Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice
Issue 46 (2025)
Special Issue: Liveable Futures: Radical Imagination as Method // Radical Imagination as Survival
Interview

"It made you ache to be alive": A Conversation on *Coexistence: Stories*

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Billy-Ray Belcourt is a writer and academic from the Driftpile Cree Nation. He is an Associate Professor and the Canada Research Chair in Queer Indigenous Cultural Production in the School of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of five books: *This Wound is a World*, *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field*, *A History of My Brief Body*, *A Minor Chorus*, and *Coexistence*.

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Introduction

Billy-Ray Belcourt has emerged as one of the most vital literary and intellectual voices of his generation, whose work moves fluidly across poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and theory with remarkable precision and emotional force. Across five acclaimed books—*This Wound is a World*, *NDN Coping Mechanisms, A History of My Brief Body*, *A Minor Chorus*, and *Coexistence: Stories*—he has redefined the contours of contemporary literature in Canada and internationally. His debut, *This Wound is a World*, earned him the Griffin Poetry Prize, making him the youngest recipient in the award's history, alongside the Robert Kroetsch City of Edmonton Book Prize and the Indigenous Voices Award for Emerging Indigenous Poets. Subsequent works have received the Hubert Evans Prize for Non-Fiction, the Stephan G. Stephansson Award for Poetry, and the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. Belcourt has also been named a finalist twice for both the Governor General's Literary Awards and the Lambda Literary Awards, and he was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. His writing does not merely contribute to Indigenous literature; it reshapes its centre of gravity, expanding its lyric, political, and philosophical reach in bold and transformative ways.

In this dialogue, Billy-Ray Belcourt and Jeffrey Ansloos explore the creative vision behind his most recent work, *Coexistence: Stories* (2024), tracing Belcourt's literary path, artistic process, and evolving thematic concerns. Their exchange moves through the affective textures of queer Indigenous life and the intergenerational currents of love, grief, sexuality, desire, and kinship. Along the way, they confront the layered scales of ecological change, the violences of settler colonialism, and the shifting grounds of sovereignty, asking how art might conjure more livable, inhabitable, and desirous worlds. Storytelling emerges here as a practice of survivance and intimacy, a method of possibility, a way of holding contradiction, and a means of imagining futures rooted in reciprocity and care. The title *Coexistence* gestures not toward harmony but toward the difficulty and necessity of living in relation–with others, with history, with the land, and with all that resists resolution. Belcourt reflects on the dense and felt interrelation of the personal and the structural. Desire, particularly queer Indigenous desire, threads throughout the conversation as both a haunting and a horizon, exceeding colonial containment and positioning love and intimacy as sites of world-making resistance.

These stories, the conversation reveals, do more than represent; they generate a felt sense of possibility, an ache toward life that insists another world can still be written into being, and indeed, already is.

The following is an adapted transcript of a conversation that took place during the *Coexistence: Stories* book launch on May 21, 2024, at the Toronto Public Library. With permission from the Toronto Public Library, the interview has been edited and shaped for publication in Atlantis by Jeffrey Ansloos and Billy-Ray Belcourt.

Conversation

Jeffrey Ansloos (JA): Shall we begin?

Billy-Ray Belcourt (BRB): Yes, you know, we are dressed the same.

JA: Oh… you're right, we are.

BRB: We didn't coordinate that, but it's giving "queer Cree professor." This is the general look.

JA: That's a read! The library is open. [laughter] What is that line you say? "What do you call a handful of Crees?

BRB: A laughter. [laughter]

JA: A laughter, yes. Reading your new book, *Coexistence: Stories,* I laughed, and cried. You have so many important stories to tell, and in each of them, deep felt knowledges to sit with and learn from. *Coexistence: Stories* is your fifth book in a series of field-defining—and in some contexts, redefining—contributions to literature from and across Turtle Island. It includes poetry, essays, novels, among many other contributions, both academic and otherwise. And with *Coexistence: Stories*, it's your first collection of short stories. I'm curious what inspired you to move toward this approach and format, and maybe what you hope to achieve with these short stories that connects to or extends beyond the work you've done so far.

