

**“Against the unwritability of utopia”: Resurgent Bodies of Joy in Contemporary Queer
Indigenous Literature**

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Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master’s degree in English Literature,
Specialization in Women’s Studies

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Abstract

Working at the intersection of queer feminist affect studies and queer Indigenous studies, this thesis focuses on theorizations and enactments of queer Indigenous joy in Billy-Ray Belcourt's *A History of My Brief Body*, Gregory Scofield's *Love Medicine and One Song*, and Joshua Whitehead's *Jonny Appleseed*. It explores how these contemporary texts uniquely emphasize the relational queer Indigenous body's tenacious capacity for care and love in order to enact more breathable, collective, and ultimately joyful modes of embodied life, even amid the stifling settler colonial present. I argue that, in doing so, these authors foster joy as a rebellious and healing affective orientation that opposes injurious colonial constructions of queer Indigenous embodiment and contributes to the future-bearing project of radical Indigenous resurgence. By examining these authors' invaluable interventions with joy, which is largely an under-acknowledged positive affect, this thesis aims to convey why the young but burgeoning field of queer Indigenous literature merits far more critical attention than it has received thus far.

Acknowledgments

I respect that the land on which I have lived, learned, and worked remotely throughout the completion of this thesis is the territory of the Anishinabek Nation, The People of the Three Fires known as Ojibway, Odawa, and Pottawatomie Nations. I give my utmost gratitude to the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, including the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation and the Chippewas of Saugeen First Nation, who are the traditional keepers of this land from time immemorial.

I would like to thank Dr. Anne Raine and Dr. Brenda Macdougall, my co-supervisors, for providing me with invaluable feedback throughout the drafting of this thesis, and for encouraging me to trust my voice and vision for this project. To Dr. Gulzar R. Charania, thank you for showing me how to “get out of [my] own way” during the first semester of my Master’s studies; I still regularly call to mind your compassionate advice. Thanks, too, to Dr. Alexis Shotwell of Carleton University, whose academic writing talks and workshops I have rewatched numerous times throughout the completion of this degree, and whose love for the pomodoro work method I have wholeheartedly adopted.

Immense gratitude also to my loved ones and supporters, near and oh-so far, who have lifted me up and encouraged me forward throughout this process. Especially to Nancy, Chet, Broderick, Umut, Jennifer, Jillian, Becca, Mickaela, Rooda, Elizabeth, Noelle, Julia, Caroline, Sohini, and Jarrod; such a project would not be possible without your diverse acts of care. During this time contextualized by the COVID-19 pandemic, you have collectively shown me the immense value of laughter-filled Facetime calls, Zoom pomodoro work sessions, nourishing meals, long walks, and mindful time spent outdoors. Thank you, endlessly.

Introduction

“Wherever there is a disavowal of something
like brown queer joy, ... there is also
its undefeatable excess”

“Joy ... is an ethics of resistance”

— Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body*

Taking the rebellious potential of joy as my central focus, this thesis examines how contemporary queer Indigenous writers theorize their affective experiences of embodiment in settler colonial Canada, and to what effect. To do so, I engage with three primary texts: Driftpile Cree scholar and author Billy-Ray Belcourt’s memoir *A History of My Brief Body* (2020), Métis poet and author Gregory Scofield’s poetry collection *Love Medicine and One Song: Sâkihtowin-Maskihkîy Êkwa Pêyak-Nikamowin* (1997), and Ojibwe Cree scholar and author Joshua Whitehead’s novel *Jonny Appleseed* (2018). In various ways, all three texts powerfully work against what Belcourt calls the “unlivability of Canada” (*History* 130) for queer Indigenous and two-spirit folks who, like him, have been made to “take on a mode of embodiment that erodes from the inside out” (11).¹ They do so by starting with the young queer Indigenous body² as a conduit for critiquing the biopolitical violence of settler colonialism while exploring the world-making potential that engagements with embodiment can produce. Whether it be through depictions of quotidian interactions in the world, intimate or erotic experiences, or loved ones supporting each other through pain and trauma, the queer and racialized body is given utmost attention and care in their writing. As such, the relational queer body becomes the basis for affective theorizations about the possibility of more collective modes of embodied life that exist within but reach far beyond the oppressive conditions of the here and now. These authors write

¹ See pages 6-7 for a nuanced description of the terms “Indigiqueer,” “two-spirit,” and “queer Indigenous.”

² Specifically, their protagonists/speakers have male and two-spirit queer Indigenous bodies.

with a utopian drive that highlights the importance of queer Indigenous practices of care and love—as expressed through the relational body—for supporting two-spirit life and enacting two-spirit joy, even in the dystopian present.

In this thesis, I argue that their diverse texts forward complementary affective arguments that can (and should) be read together as rebellious theorizations of Indigiqueer joy that simultaneously acknowledge yet resist colonial limitations on queer Indigenous embodiment and affectively bolster the future-bearing project of radical Indigenous resurgence. Together, these authors valuably move against the grain of recent queer feminist affect theorizing that interprets joy as a regulatory affect in heteropatriarchal society. At the same time, their theorizations of relational joy supplement radical resurgence theorizing that only briefly mentions joy as an ideal outcome of Indigenous resurgence. By doing so, Belcourt, Scofield, and Whitehead make distinctive contributions not only to the well-being of their primary Indigiqueer audience and their wider communities, but also to the broad field of intersectional scholarship that considers how affect and embodiment converge with social justice. These queer Indigenous writers offer invaluable enactments of joy as an enduring affective orientation with which they can collectively disrupt “the dead future that state violence anticipates” (Belcourt, *History* 110) in material and discursive ways, and, in doing so, enact more ethical means of thinking and being in the world together.

By enacting Indigiqueer joy, these writers resist the violence that the “gendered process” of settler colonialism (Arvin et al. 9) produces. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a comprehensive, historical account of this process, as only a much larger project could flesh out the complex intersections between settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, gender binarism, and toxic masculinity as they relate to various Indigenous cultures and

histories. I can, however, define and describe these relevant social structures and concepts as they will be used throughout this thesis while remaining cognizant of the fact that they have various cultural and historical nuances that I cannot fully capture here. In their influential essay “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” Indigenous scholars Arvin et al. state that “settler colonialism is a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there” (12). While this description seems to refer to past events or strategies of cultural genocide like the Canadian residential school system, Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill explain that settler colonialism is a “still-existing structure” which operates through organizing principles such as white supremacy and heteropatriarchy (9). In settler colonial countries like Canada, “white supremacist heteropatriarchy” is the hierarchal social system which grants the most power and privilege to white, heterosexual, cis-gendered³ men based on the notion that they possess superior moral and biological attributes to those of others (Pyle 112). The ideologies undergirding this structure insist that patriarchy⁴ and the heterosexuality and gender binarism⁵ it necessitates make up the “proper” family and nation (112), while other gender and sexuality arrangements are deemed unnatural or deviant (Arvin et al. 13).⁶ Consequently, those who deviate are often met with disapproval, resistance, or violence by individuals and institutions that

³ “[C]is-gendered” refers to a person whose gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth.

⁴ “[P]atriarchy” refers to male dominance, control, and power over women and others.

⁵ “[G]ender binarism” refers to the concept that there are only two genders (man and woman) that correspond to two respective sexes (male and female).

⁶ For one historical example of the colonial enforcement of heteropatriarchy as the “proper” structure for the family and nation, consider Canada’s Indian Act of 1876 which regulated the marriage of Indigenous people such that their lines of descent, property, and landholding were conferred to men despite that many Indigenous cultures used matrilineal social systems (Arvin et al. 15). For more on this, see Arvin et al.’s “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy” and Joanne Barker’s “Gender, Sovereignty, Rights: Native Women’s Activism against Social Inequality and Violence in Canada.”

have internalized heteropatriarchy's gender and sexuality prescriptions (Pyle 112). For example, in addition to the more subtle ways that heteropatriarchy operates through socioeconomic structures that normalize male dominance, heterosexuality, and whiteness, the prevalence of overtly violent manifestations of heteropatriarchy like toxic masculinity⁷—misogynistic, homophobic, or otherwise violent performances of masculinity (Harrington 349)—across many cultural communities in the West and elsewhere exemplify that heteropatriarchy is also perpetuated by gender behaviour norms that adversely impact women and LGBTQ+ people.

For the writers discussed in this thesis, the various negative manifestations of heteropatriarchy in the lives of queer Indigenous folks are of central concern, especially because this violence (both overt and systemic) is a means through which colonization continues in the twenty-first century. That said, this does not mean that versions of heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity,⁸ gender binarism, or even toxic masculinity did not exist in various pre-colonial Indigenous cultures. For instance, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice states that while alternative types of relationships such as polygamy were traditionally normalized and well-respected Cherokee cultural practices, gender binarism and heteronormativity have long existed in his culture, and “queer/two-spirit/LGBT folks are anomalous” (“Notes” 223).⁹ This importantly exemplifies that there are no clear binary oppositions between Indigenous gender practices and colonial gender practices, especially given that each Indigenous nation had/has its

⁷ For more on toxic masculinity as it relates to Indigenous men and communities, see Kim Anderson and Robert Alexander Innes' edited volume, *Indigenous Men and Masculinities: Legacies, Identities, Regeneration*.

⁸ “[H]eteronormativity” refers to the concept that heterosexuality is the “normal” mode of sexual orientation.

⁹ Note that in Justice's argumentation, “anomaly” does not hold negative connotations. He argues that there is still a place for “anomalous” people, genders, and sexualities in Cherokee culture regardless of what is considered most common.

own complex and unique gender ideologies, a number of which have been lost to history.¹⁰ As such, Métis/Anishinaabe scholar Kai Pyle states that in regards to their own experience of their culture and its concepts of gender, they remain wary of “heteropatriarchy-tinged ...gender ideologies” that are considered “traditional” (115), such as boys being instructed to become “strong leaders” and girls being instructed to be “supportive of their male relatives” (113). Pyle is wary of these gender norm ideologies not because they have no roots in pre-colonial or otherwise traditional cultural practices (they could), but because these gender prescriptions today are contiguous with the norms of colonial heteropatriarchy and may therefore “reinforce a status quo” of violence against Indigenous women and Indigiqueer people (113).¹¹ Therefore, regardless of the exact origins of these social structures of gender and sexuality, what is of precedence is that we focus on how the manifestations of these concepts influence the realities and felt-theorizations¹² of Indigiqueer people, such as Belcourt, Scofield, and Whitehead, who are living within settler colonial contexts today.

Despite the widespread realities of gender-based colonial violence, the politics of gender are not often prioritized within political discourses of Indigenous resurgence, which generally advocate for a return to Indigenous lifeways (epistemologies, languages, legal and political traditions, and ways of being) alongside a skepticism toward or refusal of the settler state (Coulthard 179). Frequently, two-spirit folks are not recognized, heard, or acknowledged within

¹⁰ Justice articulates that “while many communities (such as Navajos, Lakotas, Zunis, Mohaves, and Cheyennes) have well-documented examples in both oral histories and written texts of gender-variant people [...] comparative evidence for hundreds of other tribes (Cherokees among them) is scant, nonexistent, or mixed at best” (“Notes” 215).

¹¹ The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S) in Canada is a clear example of the magnitude of this marginalization and violence. See *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* for more.

¹² This nods to Dian Million’s concept of “felt theory” which challenges the distinction between theoretical knowledge and lived experience by claiming that stories and personal experience narratives are theory, positing that the act of theorizing includes all affective articulations about what is happening and or why (Million, “There is” 32-3).

these freedom movements due to the influences of internalized heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, and toxic masculinity (Byrd, “Normative” 105). To combat this erasure and marginalization, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson proposes a distinctly *radical* resurgence theory, as outlined in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (2017), that calls for the embrace of all Indigenous peoples’ bodies, genders, and sexualities as a vital component of resurgence organizing and Indigenous nation building. She argues that by making this radical shift, “the colonial hierarchy that heteropatriarchy embeds in us, our communities, and our nations” can be dismantled and replaced with “a web of supportive, reciprocal, generative relationships” (134) that will allow future generations to “dance through their lives with joy” (8). By theorizing and enacting joy in a range of unique ways, using different literary genres and scales of analysis, Belcourt, Whitehead, and their literary predecessor Scofield each help to flesh out this affective aspect of Simpson’s radical resurgence project, together revealing that joy is a resurgent affective orientation with transformative potential. Belcourt’s non-fiction essays in *History* define and describe joy in great conceptual detail by using his nôhkom’s (grandmother’s) felt-theorizing and his own experiences as a queer Indigenous person as a springboard for his work with joy as a relational mode of collective embodiment that can change society at large. On a much smaller scale of analysis, Scofield’s 1997 poetry collection *Love Medicine* valuably exemplifies how the two-spirit joy that Belcourt describes functions as a life-sustaining, future-bearing affect within a single polyamorous relationship. Just over twenty years later, Whitehead’s 2018 novel *Jonny Appleseed* expands on the foundational contributions of watershed writers like Scofield by exploring how joy works within a range of erotic, romantic, and familial relationships, ultimately exemplifying the resurgent potential of Indigiqueer joy for larger communities. Taken together

as three distinctly valuable parts of the same relationally collective project, these authors exemplify increasingly collective, resurgent modes of life through discursive and material practices of joy.

While, as this project overview has shown, this thesis uses the terms “queer Indigenous,” “two-spirit,” and “Indigiqueer” interchangeably to account for gender and sexuality diverse Indigenous folks, I need to define and acknowledge these distinct pieces of terminology from the outset. As a broad and flexible term, “queer Indigenous” encompasses performances of gender and sexuality by Indigenous folks that do not correspond with or conform to settler constructions of heteronormativity and or gender binarism (Driskill et al., *Queer* 3). This term is inclusive of Indigenous folks who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender rather than (or in addition to) “queer.” The pan-tribal umbrella term “two-spirit,” coined at an intertribal gay and lesbian Indigenous conference in 1990 (Wilbur and Keene n.p), “demands to be seen as separate from white Queer identities” (Driskill, “Call Me” 223) by encompassing the countless tribally-specific and language-specific gender labels which existed long before colonial binary gender norms (Tatonetti, *Written* 190) and “settler categories of queerness” (185).¹³ The term “Indigiqueer,” which Joshua Whitehead found circling around social media and has since popularized, seeks to capture the merits of both “queer Indigenous” and “two-spirit” by ensuring that Indigeneity and queerness are integrated (using one word, rather than two) within what Whitehead considers a distinctly contemporary and future-oriented term (Keene and Wilbur n.p). Unlike the more tradition-oriented term “two-spirit,” “Indigiqueer” is removed from the anthropological models of inquiry that can misinterpret these diverse, contemporary people as

¹³ Although the “two” in “two-spirit” is frequently confused as a reification of gender binarism and the dichotomy of masculine/feminine ways of being (Tatonetti, *Written* 190), and the term is frequently mistaken as a synonym for non-cis genders like trans, neither is the case (187).

relics of the past (n.p). Even so, the connotations and functions of these terms are highly flexible and contextual and can be variously employed by their contemporary users (Driskill et al., *Sovereign* 5); for instance, Whitehead describes himself as both two-spirit and Indigiqueer (Keene and Wilbur n.p). As such, my interchangeable use of these terms for ease of reading is not meant to diminish the unique value of these labels but to keep front of mind that I and the authors and thinkers featured in this thesis recognize that there are a myriad of gender and sexuality configurations and identities ascribed to by Indigenous people that do not fall within a singular category.

These nuanced terms show that there is currently a growing discourse about queer Indigenous representation taking place; however, it still appears necessary to outline their various meanings and connotations, which points to the relative infancy of this area of study. The fact that Whitehead's acknowledgments for his 2018 *Jonny Appleseed* states that he wrote this book "with the goal of showing you that Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous folx are not a 'was,'" but an "*is and a coming*" (221, emphasis in original) confirms the immediacy of this under-acknowledged subject matter. That said, while my project may be the first to bring Belcourt's, Scofield's, and Whitehead's felt-theorizations together to explore queer Indigenous joy as a radically resurgent affective orientation, it is certainly not the first to focus on unashamed representations of Indigiqueer life, bodies, sexualities, and expressions of care and love in Indigenous-authored literature. Notably, Anishnaabe author and publisher Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm compiled the innovational anthology *Without Reservation: Indigenous Erotica* in 2003 to combat the "stereotypes and images that make [Indigenous people] less than the whole, complex, loving, sexual, spiritual beings we are" (Akiwenzie-Damm 100). In doing so, she respectfully showcased erotic and romantic stories and poems by an intersectional range of Indigenous

authors, two-spirit writers included, for the first time. In a similarly inclusive project three years later, Ojibway playwright and author Drew Hayden Taylor published the essay collection *Me Sexy: An Exploration of Native Sex and Sexuality* with the intent to interrupt dominant depictions of Indigenous folks as “oppressed, depressed and suppressed” and replace them with Indigenous authors’ depictions of “honesty, love, and survival” (Taylor 3) in the form of “Romance. Passion. Sex. Erotica” (2). The next anthologies of this kind (either queer Indigenous or Indigenous erotica) were not published until 2011 when *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah A. Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti, was released alongside its sister-text of critical scholarship *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen. Since their dual release, *Queer Indigenous Studies* has become widely known as a revolutionary intervention in the field for its wide-ranging methodologies with which to assert the existence, value, and knowledge of contemporary two-spirit people. This essay collection, paired with the highly-regarded two-spirit literature in *Sovereign Erotics*, firmly situated the importance of bringing Indigenous studies and queer studies into dialogue in literary analysis and beyond to “disrupt external and internalized colonialism, heteropatriarchy, gender binaries, and other forms of oppression” (Driskill et al., *Queer* 19).

Largely due to the reclamatory efforts of these foundational anthologies, their many contributors, and prominent First Nations, Métis, and other literary scholars like June Scudeler, Lisa Tatonetti, Tracy Bear, and Aubrey Hanson, recent queer Indigenous literature and criticism has been able to diversify its focal points and reorient its goals. Indeed, while the two-spirit literary scene in the early-to-mid 2000s was primarily focused on Indigiqueer resistance and

survival in the past and the present, the last ten years has seen a proliferation of Indigiqueer texts about resistance and flourishing in the present and future. The 2016 anthology *Love Beyond Body, Space and Time: an Indigenous LGBT Sci-fi Anthology* and its 2020 sequel anthology *Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction* (edited by Joshua Whitehead) are just two indications of this exciting shift wherein two-spirit writers are queering their works “toward the utopian” with affects like “love” to consider “how we may flourish into being joyously animated rather than merely alive” (Whitehead, *Love* 9). Similarly to Whitehead, Belcourt has said that his current works aim to “show how we might discern practices of care and joy where they are expected to be absent, to have been quashed by state power” as part of the project of “rendering what an Indigenous future might look like” (Belcourt and Morgan n.p). With the chapters that follow, what I hope to contribute to this corpus of felt-theoretical work is an approach that focuses on the “future-bearing energy” (n.p) of contemporary Indigiqueer literature so as to highlight the care and love-based joy that young two-spirit authors spanning generations locate beyond the discursive limits of “survival.” My thesis thinks alongside Belcourt, Whitehead, and their literary predecessor Scofield by exploring how enactments of joy *through* the relational Indigiqueer body can be understood as expansive practices of radical Indigenous resurgence that materialize a “future [that] is here in [...] the practices of the present” (Simpson, *As We* 213).

Because I believe that all three authors are theorizing in dialogical ways despite the generational gap that separates Scofield from Belcourt and Whitehead, I do not examine the primary texts chronologically. In fact, my first chapter analyzes the most recent text, Billy-Ray Belcourt’s memoir *A History of My Brief Body* (2020), as a theoretical intervention through which the meaning and political function of joy can be productively reinterpreted, thus allowing

for joyful reinterpretations of other queer Indigenous texts like Gregory Scofield's *Love Medicine and One Song* (1997) and Joshua Whitehead's *Jonny Appleseed* (2017) in chapters 2 and 3 respectively. To convey why Belcourt's work with queer Indigenous joy is so useful, especially amid his interrogations of settler colonialism, chapter 1 analyzes how he defines and theorizes joy as a positive, rebellious mode of relationally collective embodiment, which puts his work in contrast to that of queer feminist affect theorists like Sara Ahmed and radical Indigenous resurgence theorists like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who have occasionally mentioned joy in their works, but have mostly overlooked the liberatory potential of joy as an affective orientation and analytic tool for queer and racialized people. Parsing through the similarities and differences between Belcourt's theorizing and theirs, as well as between his work and two-spirit theories of body sovereignty like that of Qwo-Li Driskill, this chapter shows how Belcourt uniquely helps us think about the intersections of these fields and why joy deserves recognition as a resurgent means of combatting a multitude of oppressive colonial forces and creating alternative, more livable modes of collective embodied life.

