "Silver" follows the blade throughout Miranda's life: In "Forge," Miranda recalls her father holding a knife to her mother's throat and, later, wields a knife of her own (108-109); in "Sheath," she is a six-year-old sharp with anger (110); in "Whetstone," she is sexually abused by her mother's friend (112); in "Unsheathed," she holds her absent father's small, cold handgun and considers shooting him (113). "Cutting Edge," the fifth section of "Silver," locates Miranda after she has married her high school teacher at nineteen and raised two children with him. Here, an adult Miranda rediscovers writing, where she realizes, "My life—carefully constructed to include husband, children, solid old house—is no longer moving forward in time. The more I write, the further backward my words take me" (114). Eventually, Miranda, frustrated and angry, confides in two friends, a lesbian couple who live far away. She finds safety and catharsis in exchanging letters with the couple, who share "their own stories of lost families, abuse, and healing" in conversation with Miranda's

confessions of what she refers to as “the rape, my silence, my anger” (115). The women, one of whom Miranda says she is “secretly in love with” or, maybe, “in love with . . . the fact that they love each other” (115), encourage Miranda to share with her husband a poem she wrote about her childhood rape. She does, and, in her process of healing guided by her friends, she writes many more poems, dulling the blade of her metaphorical knife.

In “Crucible” and “Reforged,” the final two parts of “Silver,” Miranda asserts herself as both a writer and a queer woman driven by desire—two modes of self-telling that are critical to Miranda’s healing. The process of self-discovery and self-assertion that Miranda details in “Silver” are part of a painstaking path to healing from the wounds of her early life, where Miranda writes, “I fight transformation tooth and nail. At last, I recognize change as my old friend Truth. I stand still, and I embrace her” (116). The truth that Miranda embraces after a process of healing is what she details finally in “Reforged”: truths of love, longing, and desire. Early in *Bad Indians*, Miranda names *desire* as a foundational feeling in her life and the making of her self, describing her parents as having “the kind of desire that happens only once in a lifetime, the kind of desire that eventually leaves you wishing you’d never tasted its soul-thieving mouth. . . . Desire that demands like demonic possession. Desire you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy; desire you hope to god your own children would never know” (xiii). As Miranda conveys in her life stories, the longing that her parents had for one another was complicated and turbulent; her European-American and Jewish mother, who used drugs and lived with mental illness, and her California Indian father, who was abusive and often absent, intermittently reunited with frenzied and disastrous results. As detailed in *Bad Indians*, their relationship seems to operate precisely at the intersection of anger and desire—both vehicles of insatiable want and need. It makes sense, then, that when Miranda reaches adulthood, she seeks

to “carefully construct” her life “to include husband, children, solid old house” (114), which, in reproducing the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, seems to approximate safety and stability. In this purported safety, however, Miranda is still angry. It is not until she (re)finds writing that she is rid of her metaphorical knife, finding a place of quietude in “Reforged,” where she has “left the marriage house with almost no belongings” and “re-possessed” herself (117). Here, from this location, Miranda recalls “the day [her] anger transformed like molten silver into a blinding nova that [she] learned to call desire” (117), which is a transformation marked by queerness.

In smaller, block-quoted type, Miranda writes about a day trip to Shoshone Falls with an unnamed person described only by the pronoun *she*. Describing the surprise trip, Miranda writes sensually of the Falls, saying, “The road is suddenly a crevasse: opens jagged in this flat earth, slants fast down to the river. A gift. She saved this moment to please me” (117). Here, the land that Miranda describes feels almost erotically bodied, where she imagines her companion conspiring with “the Indian at the gate” to ““make sure [the Falls] roar real good”” for their visit (117). Narrating with a distinct tone of eroticism, Miranda describes their “bare feet in the cold current” of the water and then a kiss that she describes as “Innocence; the almost virginal state before passion” (117). As a narration of the day that Miranda’s anger turned into the “blinding nova that [she] learned to call desire,” this kiss that she shares with an unnamed woman is, as Miranda implies, a coming-out story, where something “dormant” (queerness) “awakens” in her (118). In this, Miranda stories her queer desire as a landmark of truth in the story of her self, where she declares, “I loved a woman; I will love other women. Never like this first time . . . but always with the same truth” (118). In writing of the transformative day of pleasure at Shoshone Falls, Miranda re-stories her body from a narrative of anger and pain—in which desire is a source of trauma—to one of healing that satiates the bodied self with love and, as Miranda

discovers, a desire that is fulfilling and profound.

