

A REVIEW OF BILLY RAY BELCOURT'S 'THIS WOUND IS A WORLD'

Eve Coley

N0869949@my.ntu.ac.uk

Creative Writing BA – Nottingham Trent University

I read 'This Wound is a World' knowing very little about Indigenous Canadian culture and literature. Billy Ray Belcourt did an excellent job at immersing the reader into a personal experience of what it was like to grow up as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and as an Indigenous Canadian who still feels the effects of colonialism today. Belcourt eloquently and successfully wrote this anthology with immense emotional intelligence.

CBC Arts describes "decolonial love" as "a way of letting go of the shame and violence which often comes with being Indigenous in Canada" which Belcourt represents encompassing in his poem "Colonialism: a love story", saying "we are still figuring out how to love and be broken at the same time" [CBC Arts].¹ Belcourt's poems vary in structure and style depending on the message and tone of the story being told. Some of the

poems in the collection follow one coherent story, such as in his poem, 'Sacred', where the reader witnesses the rejection the speaker feels from the community as a result of being gay. Arguably, this is Belcourt's strongest style and one of his biggest strengths in the collection. By the end of the tale, we see an emerging sense of self-love, or decolonial love but this is bitter-sweet as there is still an ingrained shame due to the colonialization of indigenous Canadians that taught them that homosexuality is "shameful". However, there is a sense of optimism too amongst the anthology, and a feeling that a more accepting society will emerge from colonialism's ashes.

Other aspects of the collection included poems which were broken down into structured points, again making the content accessible for readers. But poems such as 'Notes from a Public Washroom' were much more complex

¹ Benaway, G., 2021. *Decolonial love: These Indigenous artists are taking back the self-love that colonialism stole* / CBC Arts. [online] CBC. Available at: <[https://www.cbc.ca/arts/decolonial-love-these-indigenous-artists-are-taking-back-the-](https://www.cbc.ca/arts/decolonial-love-these-indigenous-artists-are-taking-back-the-self-love-that-colonialism-stole-1.4189785)

[self-love-that-colonialism-stole-1.4189785](https://www.cbc.ca/arts/decolonial-love-these-indigenous-artists-are-taking-back-the-self-love-that-colonialism-stole-1.4189785)> [Accessed 6 December 2021].

to unpick. The stream of consciousness allows authentic emotions to flow creating a powerful impact. The messages were less direct and instead hidden in metaphors and imagery. Belcourt's wording "I need to cut a hole in the sky to world inside" is very subjective. Does he feel trapped by the earth's boundaries? Or does he just crave an escape? Or is there some other deeper message that as an outsider I cannot find within the lines? While the use of the subjective is an evoking tool, for me it sometimes feels like a weakness in Belcourt's work. How cryptic is too cryptic? However, this does lead me to ask for the writers' intentions, and whether Belcourt isn't trying to relate his poems to a universal experience, but that they are felt by those who know only this distinct type of pain. If these collections of poems were to be published a second time, I think that Belcourt could include an extended biography to give some context to his experiences. This may have made these more complex ideas easier to decipher.

Poems such as 'Colonialism: a love story' are written more with the reader in mind to guide us and help begin to understand something that many can never experience or empathise with. Colonialism is one of the core themes Belcourt's work explores and its lasting impact that is still felt and experienced in modern day. The need for decolonial love only emphasises

how strongly colonialism instilled the belief that the indigenous people of Canada were not worthy of beauty, love or appreciation. Belcourt offers a personal definition of what colonialism means to him; a way of "turning bodies into cages that no one has the keys for". This personification reveals the complete objectification of the indigenous people in the eyes of the colonials. They were reduced into relics of a painful history, where the 'cages' represent a trapped and forgotten identity.

What Belcourt brings to the table for Canadian literature is invaluable. Through his poetry, the reader is able to hear a first-hand voice emerge from the injustice of colonialism, one that not only felt this oppression due to his heritage as an indigenous Canadian, but also as a homosexual. Belcourt's poem, "A Cree word for a body like mine is a weesageechak" is one of the stronger poems in the collection. The use of the native 'weesageechak' which translates to 'the trickster; a person who can change into any form or disguise' [Belcourt] both grounds the piece in Canadian identity while being accessible to readers.² The natural imagery draws us in and is symbolic of Belcourt's feelings of identity and the constructs of gender. The overarching message of Belcourt's collection is decolonial love. The painful yet essential road to creating a more positive environment for emerging generations

² Belcourt, Billy-Ray, *This Wound Is a World*, First University of Minnesota Press edition.

(Minneapolis, Minnesota; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

of Indigenous Canadians to celebrate their true identities and heritage.

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