Mobilizing Belcourt's joyful interventions as my theoretical lens for the remainder of the thesis, chapter 2 reinterprets Gregory Scofield's erotic poetry collection *Love Medicine and One Song: Sâkihtowin-Maskihkîy Êkwa Pêyak-Nikamowin* (1997) as a precursor to Belcourt's politically charged theorization of queer Indigenous joy. While one might say his work is too idealized or apolitical to align with Belcourt's, Scofield's poetic exploration of love between three people using Cree/Métis¹⁴ philosophies implicitly resists the "asphyxiating" (Belcourt, *History* 8) impacts of colonialism while explicitly representing the positive interconnection between culture, spirituality, and erotic queer pleasure. In the early 2000s, his poetry was

¹⁴ Scofield is Métis, and his Indigenous language is Cree, which is an indispensable part of his poetry and other writing.

therefore interpreted as a quintessential example of “sovereign erotics” (Driskill, “Call Me” 229) that celebrates two-spirit erotics in spite of the dominant culture’s belief that such expressions of sexuality are “shameful, tragic, or disgusting” (228). Although neither Scofield’s poems nor Driskill’s analysis name the presence of relationally collective joy, this chapter posits that *Love Medicine* is nonetheless a watershed enactment of radically resurgent joy that created the necessary room for other literary enactments of joy to follow. Given that the collection focuses solely on one polyamorous relationship,¹⁵ its orientation may seem too intimate or individualist to demonstrate expansive, relationally collective joy. However, I argue that if we read *Love Medicine* through Belcourt’s theorization of joy, we will be able to better recognize that Scofield’s enactment of two-spirit erotic joy over twenty years ago anticipated the current discourses taking place at the vanguard of contemporary queer Indigenous studies—including its theoretical intersections with queer feminist affect studies and Indigenous resurgence studies. As such, in light of the little critical attention that *Love Medicine* has received since the early 2000s, I insist that it merits recuperation as a resurgent two-spirit manifesto which can uniquely add to our understanding of the queer Indigenous literary field’s trajectory, especially as it pertains to the emergence of joy as a community-building, future-bearing affective orientation.

My final chapter turns to Joshua Whitehead’s 2018 novel *Jonny Appleseed*. I argue that by combining Belcourt’s overt interrogations of settler colonialism and theorization of Indigenous joy with Scofield’s embrace of spiritual erotic joy through the life experiences of his young Indigiqueer protagonist, Jonny, Whitehead adapts the form of “‘realistic’ fiction” (Justice, *Why* 142) to produce a distinctively effective approach to two-spirit joy as a transformative,

¹⁵ Note that Scofield does not call this relationship polyamorous or attach any other label to it. I only refer to polyamory here (intimate relationships with more than one partner, with the informed consent of all involved) to convey that his poetry helpfully focuses on one “individual” relationship wherein relational joy is explored between three people, rather than a larger human network of joyful connections/ relationships.

community affect. Indigenous scholars like Daniel Heath Justice argue that the “realistic” literary form often reinforces pathologizing deficiency narratives about Indigenous life, which can make it less useful for resisting racist stereotypes than other literary forms like speculative fiction. I contend, however, that given the politically powerful similarities that Whitehead’s *Jonny* shares with Belcourt’s *History* and Scofield’s *Love Medicine*, his non-conventional, decolonial use of this form productively challenges its harmful conventions. Moreover, because *Jonny*’s form lends itself so well to colloquial rather than academic or poetic vocabulary, and because *Jonny*’s community-oriented content nurtures collective joy in a range of life circumstances not seen in the other two texts, Whitehead showcases an especially approachable model of queer Indigenous joy to an exceptionally broad audience. By situating the unique value of Whitehead’s healing scenes of collaborative storytelling between Jonny and his various loved ones, I ultimately argue that Whitehead’s realistic fiction shows his diverse audience that Indigiqueer stories of pain, care, and love are relationally collective enactments of joy, and that such quotidian forms of joy-making serve as the “best medicine” (80) with which communities can heal and bolster radical Indigenous resurgence in everyday life.

In the chapters that follow, I articulate why it is important to recognize Belcourt’s theorizing of collective joy, Scofield’s exemplification of intimate or seemingly individualist joy, and Whitehead’s enactments of community-oriented joy as indispensable parts of the same relationally collective project. Together, they can help us to understand the multifaceted theory of queer Indigenous joy, including what it is, how and where it can show up, and what transformative work it can ultimately *do* as a radical resurgent affect.

Chapter 1

“[A]n always-loudening chant”: The Liberatory Value of Billy-Ray Belcourt’s Theory of Joy in

A History of My Brief Body

Billy-Ray Belcourt’s memoir *A History of My Brief Body* (2020) is a collection of fourteen lyric essays which grapple with the implications of his quotidian experiences of life in Canada as a queer Indigenous man. To do so, Belcourt interrogates how oppressive settler colonial structures and discourses of race, gender, and sexuality entrap Indigenous people, and particularly queer Indigenous folks, in “compressed forms of subjectivity” (Belcourt, *History* 10) which erode their sense of body sovereignty. Bearing this in mind, *History* also wrestles with how feelings of care and love for others can similarly destabilize one’s felt understanding of the individual embodied self, and create other, positive forms of non-sovereignty. Working through this paradoxical instability, Belcourt’s memoir uses his complex affective experiences with others, including opinionated strangers and romantic partners, to displace the “rusty category of the individual” (130), itself a settler colonial and masculinist construct, with more relationally collective forms of joyful embodiment. In doing so, Belcourt’s *History* offers a unique felt-theorization of joy as a rebellious, world-building affect that encompasses the cumulative power of Indigenous enactments of wonder, care, and love. In foregrounding relationally embodied joy despite ongoing colonial oppression, Belcourt shows how this ancestral yet under-acknowledged affective orientation bolsters the resurgence of collective queer Indigenous life and thereby resists the “asphyxiating ... conditions” (8) of the settler colonial present.

In this chapter, I show how Belcourt’s work with joy is in dialogue with feminist affect theory and Indigenous theories of body sovereignty and radical resurgence, all of which emphasize queer bodies and their life experiences as sources of possibility for more supportive,

anti-institutional forms of collective life in the largely unjust present world. However, I argue that Belcourt's contribution at this intersection of study is uniquely valuable because it centralizes the under-theorized affect of joy as a care-based practice that widens possibilities for alternative modes of collective life, and can therefore drive resurgent change, especially for queer Indigenous people. This claim alone puts Belcourt in contrast to queer feminist affect theorists like Sara Ahmed who, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), considers how wonder begins to open up the individual body to the possibility of joy and new forms of collectivity, but never theorizes joy nor its liberatory value for feminist collectives. Instead, recent queer feminist affect theory tends to critique or resist joy and happiness as regulatory affects that support heteropatriarchal social structures (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 2010; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2011). In stark contrast, Belcourt theorizes joy as a positive, relational, and ultimately rebellious affect that functions for queer and racialized people like the "practice of breathing in [...] 'breathtaking spaces' shaped by oppressive forces of all kinds" (*History* 8-9). Indeed, using his joyful affective orientation, Belcourt resists oppressive settler colonial interpretations that Indigenous writing and life is "simple" (144), solely shaped by death, trauma and deficiency, and, pertaining specifically to Indigiqueer and two-spirit life, fundamentally "paradoxical" and "unintelligible" (28). In contrast to queer Indigenous scholars like Qwo-Li Driskill, who resist these pervasive constructions of Indigeneity and Indigiqueerness by working to reclaim body sovereignty within colonial contexts, Belcourt suggests that the concept of body sovereignty is ultimately limited because of its entanglement with individualistic models of selfhood that subtly uphold the colonial state while closing off the possibility of radical forms of

care.¹⁶ Conversely, the concept of joy in Belcourt's construction is a more powerful and positive alternative for rebellion because it is non-sovereign and relationally collective. In short, he dismantles individualist notions of self and embodiment because they hinder the collective from flourishing. These multiple contradistinctions reveal that Belcourt's unique concept of joy contributes meaningfully to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's radical resurgence project as outlined in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resurgence*, which calls for a "rebellion of love [...] and profound caring" that enables Indigenous folks, and especially queer Indigenous youth, to "dance through their lives with joy" (8). Yet Simpson, like Ahmed, does not define or theorize her use of joy, so Belcourt's work enriches Simpson's model of radical Indigenous resurgence by providing an insightful theorization of this important but overlooked affect.

As such, in this chapter I will establish why Belcourt's felt theory of joy serves as an important theoretical foundation for understanding how joy functions as a resurgent, world-building affect in contemporary queer Indigenous literature. By tracing Belcourt's discussion of harmful settler colonial conditions and alternative modes of affective embodiment, I will show that his work is key to helping us understand how the "undefeatable excess" of "brown queer joy" (Belcourt, *History* 158) shows up in the resurgent works of other writers including Gregory Scofield and Joshua Whitehead, who I will discuss in chapters 2 and 3 respectively. In doing so, I will demonstrate how the "[g]eographies of joy that manifest where we are trained not to see them" (60) are life-sustaining networks of care which form an "always-loudening chant" (14)

¹⁶ I, like Driskill, do not intend to disavow, "challenge or replace the legal definitions of [Indigenous] sovereignty" ("Stolen" 61) through my discussion of body sovereignty and Belcourt's relational, non-sovereign approach to positive affects. Nor do I intend to repudiate the popular concept of bodily self-sovereignty altogether; rather, I aim to emphasize the expansive merits of Belcourt's different approach to collective life as a supportive way forward for all which is worth serious consideration.

against colonial oppression and for queer Indigenous liberation in the present and future.

While Belcourt's *History* is referred to as a personal memoir, it is simultaneously a critical, theoretical, and poetic text which plays with form, upends genre, and explores the very limits of representation, creating a collection of lyric essays that refuse easy categorization. Take, for example, the essay "An Alphabet of Longing"¹⁷ within which various letters of the alphabet from A to V have their own entries and unique literary forms, tones, and styles. Letter E, "EMPTY BED," is a free-verse poem and letter N, "NDN HOMO"¹⁸ (104), features a politically charged catalog poem. Other sections showcase more lengthy prose expositions that engage with the ideas of various writers and scholars; for instance, "DESIRE" quotes from Richard Siken's book of poetry *War of the Foxes* and Anne Carson's verse novel *Autobiography of Red* while "LOVE" converses exclusively with Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*. With its many forms and diverse intertextualities, "An Alphabet of Longing" serves as a microcosmic example of *History*'s relational, fluid discursive register, which challenges readers, including critical analysts, with its elusive complexity.

Given this complexity, or what Belcourt might call rebellious "indecipherability" (107), *History* arguably refuses access to scholars hoping to extract an uncomplicated and straightforward message or "point" from this genre-bending memoir using a single-axis mode of analysis, such as a generic study rooted in the conventional practices of one particular genre. In fact, foreseeing the possibility of reductive categorizations and interpretations of *History*, especially by white settler scholars and literary critics, Belcourt's chapter "Fatal Naming

¹⁷ As an intertextual aside, this title arguably plays on affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich and artist Karin Michalski's experimental film interview *The Alphabet of Feeling Bad*, which exemplifies how Belcourt often communicates subtly with other scholars and thinkers.

¹⁸ In the front matter to Belcourt's 2019 book of poetry *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field*, he states that "NDN is internet shorthand used by Indigenous peoples in North American to refer to ourselves. It is also sometimes an acronym meaning 'Not Dead Native'" (Belcourt, *NDN Coping* n.p). In this thesis, this term will only be present within quotes by Belcourt and Whitehead.

Rituals” addresses the “trauma of description” (143) long-inflicted by settler analysts who continue to rely on a harmful “rhetoric of simplicity” to describe Indigenous-authored texts including his own (144). Belcourt argues that these interpretations, even from some sympathetic settler readings, often incorporate words like “‘plainspoken,’ ‘straightforward,’ and ‘unmistakable’” (144) which harmfully disregard the complexities embedded in Indigenous literatures and thereby fail to capture the significance of their works’ nuanced arguments. This ongoing behaviour, he states, renews “the terrible and terror-making work of classification” that has proliferated an ultimately racist “atmosphere of ideas [...] transported from Europe” (143) since first contact on Turtle Island. By pointing out the colonial implications of present literary interpretations, Belcourt warns his readers that they must not fall into this well-documented pattern of behaviour in their readings of *History* and insists in particular that “you, a white and settler you, are beholden to a project of lessening the trauma of description” (143). By stating that white settlers are particularly beholden to this harm-reduction project, Belcourt subtly invokes the academic institution of literary studies in Canada, given that this scholarly field has historically been dominated by white settlers and by colonialist modes of description that dismiss or downplay Indigenous writers and their various epistemologies, value systems, and theoretical contributions. This callout therefore makes clear that white settler scholars have a duty to perform better, more thoughtful and careful analytic reading practices from within this academic space, and that doing so is a reparative “project” which requires a shift in analytic approaches to Indigenous literature. Specifically, for white settler scholars to move up and out of the “gutters of misrepresentation” (142) that Belcourt outlines, I argue that these readers (and all readers) must acknowledge, appreciate, and work with the theoretical complexities of Indigenous literature and Indigenous life. To otherwise regress towards narratives of simplicity would not only maintain

the colonialist “trauma of description” (143) by forcing these thinkers into “compressed forms of subjectivity” (10), but would close off generative opportunities to engage with and learn from the multifaceted theoretical contributions of new writers like Belcourt.

For that reason, I posit that settler scholars, myself included, must remain invested in thinking *alongside* Belcourt and the other queer Indigenous writers in this thesis by recognizing two central points: that Indigenous texts are not “simple” but offer complex theoretical insights and, accordingly, that Indigenous creative writers are theorists who we should recognize as such by putting them in dialogue with other theoretical thinkers as equal partners in world-making. In fact, tracing the dialogic connections between Belcourt’s creative work and a range of valuable thinkers including his felt-theorist *nôhkom* (grandmother), queer feminist affect theorists, and theorists of Indigenous body sovereignty and radical resurgence can make clear the unique value of his rebellious theory of joy. Although theorists in each of these realms, scholarly and otherwise, have productively considered how queer and/or Indigenous bodies can affectively mobilize various forms of care, love, wonder, hope, and desire for a more liveable present and future, Belcourt alone has explicitly theorized joy as a care-based embodied practice which can drive collective change.

In labelling Belcourt as a theorist in this way, my intention is not to valorize academia’s tendency to privilege intellectual knowledge over emotional intelligence, as if the two can or should be considered separate entities. Instead, I posit that Belcourt’s care-based theoretical work, like that of Indigenous and feminist thinkers such as his *nôhkom* and Tanana Athabaskan scholar Dian Million, recognizes the power of emotions as embodied knowledge which can (and should) be passed on and widely shared. Belcourt even acknowledges in his memoir’s preface, “A Letter to *Nôhkom*,” how her unconditional acts of love and care during his childhood were

practices of theory which have informed his theorization of joy in *History*. Speaking directly to her as a valuable theorist, or a “practitioner of the utopian” (1), Belcourt explains that her “capacious” way of being holds immense theoretical value (3),

Having inherited your philosophy of love, which is also a theory of freedom, nôhkom, I can write myself into a narrative of joy that troubles the horrid fiction of race that stalks me as it does you and our kin...

It’s likely that you might feel confused at times by my style of writing, its dexterity, its refusal of easiness, but I know you’ll sense the affection bubbling up inside each word. That affection is joy, and it started with you. Now, I see it everywhere. (5-6)

Here, Belcourt recognizes that, as Dian Million argues, Indigenous women are important theorists who have long been “insisting on the inclusion of [their] lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges” as a form of theory, or “felt theory,” that is no less valuable than the non-emotional, masculinist forms of theorizing that have historically circulated within Western academia (“Felt Theory” 57). As a felt-theorist, or someone who produces “felt theory” through her everyday way of life, Belcourt’s nôhkom showed him how felt experiences like care and love are valuable forms of “community knowledge” that, as he shares in his book’s preface, can “interactively infor[m] our positions as Indigenous scholars” (Million, “Felt Theory” 57) and creative writers. By way of her embodied, affective theory of freedom, Belcourt’s nôhkom instilled in him affective knowledge, and an affective language, conducive to growth. As his preface reveals, her felt theory of care and love acts as the theoretical grounds from which he began to build his own unique theory of joy as a new means to “rupture the singularity of Canadian cruelty” (Belcourt, *History* 4-5) and bolster Indigenous life.

To show how his memoir’s “narrative of joy” (5) productively builds on and branches out

from his nôhkom's life philosophies in generative ways, Belcourt's introduction "A Short Theoretical Note" defines what joy means to him, what it can mean for his Indigenous readers in particular, and why this affect is of central importance to his memoir's mobilization against the "embargo on care that is Canada" (9). Stemming from his personal experiences, including his nôhkom's relational practices of care, Belcourt claims that joy is a "durational performance of emotion [...] caught up in an ancestral art of world-making in the most asphyxiating of conditions" (8). While he claims he could call this complex affect a number of different positive feelings including "wonder" (8), Belcourt argues that "joy" is more enduring and better captures how variously marginalized people collectively "gather on the side of life" using enactments of wonder, care, and love for one another (9). He elaborates on this description by stating that "[j]oy by and for the racialized is what I consider the practice of breathing in what theorist Christina Sharpe calls 'breath-taking spaces' shaped by oppressive forces of all kinds" (8-9). As a vital practice akin to breathing, joy is the affect through which Belcourt believes that Indigenous people "breach the haze of suffering that denies [them] creativity and literature" (9). He states, "[j]oy is art is an ethics of resistance" which, clearly having grown and expanded from his nôhkom's theorizing, ultimately constitutes an entire "ecology of feeling" and "anti-institutional world" (9) which is vital to the survival and well-being of all Indigenous folks.

But while his introduction's complex definition of joy encapsulates the wonder, care and love enacted by all Indigenous folks, Belcourt's *History* shows that he is particularly invested in conveying this life-sustaining theory to his intersectionally marginalized queer Indigenous audiences. This does not mean that other Indigenous folks cannot work with these generative ideas, but that Belcourt believes an affective "anti-institutional world" (9) must work differently from the colonial and heteropatriarchal institutions that continue to marginalize two-spirit

people. In fact, this “anti-institutional” joy is undergirded by what Belcourt has elsewhere called the “uninstitutional condition of queer Indigenous ethics” (Belcourt and Nixon n.p) that put two-spirit people and youth at the center of discussion. Working against the marginalization that he and his queer kin so often face, Belcourt considers “queer NDN joy” (67), “brown queer possibility” (159), and the “undefeatable excess” of “brown queer joy” (158) throughout his memoir, which importantly positions two-spirit, queer Indigenous people in the foreground of his theorizations regarding collective social transformation through positive affects. Belcourt’s valuable theory of joy is therefore against the dominant social codes of race, gender, and sexuality which perpetuate violence and oppression in the lives of Indigiqueer people. Given the queer ethics of care embedded in its logics, Belcourt’s joy serves as an expansive queer Indigenous affect which centres Indigiqueer experiences and gives breathing room to all Indigenous folks across sex, gender, and sexuality spectrums.

Because of this focus on how affective relations can generate ethical relationality, the anti-institutional and anti-colonial drive of Belcourt’s queer joy inherently puts his work in relation to queer feminist affect theorists like Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Lisa Duggan, José Muñoz, Eve Sedgwick, and more who, much like him, are set on proliferating affective modes of life that can better support gender- and sexually-diverse people. To articulate why Belcourt’s theory of joy is so uniquely useful to both this collective feminist project and the project of radical Indigenous resurgence, neither of which have carefully considered “joy,” I am compelled to first explore how Belcourt’s “durational” form of wonder, care, and love, known as joy, connects to and enables us to build on Sara Ahmed’s exploration of wonder from her foundational text *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* in ways that have not been considered by other affect theorists, even decades after its first release in 2004.