Such love, Miranda suggests, is found not only with other women but also in the company of Others who are similarly discovering their desires in the colonized present. In the Shoshone Falls story, Miranda notes that she and her companion (who she describes as “inexperienced for all her boasts” [117]) are “two brown women traveling through a place where no maps exist” (118). Navigating the complex geography of same-gender sexuality in a world shaped by the heteropatriarchal colonial imagination, Miranda and her partner at Shoshone Falls find a location of freedom, where they firmly plant their “bare feet in [the] cold current” (117) of a waterfall named for Indigenous people. Here, in this place, Miranda (and perhaps her partner, too) finds her erotic Indigeneity and, as she does in “Cousins,” connects her self with ancestral queerness to reconstruct and story her Two-Spirit body in her mosaic of wholeness.

Enfleshing the “Wild Imaginary”

In a fragment of “Futuromania,” Belcourt writes of the notion of being stolen from his body when he says that the collective “experience of NDN life” is to be “without a flesh to signal our futurity, overwrought by signification, in the no man’s land of a wild imaginary” (40). This statement echoes Belcourt’s assertions that to be Indigenous is to live in a “world of ideas” (28) as merely a “concept that speaks” (77), unbodied by the colonial imagination. In her writings about settler mythology and Indigenous personal myths as counternarratives that expose the sickness inherent in colonialism, Episkenew underscores the potency of the imaginary, writing that “myth-making, after all, is an act of the imagination” (110). For something to be imaginary means that it exists solely in the abstract, without a physical presence. In their texts, Belcourt and Miranda employ myth-making and its power of imagination, as Episkenew notes, precisely to

construct the body with language. And if language is invention, as I've argued in this thesis, then writing about the Indigenous body and its desires enflashes the "wild imaginary," effectively removing it from the "no man's land" of pure imagination to return it to a state of wholeness.

In "Coyote Takes a Trip," Miranda employs traditional storytelling techniques to connect Coyote, the often-storied trickster figure,²⁷ to the ancestral spirituality of queer sexual desire, in an act of imagination that is about restoration of the body. The story locates Coyote in Venice Beach, California, a world of pizza-by-the-slice and parking lots filled with camper vans, where a winter of rain and heartbreak has left Coyote without "his mojo"—"his touch . . . his way . . . his magic" (179). His "mojo," Miranda indicates, is his sexual desire, which he has lost while chasing the "SoCal women he'd been hanging with" (179). Asking himself, "Dude, where's my prowess? I can't even hold up my tail anymore, let alone my pecker" (180), Coyote decides to leave Venice for New Mexico. But on his way to the airport, he has an unexpectedly sexually-charged encounter with an intriguing "old Indian lady" who, he narrates after accidentally dropping his pants and exposing his genitals, is "a glammed-up—and *impressed*—old man" (183). In realizing that the woman does not fit neatly into the gender binary that Coyote, living in the colonized world of Venice Beach, is accustomed to, Coyote, in his state of arousal, finds himself connecting to a part of himself that laid dormant, asking himself, "What was that old word? *Joto*? No, older than that, and sweeter. *Joya*?" Here, Miranda recalls the story of third-gender California Indians she explores in "Cousins," where her Coyote, reaching into the recesses of his mind, finally finds the Chumash word he was searching for, crying aloud, "'*aqi*!" (184).

Finding his way to the '*aqi* gives Coyote back his mojo; where he previously couldn't "hold up" his "pecker," Coyote now finds "his tail waving and erect" (185). In this revelation,

Miranda indicates that reaching the word *'aqi* is an act of healing that returns Coyote to his body and its desire. As he toys with the derogatory terms *joto* and *joya*, Coyote “roll[s] his slippery pink tongue around in his mouth, as if he could rattle the lost names out from between his teeth somewhere” (184). Searching his mouth, Coyote mines the memories of both his mind and body for the word to describe the person who has aroused him. In doing so, Coyote connects to his Two-Spirit kin corporeally, recalling a word “whispered by a Ventureño with sparkling eyes and a ticklish belly...a word that meant honor, medicine, and truth...then his mouth remembered . . . *'aqi!*” (184). As Coyote’s mouth remembers, Miranda points to what non-Indigenous scholar Lydia Heberling calls the “embodied, physical nature of language restoration” (20), where utterances serve as articulations of Indigenous knowledge and ways of being that have been temporarily lost to the confines of the colonial imagination.