BRB: I had the initial idea to write a novel about those two characters. Their names are Tom and Will. And I wrote the first story, *Lived Experience*, which is about 30 pages. And I thought once I had finished those 30 pages that I had said most of what I wanted to say. And so, a novel felt unnecessary. I put those characters aside, then thought about what other characters could populate a similar world. And I was still thinking about one of the characters from my novel who makes an appearance in the short story collection. And then I had this multi-verse of Cree men and Cree women. And I saw where their lives intersected and where they didn't. And the short story collection made the most sense to me as a place to put them in proximity to each other without having to think all the time about plot or causation. But what I learned writing these stories is that there's a certain pressure that the short form requires of me that I was used to from writing poetry. So, when I'm working on a poem I'll spend, if I can, an entire day just working through it. And I'll stop when I feel like I have something that I could move on from or that I could eventually go back to. And my process was the same for these stories. I would spend two to three days… I don't have many hobbies. And in the summer when I'm not teaching, I have a lot of downtime. So, I was working on these, I'd spend like two to three days doing only that and then move on. And through that rhythm the book came into being.

JA: In this book, you take us into incredibly poignant stories, transporting us all over the world. We journey to England, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Toronto. We traverse from Boreal Forests to northern reserves in Alberta, from lakes to universities, from art galleries to the kitchen tables of aunties and kokoms. We visit the former housing of residential school staff and the living rooms and bedrooms of queer and 'sometimes queer' folks. As diverse as these settings are, there's an important connection between each story. You named the book *Coexistence: Stories.* I'm curious, why "coexistence"? What prompted this title?

BRB: There's a line in one of the stories about a poetry professor, a sad poetry professor. Not me because this guy's 40 years old. It's not autobiographical. But there's a line in there where he's talking to his students and he says something like, to be a poet you have to believe in the coexistence of some contradicting truths. And so, I was thinking about that line. I was thinking also about the difficult work of living with each other, about the way that people make each other's lives more possible. I think literature often has that effect at least it did for me as a youngster. And in my down time, I do think about the ways that even the most fleeting encounters with men, sometimes men whose names I don't know, those small encounters which made my life more possible, added up over time. And those all seem like ways that we coexist with each other. And of course I was talking to one of my friends and a fellow writer Tsering Yangzom Lama,[1] she was telling me that the title just felt evident to her because that's really where we're at, like coexisting with history, confronting the atrocities of the 20th and 21st century as well, living with it in ways that don't diminish its violence but rather enable us to build otherwise, build differently, imagine differently.

JA: You open the book with an example of what living with contradictions means for many people, through a poignant conversation about religion, or at least a nod to the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of Indigenous peoples. Throughout the book, from confessional booths to the home of a local medium—who offers some pop psychology and clichés, healing as they may be, about the ancestors—you trouble some of the ways that religion and spirituality are reflected upon in certain contexts. For instance, there's a story where a university-educated son has an ethical objection to staying in a house formerly occupied by, and perhaps haunted by, nuns who taught at a residential school, while his Cree mom has smudged the place and now lives there without a worry. As I read, your story contrasts with the often-flattened portrayal of Indigenous peoples' relationships with these concepts in other writings. Could you read us a section from "One Woman's Memories"

BRB: "There are three portraits of Jesus in Louise's home. In all of them Jesus's gaze is both sincere and unspecific. It evokes whatever the onlooker needs it to but always with deep seriousness. Today his gaze reflects Louise's somberness. Because it feels good to have one's emotions acknowledged without judgment, she hasn't taken down the portraits. Jesus represents for her a force in the world that nourishes, like motherhood. To be a mother is to represent for someone else life as an abstract quality" (Belcourt 2024, 1).