Because Belcourt's description of joy includes "wonder" as a term that nearly captures the essence of his affect theory, his introduction notably speaks back to Ahmed's chapter "Feminist Attachments," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, which explores in part how wonder "may be crucial to showing us why transformations [...] are possible" (*Cultural Politics* 172). In her articulation, wonder is an affective form of movement that takes place when one encounters something out of the "ordinary" – that which is historically preconditioned, familiar, and recognizable – and, as an inevitable result, sees the world differently or "as if for the first time" (179). Accordingly, Ahmed posits that the foundational "act of wonder" opens the body "as the world opens up before it" as that which has been conditionally made, and can consequently be unmade, remade, and reshaped (181). Indeed, for Ahmed, wonder serves as a kind of eye-opening realization that, when shared between bodies, can open up a "collective space" (183) where possibilities for reshaping affective life can emerge. Ahmed even explains that wonder precedes feminist feelings of hope, desire, and joy (185), which seemingly implies that she has a concept of wonder-based joy as a world-building queer feminist affect that predates Belcourt's by more than fifteen years, making his work with queer joy not as crucial or exceptionally innovative.

Yet while it may seem this way at first, the fleeting nature of Ahmed's attention to queer feminist joy in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and her significant reorientation to joy in later works like *The Promise of Happiness* reveal that there are gaps in the feminist literature pertaining to queer joy which Belcourt's *History* helps to fill. In her chapter "Feminist Attachments," Ahmed states that wonder opens the feminist body to hope and "hope reads that openness as the possibility of [...] joy" (185). Here, she names joy as an ideal outcome of wonder and hope, as something that, perhaps, feminists can gain through "the work of teaching,

protesting, naming, feeling, and connecting” which she proposes at the end of the chapter (188). Ahmed even uses the term “joy” to describe her own feminism as work that has “never been reducible to feelings of pain, anger, or rage” but has felt like “something more creative [...] that responds to the world with joy and care” (179). Moreover, she recalls with fondness “the joy I felt as I began to make different kinds of connections with others” (171) when she first opened up to feminism and its collective concerns. But even though Ahmed briefly considers joy a formative element of her own critical position as a queer feminist scholar and an ideal outcome of collective forms of “wonder” and “hope,” she does not define joy or further theorize its importance to her politics or to the feminist collectives variously oppressed by settler structures of race, gender, and or sexuality. In *Cultural Politics*, joy is an under-explored affect with latent potential for energizing resistant queer politics anew.

In contrast, Belcourt makes joy and its liberatory potential central to his theorization of queer politics. Although he shares Ahmed’s understanding that wonder and joy are connected, he goes much further with joy in *History* than she does in *Cultural Politics* to theorize what joy is and show how it works positively in a specific context and for a specific group, namely for contemporary queer Indigenous folks of Turtle Island. In fact, Belcourt’s positive take on joy as an “anti-institutional” affect (Belcourt, *History* 9) that generates possibility and well-being in the lives of Indigiqueer people runs counter to the recent works of many affect theorists who, like Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* and Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*, critique positive affects for their regulatory function in heteropatriarchal society. Even though Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics* implies that joy is an affect that arises from queer alliance-building and her own acts of feminist resistance, when she returns to joy years later in *The Promise of Happiness*, she approaches it as an obscurant that keeps “bad feelings hidden, displaced, or negated” (Ahmed,

Promise 65) by dominant liberal fantasies of the “good life” (51).¹⁹ Forwarding the concept of the “feminist killjoy” (which she also uses to describe herself), Ahmed posits that refusing to obscure or take cover by looking on the bright side with happiness and joy can be a worthwhile “form of political struggle” (84) for feminists and that “if this book kills joy, then it does what it says we should do” (20). Against this current of thought, very little work centralizes joy as a constructive affect that queer feminists should not kill but rather proliferate in their world-building projects. In fact, even in terms of critical works that focus on joy as a *positive* affect for queer and or racialized folks, other than Simpson’s brief mention of joy in *As We Have Always Done*, I am only aware of Lisa Tatonetti’s 2021 essay “Joyful Embodiment: Felt Theory and Indigenous Trans Perspectives in the Work of Max Wolf Valerio” featured in a special issue of *TransMotion*. Belcourt is one of few theorists, then, who consistently recognize joy as a positive site of resistance, not regulation.

To do so, Belcourt does not stop at defining joy in his memoir’s introduction, but importantly includes a “thesis statement” on joy later in the text which captures the unique work that he intends his theory of joy to perform. By tracing the various components of this argument, I will further differentiate Belcourt’s approach to joy from Ahmed’s positive interpretation of wonder-based joy in *Cultural Politics* to show further why queer and feminist thinkers should learn from Belcourt’s affective interventions. In the last subsection of “An Alphabet of Longing”

¹⁹ Interestingly, in this section of the chapter “Feminist Killjoys,” Ahmed quotes Audre Lorde who in *The Cancer Journals* (1980) also considers joy and happiness regulatory affects which wrongfully “obscur[e] certain realities of life” (Lorde qtd in Ahmed, *Promise* 83). Ahmed even cites Lorde’s sarcastic line which states, “Let us seek ‘joy’ rather than real food and clean air and a saner future on a liveable earth! As if happiness alone can protect us” (76). Yet it is helpful to acknowledge that Lorde, similarly to Ahmed, had also previously touched on joy in a positive light in years prior. In her essay “The Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde mentions joy as the end product of feminist practices driven by the embrace of the erotic, but she never theorizes that positive version of joy, instead turning to a critical reading of joy in her subsequent work. These various examples, from recent and older feminist texts, indicate the ambivalence that surrounds “joy” in feminist literature, which is intensified by the lack of detailed theorization on what joy is in a range of works prior to Belcourt’s.

titled V for “Voice,” Belcourt states, “My thesis statement: Joy is an at once minimalist and momentous facet of NDN life that widens the spaces of living thinned by structures of unfreedom” (*History* 111). And then referring to what he calls his theoretical project, Belcourt explains that he is performing “a theory of nonsingularity and care that forgoes the melodrama of individuality” (111). Belcourt’s thesis statement shows that he believes joy is always already present in everyday modes of collective Indigenous life, and implies that joy is not an affect that these folks must strive for or earn. In contrast, Ahmed’s idea of joy in *Cultural Politics* implies that joy is an affective by-product of feminist acts of teaching and protesting (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 188); after she first opened up to feminism with wonder, her joy then began to arise as a result of her successful efforts to establish queer feminist networks of resistance (171). And although her interpretation of joy implies a sense of collectivity, given that her joy surfaced within networks of political organizing, her framework for communicating this joy seems more focused on sharing her personally exciting journey — “the joy *I* felt as *I* began to [...] realize that the world is alive” (171, emphasis added) — and less focused on communicating the details of how such joy is relationally collective, and what that shared affect can do for queer collectives in the present. Belcourt’s project synopsis, on the other hand, reinforces his thesis statement by highlighting that Indigenous care-based joy is always already relationally collective; he overtly rejects “melodrama[ti]c” (111) forms of individuation that can disconnect one’s experiences from collective life. This differentiation is not meant to insinuate that Ahmed’s positive consideration of joy is problematic, but instead to emphasize that *History*’s more extensive, fully formed vision of joy can move queer and racialized collectives further towards freedom than Ahmed’s brief attention to joy in *Cultural Politics* can.

Indeed, there is a more expansive quality to Belcourt’s positive joy than to Ahmed’s,

which enables his *History* to provide a valuable argument against normalized individualistic concepts of embodiment and the ways that queer Indigenous joy productively disrupts such constricting concepts. While Ahmed's wonder and joy portray the initial "opening" of the body to the socially constructed world "'as if' for the first time" (*Cultural Politics* 179), Belcourt's joy captures how Indigenous bodies are already affectively open and able to collectively "wide[n]" "spaces of living" (*History* 111) through their tenacious positive affects. Because these "spaces of living" arguably refer to bodies and the social world they inhabit, I posit that his joy's capacity to "widen" them bolsters an exceptionally expansive and relationally collective understanding of joyful embodiment which makes breathing room for more supportive modes of collective Indigenous life.

This interpretation of Belcourt's joy as a freeing mode of relational embodiment does not require the elision or denial of settler colonial violence and its harmful effects on Indigenous embodied experiences in order to be workable. In fact, as Belcourt articulates in the second half of his thesis statement, joy "widens" Indigenous spaces of embodiment already "thinned" by colonialist "structures of unfreedom" (111). The acknowledgment of oppressive social structures is actually a necessary and valuable part of both his conceptualization of joy, and my use of his joy as a theoretical lens for interpreting Scofield's poetry and Whitehead's novel in chapters 2 and 3. To Belcourt, joy is the "the practice of breathing in [...] 'brehtaking spaces' shaped by oppressive forces of all kinds" (8-9); it does not exist exclusively where colonialist conditions do not, but purposefully materializes amid these colonial spaces and through the recognition of such oppressive forces. After all, the affect of joy "bubbl[es] up inside each word" of this memoir and Belcourt "see[s] it everywhere" (*History* 6). This means that the significant portions of Belcourt's memoir that grapple with the colonial world's structures and discourses of race,

gender performativity norms, and compulsory heterosexuality are rebellious enactments of joy that each deserve analytic attention. By critiquing the problematic nature of these constricting structures and discourses of embodiment, which work in tandem to stifle and erase the vibrancy of queer Indigenous life, I argue that Belcourt ultimately insists on the need to recognize and reject these colonial notions of embodiment in lieu of more relationally collective modes of Indigenous embodiment that enact care, love, and life-sustaining joy.

A compelling part of Belcourt's joyful critique of public discourses on race, gender, and sexuality is his attention to white settler assumptions that Indigenous life and embodiment is fully determined by death, trauma, and deficiency. Within his essay "Fragments from a Half-Existence," Belcourt brings to light the harmful discourses of race that white settler subjects have employed in conversation with him. In the first of two notable examples, Belcourt recalls that at the launch for his debut poetry collection *This Wound is a World*, "a white woman begged me not to kill myself" (96). Rather than recognizing his collection as a desire-based project that longs for a more liberating collective future, she instead "heard the terrible music [...] of a premature death" (96). In this instance, Belcourt's body sovereignty was disrupted by overdetermined public ideas about the relationship between Indigeneity and death, "as if [they] were co-constitutive categories" (Belcourt, *This Wound* 58). This settler subject's attempt at benevolence, then, unwittingly functions to define and limit his Indigenous embodiment through a predetermined narrative of loss. In the second vignette, a white woman's commentary similarly functions to limit Belcourt's Indigenous embodiment through narratives of trauma and deficiency. While seated next to Belcourt on a flight to Edmonton, the woman shares her unsolicited ideas about the impacts of intergenerational trauma on Indigenous people by telling him, "[t]rauma isn't something you acquire [...] trauma is literally *who you are*." Later in the

flight, perhaps assuming that Belcourt is financially deficient and cannot afford the airline's meals, "*she asks if she can purchase food for me*" (97, emphasis in original). During encounters like this, laden with preconceived notions of Indigeneity, Belcourt states that "[you] are made to suspend yourself in an existential limbo" that will afterwards leave you "bruised" (97), a metaphor which implies that settler discourses of race can painfully destabilize one's sense of body sovereignty. Yet despite the affective pain of these non-sovereign experiences, Belcourt's recognition that such commentary is hurtful, inappropriate, and ultimately racist proliferates care for himself and all Indigenous folks who could be confronted with such reductive comments.²⁰ These powerful enactments of care are part and parcel of Belcourt's "ethics of resistance" called joy (9) with which he confronts the "horrid fiction of race" that follows Indigenous folks in Canada (5). And it is not only these limiting ideas of Indigeneity, perpetuated by white settler subjects, that *History* opposes; Belcourt also grapples with how settler colonial gender and sexuality norms have been internalized by many Indigenous communities to the severe detriment of queer Indigenous folks' embodied well-being. In doing so, he implies that joy is a rebellious affective orientation with which Indigenous communities, including their queer and two-spirit kin, can resist the destructive colonial concepts of embodiment that cause such harms along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality.

Alongside his joy-based resistance to colonial discourses of race, which reductively convey that Indigenous writing is "straightforward" and Indigenous life is solely shaped by death, trauma and deficiency, Belcourt also rebels against pervasive settler colonial discourses of gender and sexuality which claim that queer Indigeneity and two-spiritedness are "paradoxical"

²⁰ As an aside, Belcourt's use of the second person perspective, "you," in sentences like "[you] are made to suspend yourself" (97) rather than the first person singular "I" as in "I am made to suspend myself" shows that his discussion of these harmful acts includes all Indigenous folks who have been harmed by racist encounters like these.

and “unintelligible” ways of life (Belcourt, *History* 28). Arguably because of the way that these reductive narratives erode two-spirit presence and body sovereignty, Belcourt asks in *History*,

Can the Rez Fag²¹ speak?

The Rez Fag both is and isn't: how are we to undo the ideational deficit of melancholy?

Everywhere the Rez Fag is pulverized: at the kitchen table, at the Band Office, at faculties and departments of Native and Indigenous Studies.

To talk about the Rez Fag

you have to talk about circuitries of unbecoming. (108)

Here, Belcourt importantly conveys the ubiquitous nature of prejudice against queer Indigenous folks both within and outside Indigenous communities. Due to the colonial Christianizing project that has attempted to eradicate Indigenous non-heteronormative sexualities and two-spiritedness (139-140) through and beyond the Canadian residential school system (18), many Indigenous communities have internalized the constricting logics of the heteropatriarchal gender binary, its gender performativity norms, and compulsory heterosexuality such that today, as Belcourt's poem implies, Indigiqueer modes of embodiment are still often disregarded as legitimate ways of being. As such, *History* conveys here that the widespread prejudices that work to sever gender variance and sexual diversity from Indigeneity are yet another way that queer Indigenous folks experience the erosion of their individual body sovereignty.

By asserting that to “talk about the Rez Fag” (108), we must address the “circuitries,” or social systems, which suppress Indigiqueer embodiment, Belcourt's poem speaks with other

²¹ As indicated in Belcourt's notes, this section of his text, and this term, is “in response to an image of Demian DinéYazhi's by the same name” (Belcourt, *History* 166).

queer Indigenous critiques of two-spirit erasure and loss of body sovereignty. Among these critiques, Cherokee scholar Qwo-Li Driskill's famous essay "Stolen from our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic" opposes the settler colonial systems that mobilize "sexism, homophobia, and transphobia" to suppress and erase the vibrancy and vitality of two-spirit people (51). Ze posits that in order to disrupt these harmful circuitries, queer Indigenous individuals must enact body self-sovereignty²² to regain control over their "bodies, sexualities, genders, erotic senses of self" and other formations of identity (62). By embracing their own embodied desires, or their "sovereign erotic," Driskill insists that queer Indigenous individuals can renew connections to their nations, histories, and traditions, and positively influence their larger communities by doing so (52-3). Based on Driskill's and Belcourt's shared concerns regarding the compounding social forces that impede two-spirit well-being, Driskill and Belcourt share a degree of alignment as queer Indigenous theorists. However, although they both ultimately argue for the empowerment of two-spirit people, Belcourt's critical approach to the concept of body sovereignty differs significantly from Driskill's, which points to the complexity of Belcourt's theorizing that makes his work especially valuable.

While Driskill uses body sovereignty and his term "sovereign erotics" to emphasize the need for Indigenous people to take back power over their individual bodies, by contrast, Belcourt uses the term "self-sovereignty" to question the conceptual utility of the individual sovereign self – a colonial, patriarchal notion – for queer and/or racialized folks. In "REZ FAG," Belcourt states that to talk about queer Indigenous life "[y]ou have to give up on the allure of self-sovereignty / and to give up on the allure of self-sovereignty / you have to destabilize the body as

²² It is important to note that Driskill identifies in his notes to "Stolen from our Bodies" that the term "body sovereignty" as ze employs it does not intend "to challenge or replace the legal definitions of sovereignty" (61) which account for the resistance of Canadian governmental control over Indigenous nations and lands.

the sealed container for political life” (108). For Belcourt, the charismatic and popular concept of body sovereignty cannot effectively serve queer Indigenous people because it fails to account for the affective experiences that will inevitably disrupt the illusion of the body as a fixed, impermeable entity with full control. As he articulates in his title essay “A History of My Brief Body,” “I don’t subscribe to the fantasy of self-sovereignty, knowing fully that the past starts into my brief body like a knife” (31). This image implies that the harms of colonization and/or past interpersonal experiences with racism, homophobia and other prejudices have violent implications on Indigenous people’s present experiences of embodiment. But it is not only the painful resonance of collective colonial trauma and past personal tribulations that keep the concept of individualized body sovereignty, or sovereign embodiment, out of Belcourt’s theoretical work and worldview. Rather, in more than one context, he wrestles with the affective impacts of care, love, and intimacy on felt understandings of embodiment and how they, too, destabilize the illusion of the sovereign body.

By choosing to resist painful non-sovereign experiences in a way that does not reassert “the fantasy of self-sovereignty” (31),²³ Belcourt valuably investigates how non-sovereign embodiment is not entirely negative. Indeed, it makes possible the relational forms of care and love that facilitate queer Indigenous joy as a capacious mode of collective life. In a short article titled “To Be Unbodied,” Belcourt explains, “Indigeneity births us into a relation of non-sovereignty [that] is not solely coloniality’s dirty work” (n.p). There is, of course, the “bad” non-sovereignty caused by colonial structures like heteropatriarchy, but there is also the “good” non-sovereignty that describes what it means to “submit to a world-to-come” through shared forms of care and love (n.p), also known in *History* as joy. So while Driskill’s “Stolen from Our Bodies”

²³ The encounters Belcourt reflects on in his aforementioned essay “Fragments from a Half-Existence” are prime examples of an oppressive sort of non-sovereign experience.

focuses on body non-sovereignty exclusively as “coloniality’s dirty work” (n.p) to great effect, Belcourt’s *History* explores the all-encompassing nature of body non-sovereignty, in both its “good” and “bad” forms, to consider the sociopolitical possibilities made available when the “rusty category of the individual” (Belcourt, *History* 130) is disrupted or displaced altogether. In doing so, he proposes new strategies for affective life that are not so entangled with or limited by the colonial, patriarchal concept of the individual sovereign self.

The chapter “Robert,” which chronicles the entire life course of a romantic relationship, is especially adept at capturing the “good” forces of body non-sovereignty that Belcourt believes can affectively move people beyond the restricting logics of individual selfhood to more useful concepts of embodiment. Early in the chapter, subtitled “*July 2017*,” Belcourt explains the speaker’s affective state two months into a budding relationship with Robert. He writes, “I feel unhinged, as though I were adjusting to a new frequency of life, to a new gravitational force—call this care. I drift toward an elsewhere or a nowhere” (*History* 115). In conveying his speaker’s care, desire, and growing love for Robert as a destabilizing force by which he is “unhinged” and sent “[a]drift,” Belcourt reaches the common poststructuralist notion that “to be with others is to be undone by them” (115-6). As affect theorist Lauren Berlant states, “love always means non-sovereignty. Love is always about violating your own attachment[s]” (quoted in Davis and Sarlin n.p). In “Robert,” the speaker’s loving relationship undoes any attachments he holds to a fixed concept of individual selfhood. He states that with each date, “I inch closer and closer to a Not-I. I end up at the gate of a becoming-us,” which is an “unmappable world of a non-place” (115) “brimming with possibility” (116). This assessment implies that by embracing the non-sovereign implications of care and love, Belcourt’s speaker enables more positive, expansive life possibilities to emerge, which is a capacious enactment of queer Indigenous joy in itself. Indeed,

by moving beyond the illusory sovereignty of the “I” towards a more fluid and relational concept of embodied selfhood (“becoming-us”), Belcourt reorients his readers away from the normalized colonial, heteropatriarchal logics of individual embodiment and towards his notion of relational embodiment and the positive queer Indigenous affects that it proliferates.

By chronicling this process in “Robert,” Belcourt introduces his readers to a relational form of embodied affective experience that captures an important aspect of Indigenous queer relationality. As Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd states, “for Indigenous feminisms, Indigenous bodies [are] not individual, or necessarily even gendered. Instead, [they are] relationally collective” (111). And then analyzing a piece of Belcourt’s *This Wound is a World*, which touches on this concept of relational collectivity as a form of “unbodiment,” Byrd posits, “[r]ather than resisting the unbodied materiality of indigeneity, Belcourt inhabits the immateriality of Indigenous queer love as a way to remake the world...” (113). While Byrd does not draw on affect theory, their point is still helpful for its attention to how Belcourt’s work mobilizes enactments of positive affects, much like his speaker’s care and love for Robert, in order to reconstruct collective embodied life using a distinctly queer and feminist Indigenous framework. As he writes in “Robert,” “in a present that injures some more than others,” “[t]o care in a more feminist sense is to think outside of a singular life, and to do this is to participate in a process of self-making that exceeds the individual. With care, one grows a collective skin” (117). As such, for Belcourt, diverging from the individualized mode of felt embodiment²⁴ conceptually normalized by the dominant settler culture is not a hindrance to self-making or survival. Instead of working to reclaim the sovereign self, he replaces it with Indigenous queer relationality as a far more breathable mode of embodiment which, by centralizing non-sovereign

²⁴ Because understandings of embodiment are mediated by the mind’s felt experience of the larger social world, embodiment is innately “felt”.

care and love, bolsters queer Indigenous joy as a shared practice of Indigenous freedom.