Such colonial imaginings are present in “Coyote Takes a Trip” in Coyote’s ruminations of “*Joto? . . . Joya?*” and also in two block quotations from Spanish colonizers that Miranda includes, separated and in larger type, in the first pages of the text. The first quotation, from a Spanish soldier in 1775, describes “Indian men” who “are observed in the dress, clothing, and character of women” and “pass as sodomites by profession.” Noting that they “permit the heathen to practice the execrable unnatural abuse of their bodies,” the soldier then writes that “They are called *joyas* [jewels], and are held in great esteem” (178). Miranda includes this quotation, and another from a mission padre that similarly describes gender presentations that defy the colonial binary, to “contradict the intended purpose of the Spanish to represent these community members as ‘unnatural’ and ‘sinful’” (Heberling 20). In the context of Miranda’s story of Coyote, these quotations portray Indigenous communities as celebrating non-heteronormative gender and sexuality, which, as Miranda suggests, is indeed valuable in healing

the self from postcolonial stress disorder. Coyote's reunion with his "mojo," then, both reclaims the multiplicity of Indigenous genders and sexualities from the settler archives and, in doing so, heals the plural self with a celebration of queer desire.

In *The Sacred Hoop*, Gunn Allen writes that myth "is an expression of the tendency to make stories of power out of the life we live in imagination" (105). In their life stories of their bodies and their desire for queer physical pleasures, Belcourt and Miranda reconstruct the body through self-tellings, born from their imaginations, that re-make the world, imbuing it with Indigenous bodies that seek and find pleasure, joy, and freedom. With "Coyote Takes a Trip," Miranda imagines a different kind of life story—one that, in its mythology of Coyote and 'aqi, is innately tied to tradition—that asserts both the queerness inherent to tradition and, in turn, the wholeness that can be found in bodying the "wild imaginary."

Assembling the Mosaic

or maybe

*what I hear when i'm here is the sound of us not dying or disappearing, just
eating and talking and laughing and driving
remembering who we are*

Malea Powell, "real Indians"²⁸

The first section of *Bad Indians* names missionization as "the End of the World" (1). For Miranda, the world ended when her Chumash and Esselen ancestors were colonized and forced out of their known lifeways. Throughout her text, Miranda seeks to create a mosaic that recovers and then assembles parts of that world into a composition of survivance that does not absolve colonization but rather illustrates a living through it. In the essays of *A History of My Brief Body*, Belcourt describes the world as "just beginning" (118), where he, too, takes the fragmentations of his self and arranges them into a new whole. Both authors, then, use writing as a way to make the world—a world beyond what the authorized mythology of the settler-state asserts. Such a (re)making is a project of desire that seeks to transform.

When describing healing as a transformation in which an ill and fractured person is returned to a state of wholeness, Gunn Allen writes, "In the transformation from one state to another, the prior state or condition must cease to exist. It must die" (80). If colonization is an illness, it must "cease to exist" in order for life to return to wholeness. By taking the fractures of story that remain here, at both the end and the beginning of the world, and arranging them in mosaics, Miranda and Belcourt recover their selves from all over: from California missions and settler archives; from Canada and its institutions; from the colonial imagination and its "bank of public ideas" (Belcourt 77); from the confines of *memoir* and genre. Arranging and rearranging those fragments into stories that invent, en flesh, reclaim, and reconstruct the queer Indigenous self, Miranda and Belcourt remake the world into a future of healing, leaving the old one to die.

Notes

¹ *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* 103.

² Defining terms in an introduction (especially with the OED) is a common move, but it feels particularly necessary in examining Miranda and Belcourt's texts, which are both, as I argue, described and marketed with genre conventions that are fraught. Additionally, while I acknowledge that the OED is a dictionary of use rooted in the colonial violence that this very thesis seeks to examine and undermine, my use of it here is precisely to highlight how Eurocentric and imperial English-language are terms like *autobiography* and *memoir*.

³ I use *Western culture* and *Western world* throughout this thesis to represent the hegemony of North America, Europe, and Oceania, which emanates from an originally European culture.

⁴ In this thesis, I—a non-Indigenous scholar of settler/European descent—use tribal, community, and place names as people-identifying terms as much as possible. When more broadly referring to peoples and cultures indigenous to the land masses now called the Americas, I use the term *Indigenous*, while, in rare instances, I use the term *Native* to refer specifically to peoples and cultures indigenous to what is today called the United States of America, and *First Nations* to refer to communities indigenous to what is today called Canada. By capitalizing *Indigenous*, I underscore how the terms are used as a people-centered identity markers, rather than a merely descriptive adjective. I acknowledge, however, that, whether capitalized or not, *Indigenous*, *Native*, and *First Nations* are umbrella terms that broadly categorize peoples whose cultures and subject positions are not necessarily synonymous.