JA: That's gorgeous and complex. There's a line shortly thereafter where you write, "Louise isn't actually a practicing Catholic, but she believes in heaven and in the transmutability of suffering" (Belcourt 2024, 1). This notion of suffering's transmutability, and how we struggle to live differently, strikes a deep chord. Could you unpack that a bit for us—both in terms of what it reveals about the contradictions in Louise's life, and what it means to you within the context of these stories?

BRB: Well, where I grew up the footprint of Catholicism is everywhere. The hamlet I went to school in primary school is named after a French Catholic priest and, nearby towns are named after other French people from various religious factions. It wasn't until as I was writing these stories that I realized that I was grappling with the effect of the intense christianizing project of colonialism, how it shaped my life, my family's life, the larger lives of various communities in that area. And I had this image of a woman whose sense of spirituality is infused with both Cree and Catholic influences, to the extent that they can't really be distinguished. They sort of become this other third thing and how it's never a point of discussion that that's contradictory because people have had to make do in the historical positions they've been put in. But I also wanted to not turn away from the dispossessive force of Catholicism in northern Alberta. How religion moves in at the same time as westward expansion—in a totalizing way. It's difficult to try to portray people whose lives are circumscribed by history but wouldn't necessarily own up to that or don't have the language to understand themselves as such. Again, that's a contradiction that I was interested in.

JA: As I read it, I saw my aunties, my mom, my family reflected in your stories, and I've never encountered an account of their lives like this before. It was powerful to critically confront how our history is reproduced in our lives and how it refuses simplification. Let's shift from religion to sex. In your work, both in this collection and in other writings, sexual desires across a wide range of relational structures and contexts are portrayed as an arena where colonial politics are both reproduced and reimagined. At one point in this book, one of the characters describes this as be-

ing a part of "erotic possibility" (Belcourt 2024, 17). Interestingly, there are moments when your characters experience or are made to feel immense grief or shame in these expressions and experiences of sexuality. For example, in "Lived Experience," Tom, while discussing sex apps and a hookup with a settler, says, "Shame is a flickering streetlight in the middle of the night. And shame has turned me into a flickering man in the middle of my own life" (Belcourt 2024, 18-19). In Indigenous literary studies, there is concern about a preoccupation with damage and shame. In your work, you've written against this preoccupation with queer Indigenous trauma, yet you're writing about experiences that some might misunderstand as damage or a focus on pain. How do you disentangle the two, and what distinctions do you see here?

BRB: I put it this way in relation to my novel, which is that a traumatic event or something difficult in one's life is never the central focus of the work. I'm often more interested in how people survive, how they insist on their flourishing in the face of trauma or oppression. But in this story "Lived Experience," it opens with this scene that amounts to some kind of shame. And I was thinking about, I mean, no one really prepares you. Like when you're newly out and you've logged on the Grindr for the first time, no one really prepares you for those experiences that you have, that in the middle of them or even before they happen, you realize you don't want to be a part of it, but you persist anyways. And so that's what's happening in that story. And it's a bit of a turning point for the character because he realizes that he desires specific kinds of relationships that aren't being provided for him; he wants to love but the people he's meeting aren't interested in loving him. That becomes the catalyst for the rest of the story, which is more so a wish fulfillment of a form of love that is Indigenous and world making.

JA: It's true... reading the second half of this story, it's beautiful. In many respects, you offer up the aspired life and fantasy of some Cree, queer youth. It was quite startling to read, partly because it's a narrative I have rarely encountered on the page—this depiction of young queer Indigenous love. Later in the book, after receiving criticism in an arts class, the character Will says, "I'm attempting to offer up a new grammar of Indigenous life" (Belcourt 2024, 85-86). I'm fascinated by that language, which you've also used elsewhere.[2] What kind of grammar for queer Indigenous life are you trying to offer us here, in a love story that is as idyllic and tender as the one you write?