So although, in Belcourt's example of relationally collective embodiment, his speaker is affectively hurt by Robert's eventual breach of monogamous exclusivity, the subsequent breakup does not undermine Belcourt's utopian theory of queer joy as a tenacious practice of Indigenous freedom. A month after the breakup, his speaker still cares for Robert and even texts him to say "thank you for what we did have," including the space to desire "SERIOUSLY, romantically, shamelessly" (123). While this brief example of his speaker's enduring care for Robert may seem inconsequential to Belcourt's theorizing overall, it actually exemplifies his memoir's concluding argument that freedom is driven by an "ethics of care, a relational practice of joy-making that is all of ours to enact" (161). By sending that text to Robert, and allowing for the joy of the romantic, shameless desire they once experienced together to persist, Belcourt's speaker uses his ethics of care to enact a practice of joy-making that is not foreclosed by the pain of heartbreak in an already injurious societal context. Instead, his joy expands beyond the confines of coupledness and epitomizes the sort of liberating affective orientation that Belcourt insists is necessary for his readers right now in the dystopian present.

The utopian directionality that undergirds Belcourt's theory of joy speaks to and works alongside the resurgence project proposed by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resurgence*. In the closing pages of *History*, Belcourt even names Simpson as an earlier generation queer Indigenous thinker who, alongside his *nôhkom*, inspires his own understanding of freedom; Simpson's insistence in *As We Have Always Done* that all her kin, both present and future, deserve to "dance through their lives with joy" (160-1) articulates an affective desire

which informs Belcourt's vision of joy for queer and Indigenous people.²⁵ As such, Simpson's argument that her relations need to "join together in a rebellion of love [...] and profound caring" that listens to and accepts "[q]ueer Indigenous youth as our teachers and our most precious theorists" (*As We* 144) points to Belcourt's theory of joy as a useful example of radical Indigenous resurgence which readers can (and should) learn from. And because Simpson, like Ahmed, mentions joy but never elaborates on what "joy" as a term means, Belcourt's substantial efforts to define queer Indigenous joy and describe its liberatory functions is even more theoretically valuable for this queer-inclusive resurgence project.

As Simpson instructs her generation to listen to queer Indigenous youth, Belcourt fulfills his responsibilities as a young theorist, resurgence thinker, and teacher by working with joy to support and encourage his peers and even younger generations. In the last paragraph of his chapter "Please Keep Loving: Reflections on Unlivability," Belcourt joyfully instructs,

NDN youth, listen: to be lost isn't to be unhinged from the possibility of a good life. There are doorways everywhere, ones without locks, doors that swing open. 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. (140)

In this passage, Belcourt sketches a visual representation of how his peers can mobilize positive affects like love to step into another way of being, which can arguably constitute a collective resurgence movement that "fight[s] on the side of hope, against suffering" (133). Although the doorway imagery could easily be misconstrued as an indication that Indigenous youth must

²⁵ Although Simpson was only born in 1971, she nonetheless represents an earlier generation of queer Indigenous theorists, which shows just how quickly this burgeoning field of study is growing with the valuable contributions of young queer Indigenous theorists like Belcourt and Whitehead, who were born in the 1990s.

escape the current conditions of their lives in order to access the “good life” that colonialism has hindered them from having, Belcourt’s caring instruction to “[p]lease keep loving” (140) says otherwise. Cohering with his earlier point that he already sees the affection of joy “bubbling up” everywhere (6), Belcourt’s instruction for his peers to “*keep* loving” (140, emphasis added) insists that they also already have the positive affective tools they need to bring about the “good life” and resist the despair of colonialism through their enactments of relational positive affects such as care, love, and joy.

And although this passage focuses on the youth-led actions that can engender queer-inclusive resurgence of the sort Simpson describes, Belcourt’s appeal innately suggests that older generations have a significant supporting role to play in this affective resistance. If it were not for his nôhkom’s and Simpson’s theories of freedom, which contributed to his conviction that care and love can facilitate meaningful change, who knows whether Belcourt would have the same capacity to rally against colonialism with love and joy and to encourage his peers to speak up and do the same. Indeed, intergenerational, multidirectional enactments of respect and love undergird Belcourt’s interventions, revealing that all generations are indispensable to this relationally collective, youth-led radical resurgence project. In this way, Belcourt’s vision of rebellion approximates to an “always-loudening chant” (140) whereby gender- and sexually-diverse Indigenous youth, supported by older generations, can insist on and experience inexhaustibly joyful modes of life.

The ongoing challenge of realizing Belcourt’s joyful vision of resurgence, however, is that quotidian acts of care and love can be hard to detect, focus on, and situate as a defining feature of collective life when, as Belcourt explains, Canadian governmental forces continue to contort Indigenous communities, such as those on reservations, into “sites for bad feeling” (134).

Moreover, there is such a widespread disavowal of queer Indigenous joy in and outside of Indigenous communities due to the compounding colonial forces of heteropatriarchy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and racism that “geographies of joy” often only “manifest where we are trained not to see them” (60). However, by claiming that the inability to see joy is “trained,” and therefore learned over time, Belcourt insists that it is entirely possible to unlearn and to retrain in another mode of seeing, especially given that under-acknowledged joy is nevertheless manifesting against all odds in contemporary life. And as I will show in the following chapters, Belcourt’s thorough enactment of an alternative mode of embodiment, which includes this alternative mode of seeing and feeling, serves as an analytic lens for (re)reading queer Indigenous texts of various periods, (re)interpreting affective situations in everyday life, and speaking and writing about the felt theories that emerge from those interpretations, such that joy is foregrounded as a central, enduring part of queer Indigenous life.

The definition, theorization, and cultivation of joy in Belcourt’s *History* therefore presents a lens to interpret the enduring significance of older queer Indigenous texts such as Gregory Scofield’s *Love Medicine and One Song: Sâkihtowin-Maskihkîy Êkwa Pêyak-Nikamowin* (1997), as I will do in the next chapter, and to analyze the affective work of more recent queer Indigenous texts like Joshua Whitehead’s *Jonny Appleseed* (2017), which I will do in the third chapter. Attending to the through line of relational joy in these three texts, starting with Belcourt’s *History*, is an analytic means of tuning into the “always-loudening” voices of joyful, gender- and sexually-diverse Indigenous youth spanning generations, whose interventions warrant more critical attention than they have been given thus far. Because Belcourt works with overlapping intellectual traditions including queer, feminist affect theory and Indigenous resurgent felt theory to explicitly name and theorize joy as a world-shaping affect, his *History*

provides a strong foundation from which to construct this care-based affect study. Alongside Belcourt's theorizations, I look to interrupt "the long history of the catastrophization of NDN life and bodies" (152) in the analyses of chapter 2 and 3, and in doing so, aim to consider the tenacious power of joy to engender a radical reorientation to life that starts in relational bodies of care.

Chapter 2

The Watershed Importance of Gregory Scofield's *Love Medicine and One Song: Sâkihtowin-*

Maskihkîy Êkwa Pêyak-Nikamowin: A Resurgent Two-Spirit Manifesto

As the first book of erotic poetry by an Indigenous author in Canada, Gregory Scofield's *Love Medicine and One Song: Sâkihtowin-Maskihkîy Êkwa Pêyak-Nikamowin* (1997) marks a watershed moment in the field of Indigenous literature (Cariou iii). Published just before the turn of the twenty-first century, this collection of queer-inclusive work falls at the beginning of a “renaissance” of “queer Indigenous poetry, essays, fiction, and theory” (Tatonetti, *Queerness* 174) within which Belcourt's and Whitehead's recent texts play an influential part. This literary lineage contributes to the connection between these three authors and provides the grounds to reconsider Scofield as a precursor to their forthright engagements with joy as a queer Indigenous affect. Although Scofield's nuanced exploration of love between three people using Cree/Métis²⁶ philosophies never names joy as such, it is principally through Belcourt's explicit theorization of this affect that I will reinterpret *Love Medicine* in this chapter. While the affective explorations in Scofield's poetry might seem more apolitical or utopian than that of more recent queer Indigenous writers because its erotic verses seem not to deal with the “asphyxiating” (Belcourt, *History* 8) impacts of colonialism, Scofield's work actually does so implicitly, which means that his celebratory “sovereign erotic” poetry (Driskill, “Call Me” 229) anticipates Belcourt's politically charged theorization of Indigenous joy in a way that other critics have yet to recognize. Despite that little scholarly attention has been paid to Scofield's *Love Medicine* since the analytical work that queer Indigenous theorist Qwo-Li Driskill performed in the early 2000s, this chapter will establish the present relevance and value of Scofield's enactments of queer

²⁶ Scofield is Métis, and his Indigenous language is Cree, which is an indispensable part of his poetry and other writing.

Indigenous erotic joy over twenty years ago. While Scofield's small-scale focus on one polyamorous relationship²⁷ may appear too intimate or individualist to exemplify expansive joy of the sort Belcourt theorizes, his radically resurgent verses *are* expansive, especially because they create the necessary space for more joyful Indigiqueer texts to follow – like those of Belcourt and Whitehead – which branch out to explore broader communities and networks of relationships through queer Indigenous joy. By fleshing out these arguments, I will ultimately conclude that *Love Medicine* deserves recuperation as a resurgent two-spirit manifesto which actively “write[s] against the unwritability of utopia” (Belcourt, *History* 9) with erotic joy leading the way, thus adding to our understanding of the queer Indigenous literary field's exciting, future-bearing trajectory.

In Scofield's collection of forty-three erotic poems, he takes readers through scenes of lovemaking and longing shaped by the interconnectivity of three lovers, nonhuman nature, Cree language, and expressions of spirituality. Together, the collection's four sections tell the non-linear²⁸ story of how the speaker's sacred love grows and persists by way of his complex relationships with his two lovers, Kim and Dean. Notably, although the speaker moves frequently between his two lovers and focuses most on his enduring love for Dean, especially when Dean is absent from his life, none of the lovers are shown to be jealous or possessive as a result. In fact, as Warren Cariou states in his introduction to the 2009 reprint of *Love Medicine*, “all of the characters seem to be abundantly aware that they are participating in something larger than themselves, something that involves taking a respectful and spiritual approach to the entire

²⁷ Note that Scofield does not call this relationship polyamorous or attach any other label to it. I only refer to polyamory here (intimate relationships with more than one partner, with the informed consent of all involved) to convey that his poetry helpfully focuses on one specific relationship wherein relational joy is explored between three people, rather than either a couple or a larger human network of joyful connections/ relationships.

²⁸ Although, as I will explore later in this chapter, the third section “Twelve Moons and the Dream” does chart an entire year of the speaker's longing and love for his lover, Dean, in a more linear fashion.

world, rather than simply to their lovers” (v). As part of the expansive framework that governs this collection, Scofield does not limit the speaker or his lovers to hetero/homonormative coupledness or fixed sexualities; they are not identified as gay, bisexual, or even polyamorous²⁹, despite that such identity labels might, to some readers, seem highly applicable and worth stating. By avoiding labels altogether, Scofield’s *Love Medicine* commits to fluid and expansive enactments of embodied love which prioritize relationality and presence within the greater natural world, not distinctions of individual identity.

Based on these introductory descriptions of Scofield’s work, one might say that his erotic verses are too idealized or apolitical to fully align with Belcourt’s joy, which Belcourt describes as “the practice of breathing in what theorist Christina Sharpe calls ‘breathtaking spaces’ shaped by oppressive forces of all kinds” (*History* 8-9). Scofield’s seemingly evasive approach to biopolitical oppression in *Love Medicine* does, I would argue, set his work apart from Belcourt’s and Whitehead’s texts, which each centre joy while confronting many iterations of racism, sexism, homophobia, and trauma head on. However, the difference of approach to “asphyxiating” social conditions between Scofield and these newer writers does not mean that Scofield’s work is too utopian or otherworldly to have a joyful, “anti-institutional” “ethics of resistance” (9) implicitly moving through it. In fact, such an argument would wrongly overlook the implications of Scofield’s thematic choices in his other literary texts, the social conditions present around the time *Love Medicine* was published, his community work with two-spirit folks throughout the 1990s, and, most importantly, his implicit acknowledgment of and resistance to settler colonial sexuality norms throughout *Love Medicine* itself. The implications of these

²⁹ It is helpful to note here, by way of a quote from Dakota scholar Kim Tallbear’s blog *The Critical Polyamorist*, that polyamory is not always an identifying label. She writes, “polyamory should remain a *method of (good) relating* and not come to be thought of primarily as a sexual orientation or identity” (Tallbear n.p).

realities, which I will address in turn, reveal that Scofield's subtle approach to harm, shame, and violence in *Love Medicine* was crucial to his individual survival and joy, and to his ability to theorize collective life beyond survival –through joy– for himself and his people.

Besides *Love Medicine*, his only erotic work, Scofield has written six other poetry collections and one memoir. Of these six, *Native Canadiana: Songs from the Urban Rez*, which was published in 1996, only a year before *Love Medicine*, is particularly indicative of Scofield's extensive thematic range in his early career. Even the titles of such poems as “The Last Uncivilized Indian” (Scofield, *Native* 38), “Mixed Breed Act” (56), and “Another Street Kid Just Died” (103) signal the politically engaged nature of this collection. Among *Native Canadiana*'s wide range of topics, Scofield explores the nuances of his Cree/Métis heritage, confronts colonial land dispossession in the prairies, addresses homophobia within Indigenous communities, and mourns the impact of the AIDS crisis on two-spirit folks in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. In “Queenie,” for instance, Scofield mourns his two-spirit former lover and ponders the likelihood of his own imminent death: “[a]lready the funeral was planned; // I would be wrapped / in a star blanket” (68). In “Owls in the City,” he grieves for other loved ones including “Donny, Ray, / Felicia” who are, like Queenie, “all sick or dead / or just about” (71). Expanding his grief to his wider community, Scofield then writes, “our *iyiniwak* [people] are dropping / like rotten chokecherries / in back alleys or hospitals” (72). In forthright, painful verses like these, *Native Canadiana* notably grapples with social injustice on many levels.

Published just three years after *Native Canadiana* and two years after *Love Medicine*, Scofield's memoir *Thunder Through My Veins* (1999; second edition in 2019) returns to the painful themes of loss and injustice shaped by the lack of resources available to queer Indigenous people in settler colonial Canada. Now in prose, Scofield writes extensively on the endemic life

conditions in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where he worked as an Indigenous youth worker throughout the 1990s, before, during, and after writing *Love Medicine*,

The IV drug use, prostitution, and violence were extreme, as was the alarming rate of HIV infection. [...] Workers such as myself tried our best to help, but it was futile. The kids, even the adults, were so damaged that it was virtually impossible to get them off the streets, more ended in suicide, overdose, murder, or AIDS related illnesses. (Scofield, *Thunder* 191)

Here, Scofield importantly discusses his own on-the-ground efforts to “make some kind of difference” (192) for those facing a “reality that could have easily been [his]” (191). He tellingly states elsewhere, “I wanted to try to empower them” (David qtd. in Scudeler, “Gifts” 205). Scofield's eagerness to help other Indigenous and two-spirit folks directly in urban settings despite the felt futility of the situation, and his subsequent desire to “shed light on issues affecting them” (191) in his writing, more than proves his willingness to grapple with hard feelings, traumatic contexts, and systemic issues directly, on and off the page. The differences in thematic content between *Love Medicine* (1997) as opposed to *Native Canadiana* (1996) and *Thunder Through My Veins* (1999) points to Scofield's exploration of multiple routes to empowerment for his people, uniquely using separate genres and bodies of text to explore various sets of affective themes in varying degrees of focus and intensity. *Love Medicine*'s erotic love poems are therefore not problematically evasive about settler colonial forces, but intentionally subtle about them in a way that best supports his queer Indigenous readers in a time already marked by such grim social conditions.

Given the overwhelming state of Scofield's life in the 1990s, when he was grappling with his own “internalized homophobia and self-hatred” (Scofield, *Thunder* 83) while frequently

bearing witness to outcomes like “suicide, overdose, murder, or AIDS related illnesses” (191), it follows that a literary space like *Love Medicine*, which centers his speaker’s tenacious enactments of care and love, was affectively necessary for Scofield’s own survival, and perhaps the survival of his readers. In *Thunder Through My Veins*, he states that writing and sharing *Love Medicine* allowed him to bring to life his “every dream and desire in relation to love” (195) which ultimately helped him to “break down the walls of [his] own internalized homophobia, set free at last the voice of [his] own spirit” (196). Ten years later, in an interview with Tanis Macdonald, Scofield theorized that “[e]ach of the poems becomes a ceremony that involves others, including the readers, who are given an opportunity to bear witness to that ceremony and take it away into their own lives” (Macdonald and Scofield 292). Scofield’s *Love Medicine* enables readers to bear witness to a set of queer Indigenous relationships infused with acceptance, love, and intimacy, perhaps for the first time, which affectively moves readers towards different, more fulfilling possibilities for embodied life beyond constricting settler colonial social codes.

Scofield’s insistence that his primary audience³⁰ can take the ceremony of his erotic poetry into their own lives, where the asphyxiating forces of racism, homophobia and shame are most pervasive, is a radical proposition that speaks with other BIPOC theories of erotics which emphasize the erotic as political and community-oriented rather than individual. Therefore, it must not be overlooked. As Audre Lorde asserts in her 1984 essay collection *Sister Outsider*, the erotic is an embodied resource which has been “vilified, abused, and devalued” within the West’s dominant culture and must be reclaimed by people experiencing oppression so they can access and share their deepest forms of feeling, creativity, and knowledge (53). Doing so “in the

³⁰ Queer Indigenous/ Two-spirit folks

face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society,” she argues, is an alternative form of political action which can “give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (59). Lorde’s work has provided resources for theorizing Indigenous resistance to ongoing settler colonial modes of dispossession and control over Indigenous lands, bodies, and cultural expressions. In the introduction to *The Queerness of Native American Literature*, Lisa Tatonetti summarizes and recontextualizes Lorde’s theory of erotics, concluding that “the erotic, then, [...] is a decolonial imperative—to feel, to remember, to act—that is *situated in the body*” (xx). Similarly, Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen/ Chumash poet and scholar Deborah Miranda posits that the decolonial drive of Indigenous erotics and their literary expression means that “the erotic [is] at odds with the violence and domination that structures any colonizing or patriarchal culture” (*Zen* 4). Elsewhere, she writes more specifically that the erotic “threaten[s] the status quo” of the West by addressing “truly consequential discourses about power, souls, well-being, and the transformational aspects of relationships based [...] on [the] celebration of pleasure and our humanity” (Miranda, “Dildos” 146). Like Tatonetti and Miranda, many Indigenous scholars and authors including but not limited to Kateri Akiwenzie Damm, Tracy Bear, Beth Brant, Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Paula Gunn Allen, Kim Tallbear, Robert Warrior, and, of course, Gregory Scofield have taken up and extended what Lorde calls “the celebration of the erotic” (55) as a source of empowerment and connection to their “deepest knowledge,” which is simultaneously “physical, emotional, psychic, [and] intellectual” (55). Through their writing, these thinkers have effectively mobilized literary expressions of sensuality, passion, and eroticism to confront the ongoing manifestations of colonization on everyday embodied experiences of life on Turtle Island (North America). In doing so, they have explored and shared how quotidian experiences of colonialism, and their affective impacts, can be shifted through

erotic celebrations that refuse to accept the settler colonial status quo as all that there is or can be.

In consideration of Scofield's contributions to this collective work, nowhere is his erotic, celebratory mode of colonial resistance made clearer than in Qwo-Li Driskill's 2003 essay "Call Me Brother: Two-Spiritness, the Erotic, and Mixedblood Identity as Sites of Sovereignty and Resistance in Gregory Scofield's Poetry." In this piece, ze touches on "sovereign erotics" as a conceptual framework for the first time, using Scofield's *Love Medicine* as a quintessential example of an "erotic celebration" which contributes to the ongoing process of decolonization (Driskill, "Call Me" 229). Driskill claims that by speaking from "outside dominant culture's notions of the erotic," Scofield refuses the "sexism and racism infused into its fiber" (229). Instead, Scofield situates the erotic as a "creative force [...] [which] becomes ceremony, prayer, and celebration" (229) rather than something "shameful, tragic, or disgusting" (228). In his conclusion, Driskill claims that Scofield's erotic poems "bring us home, help us understand who we are as Native peoples alive under continuing colonialism" (234) and are therefore "precious and necessary for a movement of decolonization" (223).