In *A History of My Brief Body* and across his most recent writings, Belcourt primarily refers to himself as NDN, while Miranda uses *Indigenous*, *Native*, *Indian* and *NDN* (most notably on her blog, *BAD NDNS*.) In a 2020 interview with digital literary magazine *The Rumpus*, Belcourt is asked about his move from using the term *Indigenous* in his older works to using, as he does in *A History of My Brief Body*, the term *NDN*. Belcourt notes that *Indigenous* is a term created and approved of by the settler state, where, in contrast, *NDN* is a term of “multiplicity” that “indicates both an unofficial language (how to talk to one another as opposed to how the state talks about us) and a refusal of colonialism (Not Dead Native)” (LeFaive). Like Belcourt, I understand that *Indigenous*, whether capitalized or not, is part of the settler-colonial state's lexicon—inextricably tied to violence, genocide, and erasure—that attempts to make the Other legible. However, as a descendent of settlers and, thus, a beneficiary of colonialism, I know that *NDN*—which, as Belcourt notes in the preface of *NDN Coping Mechanisms* is a “shorthand used by Indigenous peoples in North America to refer to ourselves” (n.p.; emphasis added)—is an endonym that is not mine to use. As such, I acknowledge the limitations and problems inherent in my use

of *Indigenous* in this thesis while also recognizing that the discomfort I feel is inherent to the limitations of language, especially in terms of how the colonial state wields language as a tool of oppression.

⁵ The term *Turtle Island* is a term used by some Indigenous people to describe the land mass that is today called the Americas. While I use this term here to emphasize that Turtle Island is a place that long predates the Americas, in this thesis, I follow Miranda and Belcourt's use of place names as much as possible, which often results in the use of names like *California* and *Canada*. In mentioning this, I also want to acknowledge that Miranda writes from the United States and Belcourt writes from Canada, two colonial nations that have histories that are both intersecting and distinct. While the scope of these histories is beyond this thesis, these histories bear acknowledging, as I refer to them in the abstract throughout these chapters.

⁶ In this context, I use *literacy* particularly to emphasize the writing component of "reading and writing."

⁷ I use the term *invasion* in place of the more common *Conquest*, which implicitly reduces Indigenous people to "the conquered."

⁸ Such a refusal of using the "enemy's language" echoes of Audre Lorde's assertion that "The master's tools will never tear down the Master's house."

⁹ Deborah Miranda identifies herself as both queer and Two-Spirit, while Billy-Ray Belcourt seems to exclusively describe himself as queer. In this thesis, I use the terms that each authors self-identifies with, and use *queer* to broadly (and imperfectly, as is often the case with language of identities) refer to frameworks of sexuality, gender, and the body that engage in "oppositional critique[s] of heteronormativity" (Driskill et al. 3).

¹⁰ William's last name is spelled both *Apes* and *Apess* in his publications. Here, I have chosen to follow scholar Barry O'Connell's use of the spelling *Apess*, who posits that the spelling used on Apess' final two publications may have indicated Apess' spelling preference. See *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

¹¹ On their website, Penguin Classics advertises *Life of Black Hawk* as a historical artifact, asserting, "The first published account of a victim of the American war of extermination, this vivid portrait of Indian life stands as a tribute to the author and his extraordinary people, as well as an invaluable historical document."

¹² Joy Harjo echoes Eastman's sentiments in her essay "Ordinary Spirit" from *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, writing, "I walk in and out of so many worlds."

¹³ See *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* by Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran (SUNY Press,

1995), and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's work on Historical Trauma.

¹⁴ An incomplete list of contemporary self-writers would include Terese Marie Mailhot (Seabird Island Band), Alicia Elliott (Tuscarora), Jas M. Morgan (Cree-Métis-Saulteaux), Tanya Tagaq (Inuk), Tiffany Midge (Hunkpapa Lakota), Darrell McLeod (Cree), Elissa Washuta (Cowlitz Indian Tribe), Linda Hogan (Chicksaw), Helen Knott (Prophet River First Nation), Ma-Nee Chacaby (Ojibwe-Cree), Ernestine Hayes (Alaska Native), Toni Jensen (Métis), and many others.

¹⁵ See, for example, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) and the work of Roland Barthes.

¹⁶ In an essay titled "How Scholarship Defames the Native Voice...and Why" (*Wicazo Sa Review*, Fall 2000), Crow Creek Sioux tribe member and scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn writes that to deny Native people to tell their own stories is a denial of a "basic human right" (86).