BRB: The first thing I'll say is that it is still relatively rare for a queer Indigenous book to publish. And some people might not grasp that because, for example, like between Joshua Whitehead[3] and I, there are eight books. So, people are like, oh, there's a lot going on. We have these eight books, but that's literally just two people. And we need more. We need other people writing, publishing in prose, in particular. In poetry, there's a bunch of us. Secondly, as a young queer Indigenous person, when I was reading or consuming queer media, it wasn't necessarily my own life I wanted reflected back to me, partly because there was never any kind of indication that that was something I would be afforded. I always had to understand my own life through someone else's subject position. And of course, that can be psychically destabilizing because you're always having to think about yourself through its negation. But that has compelled me as an adult writer to think about what kind of stories would I wanted to have read at that age. Like what would've felt transformative to me? It's not just self-serving because I'm not that young person anymore, but I'm hoping that it will serve others who, in the queer media landscape, only see themselves in bits and pieces. I guess the grammar that I'm interested in is one of possibility and complexity. And I've been thinking a lot with Avery Gordon, who's a cultural theorist, their conception of complex personhood (Gordon 2008), which is that we're all people with enormous emotional subtlety, and we do things that might seem contradictory. Sometimes we aren't always performing our values, but we're always full of complexity. I'm interested in queer Indigenous complexity, what it means to depict it but also to encourage people to operationalize that as a framework.

JA: It seems you're refusing and moving away from a neoliberal representational approach to narrating queer Indigenous life, by embracing complexity. We don't just receive one story or one version of queer life. As Avery Gordon suggests, we are haunted by things "we sometimes have names for and sometimes do not" (Gordon 2008). This is evident as your queer, Cree characters navigate their realities, often finding truths about themselves that differ sharply from conventional narratives imposed by settler society. For instance, in "Lived Experience," Tom muses, "it occurs to me that one also has to love despite the geographical violence of colonialism. And I want to love in a way that has geographical consequences; can love undermine a settler state? It's likely that my happiness depends on it" (Belcourt

2024, 38). This resonates with bell hooks' view that to love well is the central goal of any and all meaningful relationships, not solely romantic ones (hooks 2000). This prompts a question about your views on the transformative power of love in relation to settler colonialism and other structural violence. Do you believe that love can genuinely undermine the settler state?

BRB: It has to. There are so many ways that we are encouraged to not love ourselves as Indigenous people, to not love one another as Indigenous people, both platonically and romantically. I have a friend... I basically just paraphrased my friend in the book, where a character says that Indigenous love is the most chaotic form of love. And I'm sure any Indigenous person has anecdotal evidence of that, that it's this intense, all-consuming thing. But I think it is precisely because of the history that we've been born into. And if colonialism is both the theft of land and the attempt to eradicate Indigenous people and Indigenous ways of being, it makes sense to me that love, capaciously understood, can be a way to safeguard our ways of being in our bodies and to make our bodies inhabit the world, especially when the world is not meant to be easily habitable for Crees.

JA: It reminds me of the extraordinary poem "I Douche while Kesha Praying Plays for my iPhone on Repeat." One line from that poem really resonates here: "What I want from love is what I want from revolution" (Belcourt 2019, 27). It seems you're describing a revolutionary concept of love—love as both a method and a medicine for our times.

BRB: I will say about that poem, I wrote it after breaking up with this Australian guy I was dating.

JA: It's always the Australians.

BRB: It's always an Australian guy. He was here on a visa working at a summer camp. And I was so young and in love that I was like, I'll go back to Australia. I'll do a PhD at University of Melbourne. But he was not a good person, and didn't love me.

I was in my feelings listening to Kesha and back on Grindr and all that. But I've later reflected on that relationship as one of those moments in my life where I realized some men were going to desire me in ways that could only be marginalizing. It's as if we only exist in certain ways to them. And there's also a line in "Lived Experience" where the character says "some men wanna kill me more than they wanna sleep with me" (Belcourt 2024, 15). I've genuinely felt that in my life. So that sucks. But I think all those experiences have empowered me to think about the kinds of love that are transformative, that feel revolutionary, that in some small way helped me see myself in the future.