Scholarly analyses of Scofield's *Love Medicine* follow this "decolonial" and "celebratory" analytic trend for good reason. His collection is, after all, explicitly erotic, Indigenous, and queer – three categories of expression or identity which were not meant (by colonizers) to survive colonization or the Eurocentric social codes of settler colonial life (Driskill, "Call Me" 223). I too can feel the celebration of this ongoing survival present in *Love Medicine*, particularly expressed through erotic queer Indigenous bodies. In "Morning in the White Room," the fourth poem of the collection, the speaker rejoices:

In the white room

we had joined

the way two rivers meet;
 swollen from days
 of endless rain, overflowing

We had made it
 our celebration, a holy gathering
 of the empty walls
 and all that haunts them.

And our bodies,
 painted black and clinging
 to invisible horses
 galloped across the walls,
 overtook the room like warriors
 whooping our victory. (Scofield, *Love* 13)

In the poem's first stanza, Scofield situates the "white room" (13) as the setting for the speaker and his lover Dean's erotic actions, which he conveys to be fluid, natural, and inevitable in the same way that two rivers inevitably and naturally become one because of immense rainfall.

While these descriptions have a relationally collective, expansive quality to them as the lovers meet like "overflowing" rivers with an excess of desire, the symbolism of the "white" (13) space that encloses them adds a layer of complexity to their desirous, celebratory embrace, which is ultimately contained or limited by the room's structural confines. In the second stanza, Scofield

describes this room by way of its “empty walls / and all that haunts them” (13), which invokes something substantial and ominous that precedes their actions; the space is already haunted by a great number of things. Because of these negative connotations, the “white room” (13) serves as a small-scale representation of and metaphor for the settler colonial nation which, like the haunted structure of a white room, upholds a white supremacist power structure built on (and haunted by) the foundation of genocidal violence.

Yet despite the grim settler colonial setting, that is, the metaphoric white room, this poem ultimately focuses on the lovers’ “holy gathering,” which takes place within and surprisingly includes the “empty” yet haunted walls (13). Notably, rather than describing the walls as “white” in the second stanza, Scofield “empt[ies]” them of that meaning, that power, and shifts the defining quality of the space by prioritizing the victorious “whooping,” “painted black” bodies that “overtook the room” (13) in a celebratory resistance. Like Belcourt’s approach in *A History of My Brief Body*, Scofield writes his speaker “into the haunted house of Canada” (Belcourt, *History* 128) so that, through the loving, anti-institutional actions of racialized bodies within such constricting spaces, this nation, or “museum where hope disappears,” can be “emptied of its political wrath” (8). By including “all that haunts” (Scofield, *Love* 13) the walls within the erotic celebration itself, Scofield enables the lovers to embrace and celebrate their survival, their existence with and on behalf of all those Indigenous folks, and queer Indigenous folks in particular, lost to colonial violence, or Canada’s “political wrath” (Belcourt, *History* 8). Here, as elsewhere in *Love Medicine*, celebration serves as a definitive way to conceptualize Scofield’s treatment of the erotic exchanges that take place between the speaker and his lovers as personal and political acts of embodied resistance. That said, Scofield’s refusal to center colonial violence in his erotic poetry while still subtly acknowledging colonial forces through the connotations of

the “white room,” for example, aligns remarkably well with Belcourt’s conception of joy as the anti-institutional “practice of breathing in [...] ‘brehtaking spaces’” (*History* 8-9), which suggests that Scofield’s poetry can (and should) be reconsidered using this new theory of joy.

Although, as this analysis has shown, I agree with Qwo-Li Driskill that *Love Medicine*’s love poems are a politically powerful tool for “erotic celebration” (“Call Me” 229), I believe that exploring the “celebration” of queer desire and pleasure as a valuable enactment of two-spirit joy, rather than a manifestation of “sovereign erotics,” is a worthwhile interpretive move. As discussed in detail in chapter 1, Driskill’s concept of erotic body sovereignty, known as “sovereign erotics,” was widely used by scholars in the early 2000s because it effectively captures how the celebration of one’s erotic self and most intimate desires can take back power from colonial social forces that impede two-spirit well-being. But as Belcourt convincingly argues in *History*, shifting away from the fantasy of “body sovereignty” as a charismatic concept of embodiment can make room for joy as a new affective strategy for more collective, decolonial modes of embodied life that are not so entangled with the colonial, patriarchal concept of individual sovereign selfhood. Indeed, by shifting from a sovereign erotic lens of inquiry to a joyful one as Belcourt implies is necessary, we will be able to understand how Scofield’s *Love Medicine* is an early contributor to this multifaceted project of relationally collective joy. This interpretive move can give us more insight into the queer Indigenous literary field’s trajectory as it pertains to Indigiqueer affects while bringing into sharper focus how Scofield’s erotic work anticipated the current discourses on joy taking place at the vanguard of contemporary queer Indigenous literature. Therefore, conducting this joyful reinterpretation can foster valuable, telling connections between Scofield’s work and more recent works in the queer Indigenous literary field which might otherwise go undetected. Given that, as stated earlier, Driskill’s “Call

Me Brother” insightfully captures Scofield’s participation in a larger ongoing “movement” (222) away from colonial modes of life, it follows that reinterpreting Scofield’s celebratory erotic work as a felt theory of joy can reveal *Love Medicine*’s enduring importance to this burgeoning literary field, as a resurgent two-spirit manifesto, by way of the new analytic lens Belcourt offers.

To approach this reinterpretation in a meaningful way, Scofield’s poetry must overtly be reframed as a work of theory, as what I call a felt-theoretical intervention. As Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million has argued, even though “academia will not legitimate” (31) that experiential or “felt” knowledge is “the stuff of theory,” experience-based articulations of colonialism, Indigeneity, and relationality are important acts of theorizing (32). To Million, if any person engages in the process of comprehending their experience of the world (36), then they are actively participating in the “practical” (33) and “every day” (32) work of theorizing. There is no need, she states, for “prescription about how theory is done” (33) when all forms of story rightfully engage “in the articulations that interpret who we are in the discursive relations of our time” (33). As I will soon show, it is important that joy is traceable throughout *Love Medicine* on the level of content and generic form. And it is even more significant that these various articulations of joy, rooted in erotic experiences, reveal a greater theoretical argument about the need to reinvigorate the connection between diverse sexualities and Indigenous traditions, and to recognize the connection of both with durational forms of pleasure, such that joy itself becomes a theory of reclamation, repair, and ultimately, resurgence. But Scofield’s felt-theoretical intervention and its current significance can only be located if the dominant distinction between the expression of lived experience and theoretical knowledge is renounced.

Accordingly, Scofield’s poetic explorations of his speaker’s affective interactions with Dean and Kim are, in and of themselves, the work of felt theory. As Lisa Tattonetti claims in her

recent essay “Joyful Embodiment: Felt Theory and Indigenous Trans Perspectives in the Work of Max Wolf Valerio,” “affective interactions that generate felt theory are active *processes* rather than singular disconnected entities or one-time activities, and they are, as well, tied to relationality” (11). Tatonetti’s attention to duration here, to affective processes, lends itself well to detecting Scofield’s felt-theoretical mode of writing. Take again, for example, the poem “Morning in the White Room,” which I originally used to exemplify how “celebration” works in this text. In the first two stanzas, two “warriors” overtake the room in an embodied celebration, moving freely as they “dance” and “gallop” on “invisible horses” over the course of one joyous night (Scofield, *Love* 13). Interestingly, twenty-four of the poem’s thirty-one lines explain this night’s empowering celebration, yet Scofield names the poem after the morning, which he only describes in the third stanza’s seven lines. This discrepancy implies that, as Tatonetti might argue, the ongoing affective resonance of the previous night’s interactions is of primary significance to the poem’s greater purpose, its felt-theoretical work.

Scofield’s closing focus on the lovers’ actions in the morning allows him to emphasize that this poem is not a bounded representation of a past encounter, but a relational, felt-theoretical practice of joy which his readers are invited to experience as it continues into their own present lives. To do so, Scofield’s third stanza thematizes the lovers’ prior erotic activities and affects by articulating that “in the morning,” “we laughed like children, / shy in our nakedness, / scheming like raven” (14). These lines show that exchanges which could be thought of as individual events – spending a night with a lover or waking up in the morning with a lover – are thematically part of a greater ongoing plan. Despite that their exposure to one another makes them feel “shy,” the lovers “laug[h]” and “schem[e]” (14) together anyway, which implies that their celebratory lovemaking is devious and deviant, that their deviation from colonial

heteronormativity is a source of joy (which bubbles up in the form of laughter), and that they are planning (“scheming”) to be subversive again by expressing their sexual and decolonial desires together in the future. Furthermore, because Scofield aligns the nature of their relational “scheming” (14) with Indigeneity through his invocation of Raven, a trickster figure in west coast Indigenous culture and stories³¹, the lovers’ deviance is subtly positioned in accordance with Indigenous tradition, and consequently in opposition to the colonial oppression of Indigenous bodies and their expressions of love. For two-spirit readers in particular, then, Scofield’s felt-theoretical representations of lovemaking as relational modes of resistance serve as invitations to practice this sort of embodied joy in their own lives, through their own erotic experiences. By ending his poem in this way, Scofield encourages his readers to take up and continue the lovers’ joyful “scheming” by embracing their own diverse sexualities and acts of lovemaking as valid modes of colonial resistance.

For current readers to fully access *Love Medicine*’s subversive practice of joy as they take in the contents of each poem, it is most productive to work from Belcourt’s definition of joy. For Belcourt, the non-sovereign practice of queer Indigenous joy is likened to breathing amid “the most asphyxiating of conditions” (9), which helps us recognize that Scofield’s attention to breath in *Love Medicine* is a notable enactment of queer Indigenous joy. For example, in “You, the Voyeur,” Scofield writes of Dean, “Always / you are there, a breath / without contemplation or confusion” (32). Then, when dealing with the feelings of loneliness and “hopeless[ness]” (27) due to Dean’s absence in “Offering: 1996,” Scofield writes that “Where once were drums / and flutes and songs / there is silence” (27), but against such heartbreak, “I breathe all my breath // to

³¹ Scofield was born in British Columbia and grew up in various locations including Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon. Here, he is likely pulling from his knowledge of Raven trickster stories told by family from the west coast and or stories heard during his 20s when he lived in Vancouver, British Columbia.

conjure what I hold most sacred: your full, coaxing mouth” (27). In both poems, breath is centralized as a constant force of affective power. Through breath, mental contemplation and confusion subside. Through breath, the speaker “breach[es] the haze of suffering” (Belcourt, *History* 7) that heartbreak causes and settles on sacred, erotic memories of his lover. The clarity and erotic joy that breath brings to the speaker aligns with Belcourt’s claim that through breath – that is, through the ongoing practice of embodied joy-making – life can be made more livable, even when various forms of suffering, on both interpersonal and systemic levels, are present. Where there is space to breathe, joy has the potential to materialize. In this way, joy subtly materializes in Scofield’s poetry through every reference to breath, laughter, song, and sex. While already life-sustaining by nature, breath becomes affectively life-affirming and joyous as Scofield’s and Belcourt’s complementary felt theories conceptualize it.

Even on the level of generic form, Scofield’s poetry innately incorporates embodied, relational joy, since *Love Medicine* follows a Cree poetic tradition that requires a particular focus on and manipulation of breath. According to Métis scholar Warren Cariou in his introduction to the 2009 reprint of *Love Medicine*, the Cree poetic tradition is “highly attuned to rhythm, to melody, and to the ceremonial structures of Cree music” (Cariou x). He claims that because Scofield’s writing is bound up in “bodily experience and ritual and communal expression,” readers should read the poems aloud in order to ingest them meaningfully (x). Cariou insists, “taste their syllables on your own tongue [and] feel the rhythms in your own body” (x). It is imperative to experience the poetry “through the music of your own breath” (x). By foregrounding the interdependent relationship between breath, music, and poetry, Cariou highlights the dual significance of breath to the individual body and to relational modes of affective and artistic expression. As such, Cariou’s invitation for readers to breathe with this

poetry reinforces Scofield's desire for his readers to put the affective relations he describes in *Love Medicine* into practice in their own lives and sexual experiences. Moreover, Cariou's understanding of breath as music complements Belcourt's articulation that joy is the art of breathing in "breathtaking spaces" (Sharpe 109) such that, when taken together, a cyclical affective process is discernible. To put it as Belcourt might: breath becomes music becomes poetry becomes joy, and so joy also becomes as tenacious and indispensable to life as breath. By keeping this cyclical process and Scofield's poetic references to its various components in mind and body, "we might discern practices of care and joy where they are expected to be absent, to have been quashed by state power" (Belcourt and Morgan n.p).

The centrality of breath, body, and ceremonial song to Scofield's practices of care and joy are beautifully portrayed in his poem "More Rainberries," which, located early in the collection, shows how this cyclical process enacts joy for two-spirit people. While the lovers pause in their embrace, and the speaker's lips "take momentary rest" between Dean's shoulders,

breathing becomes ritual

transcends into ceremony

pushing the song up and out

of his skin

so lowly he sings (Scofield, *Love* 20)

Here, the speaker and his lover's breath conjoin to create a joyful ceremonial song which, as Driskill explains in "Call Me Brother," "roots the erotic in Cree traditions" by "link[ing] [it] with Native song, dance, and spirituality" (229). As such, Scofield enacts a distinctly queer Indigenous form of joy that, in honouring two-spiritedness, bears resemblance to Belcourt's

theory of joy as rebellion. Scofield's use of the word "pus[h]" (20) to describe how Dean's song comes out of his body makes this rebellious aspect clear, because the effort it takes on behalf of both men for Dean to let out his breath and his desire for his two-spirit lover subtly acknowledges the greater "breathtaking spaces" (Sharpe 109) within which joy comes up through their relational, erotic acts of care. Although this short poem, like the rest of the collection, never explicitly identifies the restricting social forces which, at times, impede on the speaker and Dean's complex relationship, Scofield importantly acknowledges them and the lovers' erotic resistance to them in lovemaking scenes like this.

Various other poems throughout the collection similarly allude to larger asphyxiating spaces wherein practices of care and joy emerge despite that they are "expected to be absent" (Belcourt and Nixon n.p). In the thirteen-poem cycle "Twelve Moons and The Dream," Scofield relays the speaker's relationship with his lover Dean over the course of an entire year when Dean is often absent for undisclosed reasons, not unlike in the poem "Offering: 1996." In "Paskâwêhowi-pîsim" or "June: The Hatching Moon," the speaker claims that during Dean's absence, "[n]othing is as it should be" (46) because "you won't come / to defend this love," "there is only this wanting / and so many songs" (47). Then, in "Mikisiwi-pîsim" or "February: The Eagle Moon," Scofield discloses that both their "small town" and "[their] dreambed" hold secrets (62). Furthermore, in "Ohpahowi-pîsim" or "August: The Flying-Up Moon," Scofield explores a time when Dean returns to the speaker after being away by stating that

Though this longing is no secret
 you hold it close,
 press into me, helpless
 against your shame

.....

You sing the summer's end (51)

While multiple interpretations of these excerpts are valid given that Scofield does not explicitly state the reasons for Dean's actions, the connotations of secrecy and shame in the context of queer love and sex in the 1990s are too telling to discount. I argue that these subtle lines allude to the colonial forces of homophobia and internalized homophobia which work to hinder their relationship. Scofield's use of the word "defend" to describe Dean's inaction in "June" arguably suggests that Dean is not able or willing to overtly resist the forces of a homophobic social atmosphere, or homophobic attacks against them, due to a degree of internalized homophobia and its corresponding shame. The emphasis on secrets in both "February" and "August," paired with the acknowledgement of Dean's shame (51), contributes to this interpretation, as these subtle references imply that at least an aspect of Dean's sexuality (which he explores with the speaker) is hidden from others in their wider social context.

Yet despite Dean's frequent absences, secrecy, and sense of shame or internalized homophobia amid the "breathtaking spaces" (Sharpe 109) that constitute their small town (Scofield, *Love* 62), Scofield's speaker does not allow his own pain or heartbreak due to those realities to foreclose his love and desire for Dean. In "June," while Dean is away, the speaker's "wanting" and "songs" (47) persist, and when they reunite in "August," the speaker helps Dean "sing the summer's end" as they make love "against [his] shame" (51). The speaker's tenacious practice of care, expressed through his ongoing "songs" (47), enacts the necessary breathing space for shared forms of erotic joy to emerge, even as Dean continues to grapple with his own experiences of the settler colonial world outside the scope of their lovemaking. Together, the two

men create moments in which they both can breathe, and rise above asphyxiating colonial forces like homophobia that too frequently inhibit Indigenous joy.

In this way, Scofield's *Love Medicine* conveys how relational, erotic care and love between romantic partners is a political practice of joy that supports the well-being of queer Indigenous people. And because Scofield interweaves these intimate scenes of lovemaking and longing with representations of the nonhuman world and Cree language, his orientation to joy is not individualist as it might at first seem, but is instead ecologically and culturally expansive. Indeed, Scofield's joy reaches beyond distinct human partnerships and projects in and through these important facets of his culture, creating an expansive performance of Indigenous joy that is, like Belcourt's, "caught up in an ancestral art of world-making" (Belcourt, *History* 8). As Cariou explains in his introduction to *Love Medicine*, Scofield's inclusion of the greater natural world amidst "the intimate confines of the tryst" incorporates a "spiritual dimension, demonstrating the connectedness of the entire creation" (viii). Scofield showcases this spiritual interconnectivity in "He Is," which metaphorically describes Dean as a multitude of different nonhuman forms from "earthworm, caterpillar / parting my lips" (*Love* 8) to "mountain lion / chewing bones, tasting marrow" and "rain water / tickling down my spine" (9). Similarly, in "Earth and Textures," Scofield writes of his lover Kim that

she is the song
of frogs and crickets
tickling my feet
so always I am rooted. (7)

In both cases, which are exemplary of countless other examples throughout the collection, Scofield transforms his lovers into nonhuman entities, reiterating the expansive fluidity of their

love and its natural coherence with the “entire creation” (Cariou viii). Furthermore, by situating that Kim’s actions help the speaker to feel “always [...] rooted” (Scofield, *Love* 7), Scofield indicates that intertwining erotics with the spiritual significance of the natural world can be one joyful way to ground two-spirit bodies in their Indigenous value systems, thus exemplifying the sacred connections through which his queer Indigenous readers can grow and thrive.

These liberatory connections, which joyfully re-integrate two-spiritedness and Indigenous philosophies, are extended further still by Scofield’s use of his Indigenous language, Cree, in many of his poems. According to Métis scholar June Scudeler in her essay “Gifts of Maskihkîy: Gregory Scofield’s Cree Métis Stories of Self-Acceptance,” Scofield’s application of the Cree language to his relationships “grounds him in Cree ways of being,” “link[s] [him] to both his Cree and his Métis ancestors,” and enables him to accept all the “natural and integral part[s] of himself” as a queer Indigenous man (191). Cree scholar Neal Mcleod, in his chapter “Cree Poetic Discourse,” similarly states that “ground[ing] ourselves in culture-specific references and linguistics anchors” is a means of tapping into the “ancient poetic pathways of our ancestors” and “build[ing] the ‘positive space’ of Indigenous knowledge” (91). Given these statements, Scofield’s use of his Cree language exemplifies a linguistic outlet of joy that contributes to the “ancestral art of world-making” (Belcourt, *History* 8) that Belcourt, Scudeler and Mcleod each value.