¹⁷ In her text, Miranda refers to Isabel Meadows and other ancestors, like Vicenta Gutierrez and Victor Acedo, by first name. I follow Miranda's lead for the sake of consistency and clarity.

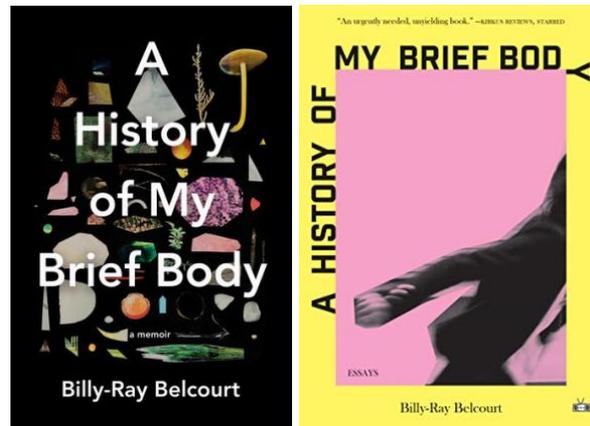
¹⁸ Miranda's poem "Ishi at Large," a meditation on a lone whale "wandering / the Pacific for the past / twelve years," appears on page 54 of *Bad Indians*.

¹⁹ For a contemporary academic examination of the life of Ishi, see *Ishi: In Three Centuries*, edited by Karl Kroeber and Clifton Kroeber (University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

²⁰ *Sovereign Erotics* 145.

²¹ In recent years, Smith's academic legacy in the field of Indigenous studies has been complicated by her claim of Cherokee ancestry, which has been refuted by the Cherokee Nation.

²² The cover for the Canadian edition of Belcourt's essay collection, published by Penguin Canada, is an arrangement of fragments—textures, patterns, and objects that create a kind of mosaic, where the spaces between the image shards are part of the overall illustration. The American edition, meanwhile, features a different visual representation of fragmentation, in which the *y* in *Body* seems to be falling—or perhaps reaching—away from the rest of the title. In the cutout photocollage it frames, a faceless, blurred body in motion seems to run out of frame. In this image, there is the sense of the (un)bodied, escaping or giving chase, underscoring Belcourt's thesis of freedom.



The Canadian (left) and American (right) editions of *A History of My Brief Body*.

²³ Paula Gunn Allen’s poem “Some Like Indians Endure” similarly engages with the notion of, as Belcourt calls it, “liv[ing] in the world of ideas” (28):

indian is an idea
some people have
of themselves
dyke is an idea some women
have of themselves
the place where we live now
is idea
because whiteman took
all the rest
because daddy
took all the rest
but the idea which
once you have it
you can’t be taken
for somebody else
and have nowhere to go
like indians you can be stubborn (qtd in Driskill et al. 22)

²⁴ Here, I use the term “third gender” in the way that Miranda does in “Extermination,” which “relies on and refers back to work done by Will Roscoe, Sabine Lang, Wesley Thomas, Bea Medicine, and others as a way to identify a gender that is neither fully male nor fully female, nor (more importantly)

simply ‘half and half, but a unique blend of characteristics resulting in a third or other gender’ (279).

²⁵ In the introduction to *Sovereign Erotics*, editors Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti note that the umbrella term *Two-Spirit* is an endonym created at the third Native American/First nations gay and lesbian conference. Their definition asserts that both *two-spirit* or *two-spirited* refer to “the gender constructions and roles that occur historically in many Native gender systems that are outside of colonial gender binaries and . . . contemporary Native people who are continuing and and/or reclaiming these roles within their communities” (4). And although the term is also used “within grassroots two-spirit societies . . . to be inclusive of not only those who identify as two-spirit or with tribally specific terms, but also GLBTQ Native people more broadly,” not all queer Indigenous people identify themselves as Two-Spirit (4-5).

²⁶ For an extended analysis of what Miranda calls the gendercide of California Indians and more on Victor Acedo, see “Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California” (*GLQ*, Feb. 2010).

²⁷ In “Surviving Catastrophe: Traveling with Coyote in *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*” (*Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Volume: 33 Issue 1-2 [2021]), Lydia Heberling argues that Miranda’s Coyote, whom she traces throughout *Bad Indians*, does not represent the trickster archetype. Referencing the work of Hupa and Yurok scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy and Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Heberling says that Coyote is “a tribally-specific First Being and Creator grounded in creation narratives and traditions” (4).

²⁸ *Sovereign Erotics* 58.

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