JA: There's a line in "My Diary" where you write, "whenever I write homeland, I see the ghostly possibility of the non-word homoland. I wish my homoland or homeland was queerer" (Belcourt 2024, 130). I relate to that deeply. We both hail from different parts of the Great Cree homelands, now in diaspora. I know that working with Indigenous queer young people in First Nations communities is often a crucible of survival. In that story, you narrate the journey of a grieving son returning home, reuniting with a long-lost lover, all set against the backdrop of the climate crisis and the vanishing Boreal Forest in Northern Alberta. And you talk about the possibilities of sexual connection. You describe what sounds like a fantastic shag, the kind that "collapses time" (Belcourt 2024, 144-145). And in the afterglow, your protagonist observes, "I can see the shape of everything around me this after sex. The forest conversely is dense with night in bed with tea. I feel dense with the desire to live longer. If nothing else I know that it's rare to feel as desperate to see you what the future holds as I do now, as I did after the first time, he and I had sex. I didn't realize I had a degree of desperation in me. It's a relief" (Belcourt 2024, 145). I mean, this is gorgeous. It is gorgeous and terrifying. The stakes of queer desire are truly not messing around. I want to hear more about what you think about what sex and desire—specifically Indigenous queer desires—offer up in terms of the possibilities of staying alive.

BRB: I'll say growing up there were no queer people around me. And I had one openly gay cousin, and he was openly gay because he had no choice. He was just classically flamboyant. And God bless his soul. But I think things are changing nowadays. I was talking to my sister on the phone the other day and she's a mostly heterosexual woman,

and she was like, 'Yes queens slay.' And I didn't say anything that necessitated that response, nor am I a "queen" necessarily, but that suggests to me that queer pop culture is now so infused everywhere.

In the story "My Diary," I wrote of a character who moves from Toronto back to Northern Alberta after this long, mostly successful art career. And he moves back too late because his parents already passed away. That would have been the reason he would have returned. I think this gets at something that a lot of queer Indigenous people contend with. I know I do. We have our homelands, we're territorial people. We have a connection to place. Our philosophies and worldviews are entangled with where we are. But if you're queer, you're usually called elsewhere. You usually have to bring yourself into being in a place that's more urban. Of course, there's exceptions to this and people figure it out, as my cousin did. But, that's just deeply difficult to do, to leave your homeland, to leave your territory, and to only go back sometimes, to lose the people that matter in those places. And this character thinks that there's nothing erotic about Northern Alberta, then this guy arrives from his past. I guess it was my attempt at showing that even these places that we have come to think of as non-queer, homophobic, transphobic spaces, still make something of our queer and trans lives possible.

JA: And you don't confine that possibility just to queer love. There's a story between Jack and Lucy that I would describe as an ode to Indigenous fathers. There is this beautiful line you wrote: "Lucy's love opened space inside his mind for different memories. That was how love changed people. It made you want to give yourself over to new pasts, to future emotional histories. It made you ache to be alive" (Belcourt 2024, 119). This portrayal makes the prairies sound like a place of possibility.

BRB: That story is also a heterosexual love story. I didn't realize till afterwards that there's no graphic sex scene in that story. And yet all the other queer stories are incredibly graphic. I couldn't figure out how to write a graphic heterosexual sex scene. That's my failing, I own up to that. And maybe in the future I'll go there.

The main question is about fatherhood. There's a line in that story where the character is like, "I only understood native fatherhood through its absence. I knew it as the shape of what I didn't receive." So, this character [Jack] is trying to turn the tide generational pattern, and be a good father. The question of how to be a good father, how to be a good native father, I think is a huge one. And this story was my small attempt at providing some kind of answer.