While there are many examples of Cree language in *Love Medicine*, including the titles within the thirteen-poem cycle “Twelve Moons and the Dream,” the collection’s first poem, “Earth and Textures,” applies Cree language to a scene of love and acceptance embedded in nature. Before Kim is conveyed as “the song / of frogs and crickets,” “she is pîhtwawikamik,” or “the sacred lodge where the pipe is smoked” (7). And, as the “earth lodge” in the first stanza,

Kim opens her arms to Scofield's speaker and calls to him, and by extension, to the embodied reader, "pî-pîhtâkwey, pî-pîhtâkwey," or "come in, come in" (7). As the first lines of the entire collection, these gestures of openness conveyed in Cree terms set a two-spirit-inclusive tone for the entirety of *Love Medicine*, since Kim, as a spiritual space, is open to embracing the queer Indigenous speaker for all that he is. By describing Kim in this way, Scofield uses his felt-theoretical knowledge about the value of his various erotic relationships to build a "positive space" (McLeod 91), or what I consider the "breathing space," for his gender and sexually-diverse Indigenous readers to experience radical acceptance, belonging, and joy.

Scofield's literary creation of this positive affective space for queer Indigenous readers in particular is especially significant because colonization intended for Indigeneity, spirituality, diverse sexualities, erotics, and their interconnectivity to be stifled and erased. The hierarchical social structures of heteropatriarchy, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in the West continue to reinforce the overwhelming oppression of queer Indigenous life and any positive connotations attached to it. As Chris Finley argues in her essay "Decolonizing the Queer Native Body (and Recovering the Native Bull-Dyke)," heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity have "become so natural in many Native communities that it is internalized and institutionalized as if it were traditional" (34). These invasive forces, Qwo-Li Driskill contends, are evidence of the manifold ways that colonial powers "[maintain] control over our homelands, our bodies, and our spirits" ("Stolen" 57). Ze states that the dominant settler colonial culture

continue[s] to enforce the idea that sexuality and non-dichotomous genders are a sin, recreating sexuality as illicit, shocking, shameful, and removed from any positive spiritual context. Queer sexualities and genders are degraded, ignored, condemned, and destroyed. As people often raised under dominant culture's values

through our homes, televisions, or teachers, Two-Spirit erotic lives continue to be colonized. (54)

While the entirety of this quotation is insightful, Driskill's attention to the colonial removal of "positive spiritual context[s]" (54) for conceptualizing Indigenous sexuality and gender diversity is most compelling. By asserting the necessity of specifically "positive" frameworks for understanding, Driskill implies that collective affective orientations play a significant role in whether two-spirit well-being is achievable. Her later plea that artists and scholars "return" (56) to and "(re)creat[e]" (59) positive contexts for erotic expression describes the exact move that Scofield's felt theory makes. By exploring the intersection of Indigenous poetic traditions, spirituality, and embodied queer pleasure, *Love Medicine* returns to long-suppressed positive spiritual contexts and reclaims joy as a two-spirit affective orientation, thus providing the necessary breathing space for more queer Indigenous enactments of joy, love, and care to follow.

Scofield's discursive moves towards positive affective orientations for himself and his readers reveal that his felt-theoretical approach to queer Indigenous erotica can be seen as part of a network of valuable connections to other Indigenous freedom thinkers working against ongoing colonial oppression. For example, I could trace Gerald Vizenor's 1999 concept of "survivance" – a combination of survival and resistance – throughout Scofield's 1997 collection since his love poems, like "Native Survivance stories," are inherent "renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (Vizenor vii). However, as with Driskill's "sovereign erotics," parsing out a theoretical connection between two Indigenous texts which were both published near the turn of the century would not help illuminate the current importance of Scofield's writing to the intersection of queer Indigenous theory, feminist affect theory, and radical Indigenous resurgence theory. While *Love Medicine* can be (and has been) read as both a survivance text and a sovereign erotic text,

its exemplification of queer joy as a form of collaborative, affective world-making marks it as an early radical resurgent text that, like recent interventions in Indigenous studies, uses generative refusal and relational joy as its mode of colonial resistance.

I am particularly compelled by the fact that, when read through the lens that Belcourt's new theory of joy provides, Scofield's work can also be recognized as an early contribution to the project of radical resurgence that Simpson outlines in her 2017 book *As We Have Always Done*, especially since both works adopt similar approaches to refusal³² that are inherently joyful. Despite theorizing within and against what Belcourt calls "asphyxiating" settler colonial contexts and circumstances (*History* 8), Scofield, like Belcourt and Simpson, refuses to exhaust his interpretive energy by focusing only on the harms of "white supremacy, gender violence, [and] heteropatriarchy" (Simpson, *As We* 231). Instead, they each put their energy into creating breathing room for the healthy ideas, practices, and affective relations they wish to perpetuate for themselves and their communities, making joyful visions of Indigenous life their empowering objects of focus. These moves showcase the shared kind of Indigenous freedom that these felt-theorists are *for* – a "for-ness" that, as Sara Ahmed's affective intervention states, can "open up different possibilities of living [...] [and] take us to a different relation to the world" (178). As Ahmed claims elsewhere in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, transformations are possible because "our investments move as we move" (172); therefore, "every moment of refusal" is "an opening up of the future" (171). As such, Scofield's utopia-driven *Love Medicine* is, like Simpson's radically resurgent book, an enactment of "generative refusal" (Simpson, *As We* 25)

³² Although the confines of this project limit the number of interventions I can consider at length, it is important to acknowledge that various methods of "refusal" have been forwarded in a number of Indigenous-authored texts including Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* which considers necessary modes of ethnographic refusal during research (see chapter 4) and Glen Coulthard's work of political theory *Red Skin, White Masks* which calls for the refusal of state recognition as a means of reconciliation, because the politics of recognition ultimately uphold settler colonial systems and interests. Simpson thinks with both authors in chapter 10 of *As We Have Always Done*.

which provides an “appropriate response to oppression” while simultaneously generating joyful, “living alternative[s]” (33) for Indigenous people in the present and future.

As part of their compatible enactments of generative refusal, Scofield and Simpson are both unwilling to accept the practice of “degrading and devaluing [...] [of] 2SQ people” (52) within Indigenous communities. As someone who does not “fit neatly into the colonial gender binary” (127), Simpson stresses that interrupting the continuity of “homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, discrimination, and ongoing gender violence” (52) is imperative and possible, so long as Indigenous communities commit to “generat[ing] on-the-ground alternatives” (54) as a collective response to these oppressive systems. Simpson states that supporting queer Indigenous folks, and especially youth, “is one of the things that we can collectively take on and make better. Right now” (120). She elaborates, “what I want out of the present and what I expect from the future” is to “live freedom” (7) in such a way that “[my great-grandchildren’s] bodies [can] carry with them every story, every song, every piece of poetry hidden in our Nishnaabeg language. I want them to be able to dance through their lives with joy” (7-8). This goal’s emphasis on gender – and sexuality – inclusive routes to the revitalization of Indigenous lifeways, expressed through the body’s capacity to hold cultural tradition, spirituality, and joyful pleasure, mirrors Scofield’s materialization of embodied joy in love poems like “Morning in the White Room,” “More Rainberries,” “Earth and Textures,” which contribute to his efforts to create “some kind of difference” (Scofield, *Thunder* 192) for Indigenous folks through his on-the-ground social work throughout the 1990s. The presence of such similar expressions of embodied joy in both Scofield’s verses and Simpson’s introduction reveals that decades before Belcourt’s theory of joy and Simpson’s radical resurgence theory found their footing as unified texts, resurgent enactments of joy resonant with Belcourt’s and Simpson’s vision were working

to affirm and engender two-spirit life and futurity in the settler colonial context that is Canada. Therefore, as an enduring and invigorating affect, queer Indigenous joy is indispensable to the world-building project of radical resurgence.

Scofield's mobilization of joy, then, takes on even more significance as a resurgent piece of literature which affectively contributes to and often exemplifies Simpson's model for Indigenous freedom. A section of Simpson's introduction helps elucidate this further, as she states:

[H]ow we live, how we organize, how we engage in the world—the process—not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation. How molds and then gives birth to the present. The how changes us. How is the theoretical intervention. [...] If we want to create a different future, we need to live a different present, so that present can fully marinate, influence, and create different futurities. (19)

Simpson's point here resonates with Ahmed's argument that a politics of love "is necessary in the sense that how one loves matters; it has effects on the texture of everyday life and [...] social relations" (*Cultural Politics* 140). She continues, "[w]e need to be invested in the images of a different kind of world and act upon those investments in how we love our loves, and how we live our lives" (141). Because Scofield's *Love Medicine* commits to reshaping the affective lens through which he, and his readers, interpret erotic queer Indigenous life and relationships, Scofield evidently recognizes the world-building power of shifting "how we live" and "how we engage in the world" (Simpson, *As We* 19) through our affective orientations. Indeed, *Love Medicine* presents Scofield's readership with generative examples of how they can shift "how they love their loves and live their lives" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 141) through relationally embodied joy and, by doing so, how they can tangibly participate and invest in social

transformation, even in intimate, small-scale ways.

Although the entirety of Scofield's *Love Medicine* speaks to these complementary elements of Ahmed's queer feminist affect theory and Simpson's Indigenous resurgence theory, and shows exactly *how* queer Indigenous embodied joy "invests" in a "different kind of world" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 141) or "different futurities" (Simpson, *As We* 19), one poem precisely exemplifies this transformative process. In "Night Train," Scofield frames his practices of joy-making as expansive, transformative acts which begin in the present and propel into the future:

Tonight

I am in dual love, no

I am in love double: $1+1 = 3$

counting him, her and me, and

if you added

his perfect lips her perfect arms

multiplied my heart, counted

all the sensations

.....

my skeleton would stretch

a love song from here

to eternity (75)

Scofield uses this poem, and the present moment ("tonight"), for positive reflections on the plurality of his erotic relationships. In the two stanzas featured here, he frames both Dean and

Kim as complementary sources of expansive love which he communicates through reference to addition and multiplication. In doing so, Scofield shows that *how* he conducts his relationships, with utmost care and appreciation, produces outcomes that are always greater than the sum of its parts. That is, Scofield's appreciation of his partners and their perfections ("his perfect lips her perfect arms") is what allows his heart to "multiply," or to expand its capacity for joy, love, and other related "sensations" (75) exponentially.

The transformative outcome of these pleasurable affects materializes when Scofield considers how his own skeletal form is metaphorically reshaped into a joyful song by the impacts of embodied love. Ahmed claims that pleasurable affects "expand the contours of bodies, as they reach towards what is possible" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 185). She states, because "pleasure is expansive," "[p]leasures open bodies to worlds" (164). Scofield experiences, records, and shares precisely this kind of expansion towards "different possibilities of living" (178), as he affectively "stretches" himself in the form of a love song from "here" to an "eternity" (Scofield, *Love* 75) of embodied joy. By placing his positive feelings towards his lovers and their relationships at the very center of his writing, Scofield actively "write[s] against the unwritability of utopia" (Belcourt, *History* 9) and, in the process, exemplifies that a joyful "future is here in [...] the practices of the present" (Simpson, *As We* 213). In "Night Train," Scofield perfectly captures that, to borrow Simpson's resurgent argument once again, "[h]ow we live [...] *how* we engage in the world—the process—not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation [...] The *how* changes us" (19).

Despite the collection's transformative potential, bolstered by its joyful, future-bearing implications, *Love Medicine* has not received the long-lasting appreciation or scholarly engagement that it deserves, especially since its reprint in 2009. As stated, it was initially

respected as a “sovereign erotic” text with a powerful decolonial drive. It was likewise lauded for “beginning a shift in thinking” (Cariou iii) regarding “how love is connected to sexuality, spirituality and nature” (iii). However, this positive reception did not keep active engagements with this collection circulating. In fact, Warren Cariou’s introduction to the 2009 reprint of *Love Medicine* spotlights this lack of long-term engagement by stating, “[t]his book richly deserves to be brought back into the public eye” (iii). He then argues in favour of its recuperation by claiming that, in 1997, *Love Medicine* was an “important watershed” text which had a “strong impact” on other Indigenous writers and on LGBTQ communities for its “tender and nuanced explorations” of complex sexualities and “erotic subjects within [his] own traditions” (iii). I would add that *Love Medicine* deserves renewed attention not only for its impact on queer Indigenous erotic literature, but also because it anticipates contemporary felt-theoretical interventions taking place at the intersection of queer Indigenous theory, radical Indigenous resurgence theory, and feminist affect theory. As such, *Love Medicine* deserves explicit recognition – and full recuperation – as a resurgent two-spirit manifesto. Through the queer erotic, this watershed manifesto expands the “breathing space” of joy for younger generations of queer Indigenous writers to continue theorizing a more liberating world-to-come, in even broader and more expansive ways.

Cariou’s first distinction that this collection “[began] a shift in thinking” about the connectivity of love with “sexuality, spirituality and nature” (iii) is helpful, but ultimately feels incomplete. I acknowledge that Cariou, much like Driskill in the early 2000s, did not have the same compelling theoretical interventions to work from as I do now; however, as this chapter has argued, it is crucial to ask what connective shifts like this *do*, or what further work they perform, in order to locate the enduring significance of this literature. By connecting love (a component of

embodied joy) to “sexuality, spirituality and nature” (iii), Scofield’s manifesto enacts the resurgent claim that queer Indigenous folks deserve to feel connected with every aspect of themselves and their traditional Indigenous lifeways, beyond the harmful influences of colonial cultures. Therefore, these connections work to pry open a safe affective space within which two-spirit readers can fully imagine (and felt-theorize) the possibility of embodied joy for themselves and their relations despite dominant colonial social conditions. In doing so, Scofield’s two-spirit manifesto taps into a timelessly “sacred place within” (Scofield, *Love* 3) and invites others to join him in that generative affective space. Many years later, “practitioner[s] of the utopian” (Belcourt, *History* 1) such as Belcourt and Whitehead, and theorists like Simpson, have joined Scofield in order to give more space and increasingly collective means of honouring all that is “so queer, so sacred” (Simpson, *As We* 144) about queer Indigenous life and futurity.

While not yet a focus of scholarly analyses, Scofield’s connectivity with these cutting-edge queer Indigenous theorists, especially those in far younger generations, has been recognized by other Indigenous writers, as well as by some of the young theorists themselves. For example, prolific Tłıchǫ Dene writer Richard Van Camp, only five years Scofield’s junior, importantly connects Scofield and Whitehead in a blurb for Whitehead’s debut novel *Jonny Appleseed*. Van Camp writes, “*Jonny Appleseed* is the most beautiful quill and bead work that I’ve felt since discovering ... Gregory Scofield. I’m in awe, Jonny. I’m grateful, Joshua. I’m astounded ... You are my new hero” (Van Camp, back cover). Here, Van Camp implies that Whitehead is a literary descendant of Scofield’s insofar as both their literary approaches produce beautiful, culturally relevant art works that he can “feel” rather than just “read.” Like Scofield, Whitehead engenders the joyful sensations of awe, gratitude, and astonishment for Van Camp as a reader.

Notably, Whitehead himself feels this connection and recognizes the influential role that

Scofield plays for young writers like himself and Belcourt. In a blurb for the 2019 reprint of Scofield's memoir *Thunder Through My Veins* (1999), Whitehead endearingly comments that "Gregory Scofield is the literary uncle to all of Indigenous Lit. . . . The return of *Thunder Through My Veins* marks an important shift in thinking about the cyclical nature of how our stories weave through time" (Whitehead, back cover). Like Cariou, Whitehead recognizes how Scofield, and the return of his work, powerfully "begins" or "marks" collective shifts in thinking. As his blurb implies, Scofield's works (including *Love Medicine*) can present abundant opportunities for younger theorists, scholars, and readers to consider the application of Scofield's felt theories in their own lives, if only given the opportunity through the "return" of his writing. By calling Scofield the "uncle" of Indigenous literature, Whitehead touchingly indicates that he is a respected, knowledgeable member of this literary community from whom younger writers like himself can (and do) learn, especially given that his use of the term "uncle" mirrors the respectful use of the term "auntie"³³ by Indigenous youth for Indigenous women leaders and mentors who work to bolster the well-being of youth and their wider communities. As literary kin, there is an intimate connectivity, a lineage, between Scofield and those who have followed his lead in the exploration of tenacious queer Indigenous joy. Together, on either side of a twenty-year span, these authors produce, share, and circulate joy as a queer Indigenous affect which has the capacity to move Indigenous readers "not in the direction of the dead future that state violence anticipates but instead towards a time and place gushing with all that this violence can't extinguish, which is our metaphysics of joy" (Belcourt, *History* 110).

³³ Here, I am reminded of Cree/Métis scholar and self-identified "academic auntie" (Anderson 204) Kim Anderson, whose Indigenous feminist praxis "start[s] with the 'auntie' responsibilities for teaching younger generations" and showing Indigenous youth the "Indigenous feminist foundations within our cultures" (210). The alignment of "academic auntie" and "literary uncle," both as knowledgeable mentors and teachers with feminist and queer-inclusive perspectives, helps further situate the importance of Whitehead's blurb and Scofield's significance to the larger queer-feminist Indigenous literary community.

Chapter 3

“We are our own best medicine”: Storytelling with Joy in Joshua Whitehead’s *Jonny Appleseed*

“*Jonny Appleseed* is the most beautiful quill and bead work that I’ve felt since discovering Chrystos and Gregory Scofield. I’m in awe, Jonny. I’m grateful, Joshua. I’m astounded at everything you’ve gathered here for us to honour ... You are my new hero. Don’t ever stop writing and sharing.”

– Richard Van Camp (*Jonny Appleseed* back cover)

In Tłıchǫ Dene writer Richard Van Camp’s aforementioned blurb for Ojibwe Cree two-spirit writer Joshua Whitehead’s first novel *Jonny Appleseed*, Van Camp notably highlights a connection between Whitehead and his literary predecessor Scofield. In doing so, Van Camp gratefully labels Whitehead “my new hero” (back cover) – a distinction which works especially well as an opening for further exploration in this chapter. Van Camp’s brief comment raises the question: is Whitehead his “new” hero because, as a young writer, he successfully emulates watershed writers like Gregory Scofield? Or, perhaps more compellingly, is he Van Camp’s “new hero” because his novel accomplishes something new in a way that meaningfully differentiates his achievements from those of his literary predecessors and peers? Although *Jonny Appleseed* has garnered rave reviews, multiple literary awards, and much public attention since it was published in 2018, Whitehead’s narrative interventions with *Jonny* have largely gone unexplored by literary scholars and critics. I wonder then, what theoretical contributions could come to the fore if Whitehead’s connections with other queer Indigenous authors, texts, and theories were parsed through? What could identifying the similarities and differences between Whitehead’s *Jonny* (realistic fiction) and important felt-theoretical works like Belcourt’s *History* (memoir/ nonfiction essays) and Scofield’s *Love Medicine* (poetry) do for our understanding of the niche intersection of feminist affect studies and queer Indigenous studies and, even more specifically, what could it do for our understanding of joy as an affective mode of rebellion and

queer Indigenous resurgence?

In light of these guiding analytical questions, this chapter argues that the novel's young two-spirit namesake, Jonny, embodies the emerging concept of joy as a liberatory affective orientation, and that his joyful disposition and actions can be transformative for Indigenous communities to bear witness to. Taking into consideration Whitehead's life experiences and scholarly career, which inspired his creation of Jonny as a vibrant two-spirit "avatar" ("Devery" n.p), I posit that Whitehead's *Jonny* epitomizes the most politically powerful qualities of the other queer Indigenous texts featured in this thesis while also providing distinct and necessary contributions to this relationally collective project of joy. Indeed, Whitehead's novel combines Belcourt's overt interrogations of settler colonialism and theorization of joy in his autobiographical essay collection *History* with Scofield's intimate embrace of spiritual, erotic pleasure in his poetry collection *Love Medicine*. And by conveying such themes and others in the form of a "'realistic' fiction" (Justice, *Why* 142), Whitehead produces an exceptionally accessible model of queer Indigenous joy that can reach, and potentially be emulated by, a wide readership. To do so, his novel uses colloquial rather than academic or poetic vocabulary and a temporal structure that enables him to explore Indigiqueer joy across the span of his protagonist's youth through a range of everyday life circumstances, relationships, and, most notably, scenes of dialogic, reciprocal storytelling between friends, lovers, and family members.³⁴ These formal and generic features help Whitehead to capture the collectivity of joy in a community-oriented way that the other two texts do not, at least not to the same extent.

Belcourt's essays primarily reference experiences with strangers and loved ones, like his felt-

³⁴ I specifically refer to Whitehead's scenes of storytelling as "dialogic" to highlight the relational discourse taking place with words between the various characters. Erotic scenes of lovemaking like those featured throughout Scofield's *Love Medicine* are embodied scenes of storytelling, but they differ from Whitehead's because they do not directly explore spoken communication/conversation.

theorist nōhkom, as catalysts for large-scale conceptual theorizations about joy as a feminist mode of collective life. Inversely, Scofield's poetic enactments of joy focus most on the interconnectivity of a single polyamorous relationship with non-human nature, but do not include dialogue between participants or reference to larger human kinship networks. While these features are not problematic aspects of Belcourt's essays and Scofield's poems, they do reveal the unique significance of Whitehead's novel and its emphasis on joyful, dialogic scenes of storytelling between Jonny and a range of his kin, which serve as powerful, realistic examples of healing and potential transformation.

In making these distinctions regarding the immense value of Whitehead's work, I attend to a notable part of Daniel Heath Justice's *Why Indigenous Literature Matters* in which he argues that the realist novel is often problematic because it tends to reinforce a pathologizing model of "Indigenous deficiency" or dysfunctionality as the "'real' of Indigenous experience" (147). In contrast, I contend that Whitehead's non-conventional, decolonial use of this form does just the opposite. Rather than reaffirming the idea that the "real" of Indigenous experience is necessarily tragic, Whitehead's realistic fiction performs how an especially approachable care-based model of Indigenous joy can not only shape the "real" of contemporary queer Indigenous experiences, but can help to heal larger communities, especially when mobilized through communal practices of storytelling that orient towards joy. To convey the significance of Whitehead's emphasis on healing storytelling practices to his Indigenous readers and their larger kinship networks, the latter section of this chapter will focus on the political and theoretical import of Whitehead's assertion that Jonny knows his "voice," "body," and "life" are a healing "bundle of medicine" (109) – a concept which we do not see much, if at all, in this project's other texts. In doing so, I will ultimately argue that Whitehead's felt-theoretical novel exemplifies to queer Indigenous

readers that their everyday stories of pain, care, and tenacious love are relationally collective enactments of joy that, in making space for more joyful stories to follow, are the “best medicine” (80) with which communities can heal, and bolster radical Indigenous resurgence right now in everyday life.

Jonny Appleseed is a semi-autobiographical realistic novel that follows Whitehead’s young “Two-Spirited persona” (Whitehead, *Love* 15) and narrator, Jonny, through the week leading up to his return to Peguis First Nation Reserve (Whitehead’s own community) for his stepfather’s funeral. After two years of living and working in Winnipeg as an online sex worker, this impending return pushes Jonny to grapple with his turbulent coming-of-age in a community divided on whether his explorations of gender, sexuality, and his two-spirit identity are acceptable. In intimate detail, the novel’s many flashbacks describe the formative relationships, experiences, and stories that shape Jonny’s present life, acknowledging among other things the ridicule and violence he endured at the hands of his late stepfather, cousins, and classmates for his “feminine ways” (*Jonny* 172), as well as the care and love he received from his late kokum (grandmother), his mother, and his best friend and lover, Tias, for those same presentations of two-spiritness.³⁵ By honing his storytelling abilities through his body language and words, and sharing these skills with his loved ones, Jonny reconciles his experiences with both the “pain and the joy [...] [the] sullen and [the] sexy” (201) of contemporary two-spirit life, and exemplifies just how relational joy can be nurtured and expanded by two-spirit folks and their kin despite the adverse manifestations of colonial heteropatriarchy in their communities.

Because there are many similarities between Whitehead and his character Jonny, many of Whitehead’s readers understandably mistake *Jonny* for an autobiographical coming-of-age

³⁵ Refer to the thesis introduction for the definition of two-spirit (and Indigiqueer), if needed.

memoir (Whitehead, “Jonny” n.p), but it is critical to clarify from the outset that this is not the case. Yes, Whitehead has stated that some undisclosed portions of the novel are autobiographical, that Jonny displays “the better parts of me, hyperbolized” (n.p), and that Jonny’s beloved late kokum, Frances, is named after his own great-grandmother and represents “an amalgamation of a lot of the women in my life” (“Devery” n.p), but readers should still not conflate the writer and narrator’s lives as a result of these details. In fact, to mistakenly read the novel as an autobiography would be to miss the immense value and significance of Whitehead’s liberatory exploration of various circumstances, behaviours, affects, and outcomes which notably exceeds the constraints of his personal experiences and expands into those of his readers as well. By instead considering the implications of Whitehead’s interrelated roles as a creative writer, scholar, and editor, and his corresponding reasons for writing his protagonist in this semi-autobiographical way, we can recognize better how Whitehead’s fictional work resonates with the diverse texts of a range of queer feminist thinkers and makes important theoretical contributions to the field of queer Indigenous studies.

As a creative writer of poetry (*full-metal indigiqueer*), fiction (*Jonny Appleseed*), and nonfiction (*Making Love with the Land*, forthcoming August 2022), and as an editor (*Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*), literary scholar, and now an assistant professor of Indigiqueer literature (University of Calgary), Whitehead’s professional life is fully invested in writing, publishing, and engaging with a range of Indigenous and two-spirit texts. As such, it would be remiss to read Whitehead’s novel in a vacuum by not recognizing how his community-based model of Indigenous scholarship and creative writing informed his creation of *Jonny*. As Lisa Tatonetti points out in the opening of a review essay on four texts including Whitehead’s *full-metal* and *Jonny* and Belcourt’s poetry collection *This*

Wound is a World, this new generation of LGBTQ/2S Indigenous writers is “on fire” (“Weaving” 153) not only because they produce creative works of “lyric brilliance” (155), but because this brilliance is the literary manifestation of their intellectual and community work in and outside of academia (154). In addition to their creative writing, she elaborates that they

give innumerable interviews and readings, hold conferences, present talks, take MA and PhD exams, mentor each other and their peers, teach in classrooms, workshops, and through informal interactions ... and, far beyond stagnating in academia, work with and for Indigenous communities and LGBTQ/2S Indigenous youth. (153-4)

Tatonetti implies here that Whitehead’s extensive knowledge of the field of Indigenous literary studies and his deep engagement with other queer Indigenous folks and their broader communities are foundational to his creative writing practice. This indicates that the voices of Whitehead’s literary speakers, including Jonny, are a necessary extension of his community-building practices elsewhere; Jonny arguably communicates something that Whitehead could not fully convey within his roles as a poet, scholar, professor, and community activist.

The multifaceted nature of Whitehead’s career and community involvements add depth to the theoretical significance of his reasons for writing Jonny as a tenaciously joyful narrator. In a 2016 interview with *The Malahat Review*,³⁶ Whitehead states that as a young two-spirit person engaging with English literature, “I couldn’t see myself. Not in ... YA texts, not in the canon, not in the great majority of books I read through two degrees...” and that, because “I haven’t ever seen or heard this story” of “sex-positivity, of sex/uality, of the vivacity [...] of Indigiqueerness,” it needs to exist all the more (Whitehead, “Hearing” n.p). Furthermore, in an interview with queer Mohawk actor Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs, who advocated for *Jonny Appleseed* in the

³⁶ At the time of this interview’s release, *Jonny Appleseed* was a short story published in *The Malahat Review*.

2021 CBC Canada Reads competition, Whitehead states that he wrote *Jonny* because “I needed Jonny to be in the world, like an avatar, as a figure for myself and ... the larger communities that I represent: a two-spirit community, queer Indigenous, trans Indigenous, non-binary Indigenous folks, specifically the youth across Turtle Island. I needed this glitter figure to be ... offering his stories” (“Devery” n.p). As these quotes imply, Turtle Island’s two-spirit communities and their vibrancy have been largely absent in previous Indigenous literatures. To rectify this erasure, Whitehead intentionally developed Jonny to showcase and embody that Indigiqueerness is a present and positive mode of life even in the dystopian twenty-first century. Whitehead had never “seen or heard this story” of Indigiqueerness before (Whitehead, “Hearing” n.p), but this does not mean that he wrote *Jonny* because two-spirit vibrancy is absent from life in general. By calling Jonny a “glitter” figure, Whitehead implies that Jonny is a bright reflection of the “vivacity” (n.p) that Whitehead already sees shining through his own lifeways and those of his two-spirit community members, but which he knows are too often overshadowed by the harsh realities of everyday life under settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. For this reason, Whitehead argues that distinctly positive representations of queer Indigeneity are necessities in order for his “Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer kin to survive” (Whitehead, “Hearing” n.p). And, as his introduction to *Love After the End* rhetorically asks years later, “[w]hat better way to imagine survivability than to think about how we may flourish into being joyously animated rather than merely alive?” (11). In light of these comments alone, Jonny takes shape as a theoretical manifestation or reflection of the positive affects that Whitehead needs himself and his gender diverse communities to recognize in their own bodies and experiences, now and in the future, for their collective survival, healing, and flourishing to be possible.

Accordingly, Whitehead’s career background, paired with his thorough consideration of

Jonny's purpose as a representational two-spirit "glitter figure," shows that his narrative speaks to radical Indigenous writers like Belcourt, Scofield, Simpson, and others whose works have also reimagined the "survivability" (11) or "livability" (Belcourt, *History* 150) of queer Indigenous life by sharing the felt theories that have emerged through their affective life experiences and observations. Whitehead himself recognizes this connection, specifically expressing his gratitude to twenty-six writers and theorists who have "paved the way for me to write a book like this" in his acknowledgements for *Jonny* (221). Among them, Whitehead notably thanks a number of writers relevant to this project, such as Billy-Ray Belcourt, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Lee Maracle, Deborah Miranda, and Gregory Scofield, and even goes on to thank Van Camp for "orating Larry Sole into the world" and Eden Robinson for "gifting us with her lovingly pained narrator, Jared" (221-2). By showing gratitude for the contributions that this particular set of thinkers, and even their narrators, have made to the burgeoning field of Indigenous literature, Whitehead outlines the shape of his literary community and, in doing so, signals the theoretical interventions he finds most resonant with his, and Jonny's. But like Van Camp's brief blurb aligning *Jonny Appleseed* with *Love Medicine*, Whitehead's articulation of his own connection with Scofield and twenty-five others does not elaborate on how exactly he understands his work in relation to theirs, or from what shared principles, themes, or theories he and these writers operate.

In what follows, I will therefore flesh out some of the most compelling intersections between Whitehead's joyful theorizing and that of Belcourt and Scofield, in order to show that his novel shares politically powerful qualities with each of their works, yet also makes distinct contributions that can further expand our understanding of queer Indigenous joy and its value as a radical resurgent affect. Like Belcourt's essays, Whitehead's novel provides overt

interrogations of the heteropatriarchal norms that harm queer Indigenous folks and, in doing so, materializes joy as an affective mode of collective rebellion against colonial gender prescriptions. And like Scofield's poems, Whitehead's prose frequently explores queer erotic activities as a spiritual means of expressing relational, decolonial Indigenous joy. But partly because of the formal and generic differences that set Whitehead's novel apart from Scofield's poems and Belcourt's essays, Whitehead conveys these themes and others in a uniquely collective way. By exploring joy through the form of realistic fiction using accessible colloquial prose and a temporal structure that allows his work to explore a multitude of common life circumstances not seen in the other two texts, *Jonny* shows an especially broad audience how queer Indigenous joy can be mobilized through everyday dialogic and collaborative storytelling practices as a form of "medicine" that can support the well-being of two-spirit people, and, by extension, strengthen their entire communities.

As young theorists engaging with contemporary queer Indigenous life in Canada, Whitehead and Belcourt both explicitly grapple with many of the same harmful social constructs in their work, including, but not nearly limited to, the binary gender performativity norms that maintain colonial heteropatriarchy. In doing so, they both produce relational queer joy as what Belcourt calls "the practice of breathing" amid "'brehtaking spaces' shaped by oppressive forces of all kinds" (Belcourt, *History* 9).³⁷ As I will now show through a pair of close readings, Whitehead's interpersonal theorization of joy politically coheres with Belcourt's more abstract theorization of joy, and his novel provides extensive narrative examples of how relational queer joy can show up, as Belcourt argues, even amid the violence that "cut[s] along gendered lines" (14).

³⁷ Belcourt's reference to "brehtaking spaces" is from Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (109).

As discussed in chapter 1, Belcourt's *History* works on an abstract level to interrogate the binary gender performativity norms that continue to harm queer Indigenous people in the wake of colonization.³⁸ In his essay "An NDN Boyhood," Belcourt also critiques how Indigenous boys and men are socially pressured to act with violence and struggle "against emotion" (19) to adequately perform "racialized masculinity" according to the dominant heteropatriarchal value system (14-5). This violent gender prescription, he argues, "sucks the air out of the room" (14), or, in other words, creates oppressively breathtaking spaces. To work against these damaging gender norms, Belcourt asserts that Indigenous folks must apply feminist practices of parenting and community building to encourage boys and men to take up "the labour of care" because, through collective enactments of care, "there is another mode of life to inhabit" (15). By arguing that care by Indigenous boys and men breathes new life possibilities into communities that have been harmed by heteropatriarchal violence, Belcourt provides one broad way that collective joy can be fostered. But what might this joyful practice of feminist care look like on an interpersonal rather than abstract level? Analyzing Whitehead's narrative can help to answer this politicized question, and, in doing so, can extend our understanding of the transformative value of Indigenous care-based joy.

By showing Jonny's reactions to the enforcement of gender performativity norms in his community as a young boy, Whitehead's narrative epitomizes Belcourt's argument that the joy embedded in acts of care can combat toxic masculinity and patriarchal violence in Indigenous communities. For just one example, in chapter 18 of *Jonny*, Whitehead describes the punishment that Jonny's best friend Tias suffers at the hands of his father when the two young boys are caught after painting their fingernails with their babysitter while his parents are out. Although

³⁸ See my analysis of Belcourt's poem "REZ FAG" (*History* 108) in chapter 1.

nail painting, to Jonny and Tias, is a joyful “tradition we wholeheartedly signed up for” (73), Tias’ father treats the act as a problematic breach of gender presentation that must be punished. Yelling at Tias to “cut this girly shit” and “stop hanging around that girly-boy” Jonny, Tias’ father violently cuts his painted nails until his fingers bleed (76). In effect, by removing the evidence of gender play and fluidity by cutting Tias’ nails, his father attempts to disembody and therefore stifle the queer self, to physically separate queerness (signified by sparkly nails) from Indigeneity through this violent act of disavowal. The strict enforcement of the gender binary within Tias’ home undeniably exemplifies an oppressive heteropatriarchal space that, as Belcourt would say, “sucks the air out of the room” (*History* 14).

But through Jonny’s gentle support of Tias after his punishment, the breathing space for care and joy re-emerges within that violently disembodiment context, bringing with it a feminist mode of possibility that beautifully exemplifies Belcourt’s more abstract interventions. After sitting with Tias, acknowledging his wounds, and patting his back to comfort him, Jonny “took his hand, and stuck his finger in my mouth” (77) in a relationally embodied effort to soothe Tias’ pain. Although Tias, who often struggles to accept Jonny’s physical tenderness with him, initially tries to shove him, he then surprisingly “stopped himself, breathed in, closed his eyes, and choked back tears” (77). As the chapter’s closing sentence, this line emphasizes the positive embodied impact that the “labour of care” (Belcourt, *History* 15) can have when mobilized by one queer Indigenous boy for another, against expectations that they should not share intimacy, outward expressions of emotion, or even, according to Tias’ father, one another’s company. While the internalized social pressure to struggle “against emotion” (Belcourt, *History* 19) and “chok[e] back” his tears persists for Tias (Whitehead, *Jonny* 77), Jonny’s relationally embodied acts of care still successfully encourage Tias to accept support and love rather than turning to

physical violence, which is a significant, albeit subtle, move towards a more feminist way of being. Indeed, that Tias stops himself mid-shove to instead “breath[e] in, [and] clos[e] his eyes” (77) showcases exactly the “practice of breathing” (Belcourt, *History* 9) that describes Belcourt’s theory of care-based joy. Although the joy of this flashback may be hard for readers to initially detect, it is inherently embedded in both Jonny’s caring actions and Tias’ subsequent reactions, which together re-orient the scene away from the pain of acute heteropatriarchal violence and towards the joy of healthy affective practices that support queer Indigenous life.

By conveying a positive affective reorientation on an interpersonal level in this example and countless others, *Jonny Appleseed* provides valuable narrative representations of care-based joy that corroborate Belcourt’s theorizing through the experiences of his queer Indigenous youth characters. However, Whitehead’s felt-theorizations do not merely echo Belcourt’s or provide supplementary narrative content with which to think more about Belcourt’s interventions. While both authors deal directly with the “asphyxiating” (Belcourt, *History* 8) implications of colonialism in affectively moving ways, there is much more at play in Whitehead’s exploration of joy that is not in Belcourt’s *History*, but is reminiscent of Scofield’s *Love Medicine*.

Following Scofield’s lead, Whitehead notably prioritizes erotic expressions of care and love between romantic partners as a spiritual practice of joy which includes nature, music, and his Cree language. While most of Jonny’s erotic experiences are more evidently situated in the throes of everyday life than those of Scofield’s speaker, which I will discuss more later, Whitehead’s text nonetheless aligns with Scofield’s utopian work at the intersection of erotic pleasure, culture, and spirituality. In particular, Whitehead’s culture-specific descriptions of lovemaking and longing between Jonny and his best friend and lover Tias and between Jonny and Tias’ girlfriend Jordan mirrors Scofield’s descriptions of love and erotic joy between his

poetic speaker, his frequent-lover Dean, and his sometimes-lover Kim. Like Scofield, by embedding his protagonist's complex relationships in his Indigenous philosophies and linguistics, Whitehead powerfully taps into what Cree scholar Neal McLeod calls the "ancient poetic pathways of our ancestors" which create "positive space [for] Indigenous knowledge" (91), or what I similarly consider the "breathing space" for Indigenous joy. This positive overlap indicates that Whitehead's *Jonny* coheres with Scofield's politically powerful *Love Medicine* because both authors work to strengthen the connection between embodied queer pleasure and Indigenous culture despite the colonial repression of "positive spiritual context[s]" (Driskill, "Stolen" 54) for such life-sustaining connections. In doing so, these authors exemplify for their queer Indigenous readers how they can cultivate the rebellious joy of queer love and intimacy through their own sexual experiences.

There are many scenes in *Jonny* that bear a close resemblance to *Love Medicine* on account of the way Whitehead weaves erotic activities with the spiritual significance of nonhuman nature, Cree language and music. In one such scene, Jonny even narrates a dream in which he has a sexual encounter in a forest with the spiritually significant maskwa, or bear, to the beat and lyrics of a Cree round dance song (Whitehead, *Jonny* 69). This noteworthy spiritual dream would be compelling to analyze, especially for its Scofield-like erotic descriptions of the "awakened" forest (69), which conveys how erotic joy expands well beyond human partnerships. But the scene in which Jonny and Jordan "ma[k]e stories with each other's bodies" (159) is even more closely indicative of the important parallels between Whitehead's *Jonny* and Scofield's *Love Medicine*. In fact, like Scofield's poetic scenes of lovemaking, Whitehead's story of eroticism arguably performs what Audre Lorde calls "an alternative form of political action" (59) that is, according to scholars such as Lisa Tattonetti and Deborah Miranda, inherently decolonial

(Tatonetti, *Queerness* xx; Miranda, *Zen* 4). By classifying Jonny and Jordan's brief physical intimacy as bodily story making, Whitehead implies that what takes place between them erotically has expansive theoretical and political significance worthy of attention.

In this passage's description of cunnilingus, Whitehead's narrator uses nature similes to describe his lover's body, calls on Cree words to depict part of the story, mentions the relational creation of embodied music, and thinks fondly of his absent male lover – all moves which Scofield's speaker also makes in *Love Medicine*. Jonny recounts, "I kissed my way down to her vagina, her body like a ravine with berry bushes around its perimeter, a cedar trail guiding me to the mound" (159). He describes further, "I counted with my tongue, peyak, niso, nisto, spelled out words like nimis, pîkiskâci, miwâsin. As she moaned I thought of Tias, of how I hadn't seen him naked in a while [...] I discovered how Jordan's body sang with mine, like finding something I had lost" (159). In the span of this short paragraph, Whitehead relocates and reclaims the erotic as an opportunity for joyful connection on an interpersonal and cultural level and, in doing so, challenges the settler colonial status quo on sexuality and erotics. Even when Jonny thinks of long-absent Tias while he is with Jordan, it does not diminish the "s[o]ng" (159) they are creating together. Instead, exploring further beyond the dominant culture's boundaries of exclusive monogamy and fixed sexual orientations allows Jonny and Jordan to embrace the pleasures of a self-made decolonial present. Jonny even gives pleasure to Jordan by tracing Cree words on her body with his tongue, which spells out the positive correlation that Whitehead, like his "literary uncle" Scofield (Whitehead, *Thunder* back cover), believes should exist between Indigenous lifeways and unashamed eroticism for both Indigenous women and two-spirit people. By describing his characters' erotic activities as "ma[king] stories with each other's bodies" (Whitehead, *Jonny* 159) in this cultural way, Whitehead emphasizes that the two-spirit joy

enacted in his novel is, like Belcourt's theorization and Scofield's poetic enactment of joy, "caught up in [the] ancestral art of world-making" (Belcourt, *History* 8) for himself and his wider two-spirit and Indigiqueer audiences.