JA: "It made you ache to be alive" (Belcourt 2024, 119). Reading your stories, I feel that call to be and to live in a way that embraces such generative possibilities in the lives of people I know. In "Literary Festival," you tell the story of a depressed poet on tour in a small prairie city. At one point, while presenting to his prairie audience, he explains that "poetry is not merely a method of self-reflection, but a tool for collective struggle" (Belcourt 2024, 100). Later, the same poet confesses to the reader that poetry has enabled him to stay alive, beyond mere livelihood. In a time when we see Palestinian poets targeted, and multiple scales of genocidal violence livestreamed to our phones, I'm curious about your views on the role that creative practices, poetry, these stories, and your work play in resisting death and enabling life, not only in Northern Alberta or in the lives of queer Indigenous people, but also in places like Gaza.

BRB: When I teach poetry, I always start with Audre Lorde's (1985) "Poetry is not a Luxury," which is an essay in which Audre Lorde is making a case for poetry as the way that, in her case, black women insist on their freedom, insist on their ability to live in excess of violence. And it seems urgent to me that we foreground that conception of poetry, because as you now as you've said, there are so many "living structures." That's what Audre Lord calls them, "living structures," that inhibit freedom for oppressed people across the globe. And so, we, with poetry, can anchor ourselves to other ways of being that make freedom possible. Whenever I think of poetry and freedom, I always think about Dionne Brand. And in my memoir, I cite two lines of her poems: "they hate our freedom" (Brand 2006, 26) and then "only freedom matters. They hate our freedom. So, only freedom matters" (Brand 2018, 227). I'm constantly thinking about poetry as a tool for collective struggle, because we also exist in a literary culture that has essentially written off that tradition of poetry. We are descendants of people who were not expected to survive. Dian Million (2009) has this great essay about how native women turned to fiction and to autobiography in order to create a

new language, because there was no kind of space, public or otherwise, for them to describe their experiences. We have to hold onto that, to that tradition of poetry and writing as one of the ways that we insist on our freedom.

JA: Thank you. I agree. And as I read your poetry and your stories, it makes me ache not just for that life, but for that freedom as well. I believe we will be free, and that Palestine will be free. Your poetry seems to ask us to hold that kind of faith, and for that, I'm very grateful. Connected to this, I wanted to ask you about land. You write about wanting to make art for the land, and about returning to the homeland. I wonder what queer Indigenous art for the land might look like, especially in your vision for the future.

BRB: I don't know if I have the range. The character in that story is thinking about how he's in the Boreal Forest, which climate change scientists are noticing is diminishing, and which I think is tragic and is a tragedy for Cree people in particular in North America. He is thinking about what it would mean to make art that acknowledges the effects of climate change. And it's not so much to say just writing a poem and burying it in the soil. But, more conceptually, can an art practice have as its main objective the sustenance of the Boreal Forest? I don't know, I don't feel like my writing practice does that. But I want to believe in the possibility of a writing practice that can sustain the Boreal Forest. I don't know what it is, but I want to believe it can exist.

JA: Well, it seems like part of what your work does—by foregrounding the land in all of your stories, when you write about the lake, the trees, the ground, and the water—is to remind each of us that this kind of freedom, the kind of aching for living that we talk about when we speak of resistance to colonialism, the defense of, protection of, and love of place, is something that is deeply connected to the love of life.

Endnotes

1. For further reading, see Tsering Yangzom Lama's debut novel, "*We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies*" (2022).

2. This concept first appears in Belcourt's (2020) essay in *The Walrus*, "How Do You Write About Joy in a State of Emergency?" where he writes, "we require a new grammar of living, one that foregrounds the fact of our utopian modes of being" (line 2, para. 2).

3. For further reading, see Joshua Whitehead's works: "Jonny Appleseed" (2019); "Full Metal Indigiqueer" (2017); "Making Love with the Land" (2022); "Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction" (2020); and "Indigiqueerness: A Conversation about Storytelling" (2023).

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