Given that Whitehead's affective approach to world-making shares so many of the same properties as Belcourt's critical work and Scofield's erotic work, one could reasonably question whether Whitehead's story reveals anything about the theoretical workings of queer Indigenous joy that the other texts do not also demonstrate, at least to some degree. But when two strong yet diverse approaches to joy appear cohesively in the form of a "'realistic' fiction" (Justice, *Why* 142), inherently unique theoretical possibilities reveal themselves. In contrast to Belcourt and Scofield, Whitehead uses accessible, colloquial prose, and a temporal structure which enables him to provide detailed explorations of many familiar life circumstances, networks of relationships, and scenes of joyful storytelling between loved ones over the course of his protagonist's youth. Aided by his formal and generic approach, Whitehead's *Jonny* uniquely shows an exceptionally wide audience that Indigiqueer joy is a "bundle of medicine" (*Jonny* 109) that, when nurtured in everyday collective practices like reciprocal, dialogic storytelling, can facilitate healing and transformation for queer Indigenous folks and their entire communities.

The way that readers will relate to Whitehead's colloquial prose in his novel is inherently different from how they will relate to the academic prose in Belcourt's essays and the free verse in Scofield's poetry; indeed, the written form impacts how readers can interpret and apply the joy within these works to their own lives. For example, Belcourt's poststructuralist lyric essays hail a particular kind of reader who can (or is willing to) engage with a range of densely theoretical and academic material. To those who might not understand his rebellious writing, such as his beloved nôhkom, Belcourt comments that "you might feel confused at times by my style of writing, its

dexterity, its refusal of easiness, but I know that you'll sense the affection [joy] bubbling up inside each word" (*History* 6). While Belcourt purposefully chose to use such dexterous language, partly to refuse what he calls the "fatal naming rituals" (141) of "simplicity" (144) common within colonial literary analyses of Indigenous texts, his comment acknowledges that this choice influences the relationship that many of his readers can have with his essays. Some readers will be obliged to feel for the joy amid their confusion, which means that *History* will resonate with them differently than it will for other readers who can understand the nuances of the essays' complex rhetoric *and* feel the affective resonance of his interventions. Similarly, even though Scofield's lyric poetry features a more accessible vocabulary than Belcourt's prose, it is possible that his readers may find joy in his verses and their otherworldly descriptions of erotic pleasure but not recognize how it relates to the complex circumstances of their everyday lives or not fully realize its political implications beyond their own experiences of lovemaking.

Moreover, because Belcourt's more abstract essay form works with quotidian situations only fleetingly, and Scofield's poetic form creates a lyric space that is not noticeably framed by everyday circumstances, there are inevitably audiences who will not be reached or deeply touched by the theorizations of joy embedded in either the poststructuralist essay form or the erotic poetry form, since the applicability of that affect to the everyday is not immediately apparent without some interpretive work. By exploring affects through a realistic fiction, rather than non-fiction essays or erotic poems, Whitehead gives himself the temporal space to flesh out how decolonial, resurgent joy works amid a range of what he calls "familiar" circumstances (Wilbur and Keene n.p) including childhood and adolescence, the loss of family members, Canada's foster care system, the financial burdens of city life, online sex work, returning home to the Rez, and reciprocal scenes of storytelling between his protagonist and various loved ones.

Although one could argue that Belcourt's entire book is also a scene of storytelling between loved ones because he addresses *History* to his nôhkom, which implies a valuable storytelling relationship, his work's inclusion of his nôhkom is primarily citational; he references her as a noteworthy felt-theorist who informs his thinking about care and joy. Readers of *History* are not shown relational interactions or scenes of reciprocal, dialogic storytelling between Belcourt's speaker and his nôhkom in the way that they are shown dialogic discussions and stories in *Jonny*, like those shared between Jonny, his mother, and his kokum. And furthermore, while Belcourt's essays describe some autobiographical life events which could be considered "familiar" to others, he does so primarily to facilitate large-scale critiques of settler colonialism and theorizations of collective joy that are not conveyed through discussion of particular community dynamics. Scofield, in his poetry collection, certainly creates joyful storytelling scenes between his three characters, but they are primarily comprised of relational erotic movements rather than speech, which means that readers are not privy to the discursive ways that joy might move between the lovers in everyday conversation. Additionally, because Scofield's poetry focuses on his speaker's erotic experiences with his two lovers, and does not explore two-spirit joy as it relates to or resonates with his speaker's larger (human) kinship networks,³⁹ the broader communal value of queer Indigenous joy is not as explicitly clear as it is in Whitehead's realistic fiction.

These distinctions are not to imply that Belcourt's and Scofield's formal approaches are therefore inadequate or problematic, but to highlight that there is more value to be added to this theory of joy through different forms of writing, which can reach different audiences. Based on his engagement with the field of queer Indigenous literature, both inside and outside the

³⁹ As discussed in chapter 2, Scofield's attention to his characters' joyful experiences with eroticism and nature show the resonance of this affect with the *non-human* kinship networks that makeup the natural world.

academy, Whitehead understands the need for a widely accessible narrative approach to bring important theories regarding queer Indigenous life to a wider public. In an interview alongside Billy-Ray Belcourt for the podcast *All My Relations*, hosted by Swinomish/Tulalip photographer Matika Wilbur and Cherokee academic Adrienne Keene, Whitehead ponders what it means for him to want to write for his queer/Indigenous communities “using basically a theory, which is great, but ... not accessible” (Wilbur and Keene n.p). He elaborates by articulating that “my role and my responsibility ... as a creative writer or storyteller” is ultimately to “take theory[,] digest it, but then regurgitate it in [...] modes of writing or forms that are familiar but accessible” (n.p).⁴⁰ Here, Whitehead importantly acknowledges that although some forms of theory can appear like inaccessible strategies “made by and for the few” (n.p), the fundamentally valuable interventions at the core of such material can still be productively shared through other, accessible forms and genres of writing that a wide array of readers can access and appreciate. As Athabaskan scholar Dian Million argues, the “every day” “felt” modes of theorizing that make experience-based articulations about the quotidian world (Million, “There is” 32) are just as important for communities as the more abstract forms of theorizing that academia encourages and legitimates (35). Seeing the indispensable decolonial value of both academic modes of theorizing and everyday theorizing, Whitehead considers it his duty to his communities to “digest” theory, however it comes to him, and then to “regurgitate” this embodied knowledge through familiar literary forms that academics and non-academics alike can work with on their own terms.

⁴⁰ This does not imply that all forms of theorizing are inaccessible and scholarly, or that general readers need scholars like Whitehead to do their theorizing for them, especially given Dian Million’s convincing arguments that everyone can felt-theorize from their own life experiences and that there should be no “prescriptions” about how theory is done (Million, “There is” 33). Rather, Whitehead is articulating here that in order to share his particular embodied knowledge with a large readership and their many ways of communicating/feeling/intuiting theory, he finds it most productive to apply his felt knowledge to common circumstances and widely accessible mediums.

Whitehead's admirable consideration of mass reader reception through this approach, however, does not mean that *Jonny*'s theorizations will get the wide acknowledgement and respect that they deserve, because some literary critics and general readers will undoubtedly hold reservations about *Jonny*' realistic fiction form and young adult (YA) genre classification. In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice explains that fictional constructions of "real" Indigenous life often rely on "deficit models" (142) which show "only the most disempowered or disempowering stories" (147). In this understanding of what counts as realistic, "Indigenous realism is that which reinforces the perspective," especially common in the dominant "settler colonial imaginary," that Indigenous reality is solely shaped by loss, deficiency, or dysfunctionality (147). Proposing Indigenous-authored fantasy fiction as a liberating alternative to literary realism, Justice argues that the fantastic in particular "expands the range of options for Indigenous characters (and readers); it challenges our assumptions and expectations of 'the real,' thus complicating and undermining the dominant and often domineering functions of the deficit model" (149). I appreciate Justice's point about the violent norms which have shaped how many authors of realist fiction convey Indigenous stories, and agree with his articulations about the merits of fantasy fiction to do necessary and imaginative decolonial work; yet at the same time, I insist that we acknowledge how insightful Indigenous writers like Whitehead are using the realist fiction form in expansive, utopian ways which challenge rather than reinforce these norms.⁴¹ Whitehead's young adult (YA) novel does not convey an oppressive sense of deficiency, but uncovers and proliferates the embodied love and joy that is embedded within two-spirit lovemaking and lifeways.

⁴¹ Note, too, that while Whitehead's text is predominantly "realist," his novel includes multiple dreamscapes (including Jonny's sexual encounter with Maskwa) which could be considered what Justice calls the "fantastic," making it even more apparent that Whitehead has formed his own unique way of "challeng[ing] our assumptions and expectations of 'the real'" (Justice, *Why* 149).

And while some literary critics or general readers are likely to argue that Whitehead's *Jonny* should not be considered a piece of YA literature or read by adolescents due to its sexually explicit content throughout, such a genre-based grievance would ignore that Whitehead himself classifies his novel as a piece of YA literature which, as discussed earlier, he wrote for young Indigenous audiences who deserve to see positive representations of themselves in literature ("Hearing" n.p). It would also wrongfully devalue an important component of Whitehead's work on account of a conservative, implicitly colonial Euro-western interpretation of sex and sexuality. Drawing from his Cree philosophies, Whitehead states that "[Jonny] is, as Chris Finley wrote in 'Decolonizing the Queer Native Body,' bringing 'sexy back.' He thinks about sex, he has sex, he is sexed—he makes love to make live—hell, this could be a dinner-time story" ("Hearing" n.p). For Whitehead, as with countless other queer Indigenous thinkers, like Scofield and Finley, queer sex and sexuality are not shameful aspects of life that should be hidden, but natural forms of relational, embodied knowledge which deserve open acknowledgement, even around the dinner table, even with adolescents. To reason that teens, and two-spirit teens in particular, should not encounter such themes in literature, one would need to subscribe to the "disciplining logics of colonialism" which seek to control both Indigenous and non-Indigenous bodies (Finley 35)⁴² – logics which Whitehead's decolonial approach to the YA genre, like his approach to the realist fiction form, resists by proudly centering a young two-spirit protagonist and all the intimate ways that he uses his "voice," "body," and "life" (*Jonny* 109) to manifest joy for himself and others, including Whitehead and his broad audience.

Through his characters' collaborative, dialogic practices of storytelling, Whitehead's novel uniquely exemplifies that quotidian circumstances are affectively workable, and can

⁴² Finley articulates that, although these logics govern all people in the West, "Native people are more adversely affected by these colonizing logics" (34).

contribute to the expansion of relational enactments of embodied joy, no matter how painful they seem. Take, for example, the scene in which Jonny and Tias lie in bed after sex during which Tias had told Jonny “I love you” for the first time (Whitehead, *Jonny* 208). The wonder and love summoned up through this phrase, paired with that of their erotic lovemaking, widens the space for further connection and relationally embodied joy through storytelling. Leaning into the possibilities of this vulnerable, relational moment, Jonny softly asks Tias to tell him more about the sister he was separated from by the foster care system, “if you’re up to it” (208). Because of his caring approach to this “thorny subject,” Jonny creates the conditions wherein Tias can self-compassionately share the “story of his sister ... buried deep within him” (208). As they look at a photo of his sister together, Tias explains how she was taken, and the affective impact that her absence has had on him since his childhood in foster care. Although he struggles to speak, and his sentences frequently break off, Jonny listens patiently and intently with his whole body, even “position[ing] myself behind him, cradling him with my legs” (209). Jonny’s seemingly small embodied movement, which puts Tias in the center, subtly indicates that this scene has an underlying positive affective orientation; Jonny physically holds Tias and his pain, offering a supportive, breathable space for him to feel and talk through the asphyxiating memories that make his body “wil[t] like a deflated balloon” (209).

While such a story about the embodied impacts of foster care on Indigenous youth could reflect a state of disempowerment that relies on the “deficit models” of Indigenous life with which Justice is concerned (Justice, *Why* 142), Whitehead significantly shifts and expands the possibilities of this painful story through the lovers’ affective, verbal exchanges as it is being shared. With Jonny’s care, Tias is able to share five “I feel” statements and proposes a total of nine questions to Jonny throughout his story, two of which ask, “You think she ever thinks about

me, Jon? You think she ever stops and says, ‘I wish my brother were here?’” (210). Tias’ approach to telling his own story – as one primarily crafted around his affective process of grief and love for his sister – is also a highly relational approach that, through questions and dialogue, produces other, possibly more empowering, modes of interpretation. By asking Jonny questions like this, in addition to questions about the nature of affects, like “[y]ou think you know what loneliness feels like, Jon?” (209), Tias shows that the circumstances of his upbringing and their affective impacts are workable and can be re-engaged and re-storied in new ways. Of course, Jonny’s caring responses to these questions confirm that this is the case, especially when Jonny “lay[s] his head in my lap” and positively insists that he knows Tias’ little sister thinks of him and wishes they could be together because “m’boy, you’re the best damn person I ever met” (211). Gifting Tias with a positive vision of both himself and his sister thinking fondly of him as he falls asleep in Jonny’s lap, Jonny makes palpable how care-based joy can be nurtured by and for loved ones in everyday life. While this example of joy may not be overtly celebratory, as some scenes of relationally embodied two-spirit joy undoubtedly are, it is nonetheless present as these young friends and lovers work affectively with childhood circumstances, the loss of a family member, and a trauma-producing governmental system through colloquial, collaborative, and embodied acts of storytelling.

In steadily walking his readers through storytelling scenes like this one, Whitehead explores positive affects in a way that is easier for readers, perhaps especially young readers, to relate to and hopefully replicate in their own lives. Certainly, both *History* and *Love Medicine* foster queer Indigenous joy for their readers in productive, unique ways, as explored earlier in this chapter and at length in chapters 1 and 2 respectively; but what is so distinctly moving about Jonny’s role in this relationally collective project is its ability to emphasize how everyday

practices of discursive storytelling, and the cultivation of joy within those relational practices, can be an accessible, collective means of healing and transformation for two-spirit youth and adults alike. While the direct outcome of Tias' story about his little sister is not immediately life-changing, the caring exchange within this scene, which encourages affective processing and healing, exemplifies the kinds of relational groundwork needed for broader forms of collective transformation to emerge, like those that Belcourt advocates for in *History*.⁴³ In particular, Jonny's caring behaviour in this scene, and throughout the novel's storytelling, facilitates joy-based healing for himself and others; as he asserts earlier in the book, "[m]y voice, my body, my life—every piece of me is a bundle of medicine that gives and burns and smudges" (109), arguably not just for other characters in the novel, but also for Whitehead and his exceptionally wide readership. In fact, now looking at Whitehead's reparative theorization of joy as "medicine," which is a staple in Jonny's vocabulary, can extend our understanding of the indispensable way that Whitehead performs joy through his young two-spirit avatar Jonny "for the next generation" ("Hearing" n.p), so that they might emulate these healing practices, and be transformed by them.

The idea that stories and reading practices can function reparatively is not a new concept,⁴⁴ and in Indigenous theorizing, the potentially reparative concept of story as "medicine," which can either harm or heal, has been considered at length. Consider Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, in which King states that he and Louis Owens "both knew that stories were medicine, that a story told one way could cure, that the same story told another way

⁴³ Recall my aforementioned example of Belcourt's assertion that Indigenous folks must foster feminist modes of community building to encourage boys and men to take up "the labour of care" and, in so doing, allow new modes of collective life to emerge (*History* 15).

⁴⁴ Here, I am thinking first and foremost of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential concept of "reparative reading" from "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You."

could injure” (92). And take for example Jo-Ann Episkenew’s introduction to her watershed text *Taking Back our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*, which references Muskogee poet Joy Harjo’s assertion that “[i]n our tribal cultures the power of language to heal, to regenerate ... is understood” (Harjo qtd. in Episkenew 14).⁴⁵ Similarly, Justice articulates that, while some stories can be “bad medicine” which intend to harm with “unyielding stereotype[s]” (*Why* 3), other “stories can be good medicine [...] driv[ing] out the poison, heal[ing] the spirit as well as the body, remind[ing] us of [...] the greatness of who we’re meant to be, so that we’re not determined by the colonial narrative of deficiency” (5). These powerful examples from a range of well-known Indigenous writers establish that stories of all kinds hold the power to deeply impact embodied readers and, when crafted with good intentions, can support and encourage Indigenous readers to “cure,” “regenerate,” and “heal.”

And while these useful examples refer to stories more generally, some literary scholars and writers have taken to “medicine” as a useful framework for understanding, more specifically, how various modes of gender expression, embodiment, and affect can work through stories to provide readers with good medicine that their whole communities can benefit from. For example, focusing on *Jonny Appleseed* in one portion of her 2021 monograph *Written by the Body: Gender Expansiveness and Indigenous Non-Cis Masculinities*, Tatonetti explores how non-cis genders, such as Jonny’s two-spiritedness, are forms of medicine that can be assets to entire Indigenous nations (200-1), while Sam McKegey’s *Carrying the Burden of Peace: Reimagining Indigenous Masculinities Through Story* (2021) considers what decolonial possibilities could arise if ethical representations of Indigenous masculinities in literature could be conceived as “creative tools [and] medicines” (xvii). And most importantly, in an introductory letter to the

⁴⁵ See this section of Episkenew’s *Taking Back our Spirits* for a long list of Indigenous thinkers, Harjo among them, who recognize language and story as medicine.

readers of *Love Medicine*, Gregory Scofield emphasizes the sacred power of stories to convey and share positive affects (in his case, “love!”) as “the most healing and beautiful of all medicines” (4). As part of the contextualization for his poetry collection’s themes, Scofield’s letter begins by recalling that “I remember hearing old-time stories about love medicine” (2) and, later in the letter, how “[t]oday, such stories carry as much power as they did long ago” (3). The queer Indigenous joy embedded within each of Scofield’s erotic poems, then, partly came to him as a form of affective medicine which was shared with him through the storytelling practices he encountered during his youth. In coherence with the other arguments featured here, Scofield’s experience with affective stories as healing medicine implies that storytelling can have lasting, gradually transformative impacts on readers and their communities; who knows if Scofield would have written or shared his watershed story of three joyful queer lovers with the world had he not been gifted the “beautiful...medicine” (4) of love through storytelling.

These insights suggest that Whitehead’s story of two-spirit joy is a remarkably powerful source of healing medicine for his contemporary readers. In fact, by fusing together Jonny’s two-spirit gender expression and joyful affective orientation within the all-encompassing mantra, “I am my own best medicine” (80), Whitehead makes this interpretation of joy as good medicine especially clear. Functioning like a thesis statement that urges two-spirit readers to take up his joyful lifeways in their own lives, Jonny’s catchphrase repeatedly reminds Indigiqueer readers, in particular, of “the greatness of who we’re meant to be, so that we’re not determined by the colonial narrative of deficiency” or the “bad medicine” (Justice *Why* 5) of colonial heteropatriarchy which implicitly stifle two-spirit life. While Jonny’s “I am” mantra, which he frequently thinks to himself, may seem to imply an individualist model of self-care that stands athwart more relational concepts of selfhood, it is important to recall that Jonny is an avatar who

represents a wide collective of gender- and sexually-diverse Indigenous people (“Devery” n.p). Indeed, in referring to both “I” and “[m]y voice, my body, my life” as good medicine (109), Jonny conveys that the subjective personal pronoun, “I,” envelopes his entire embodied way of being, or his entire “life,” which includes his intimate relationships with loved ones like Tias, his mother, and his kokum, thus reminding readers of Jonny’s relationally collective, community-oriented concept of selfhood. To further clarify this point from an extratextual perspective, whenever Whitehead refers to Jonny’s phrase or the importance of Jonny’s storytelling practices in interviews and other writings, he shifts to the plural expression, “[w]e are our own best medicine” (Whitehead, *Love* 5). Whitehead’s transition between the singular “I” and the plural “we” again shows that his protagonist purposefully stands in for an Indigiqueer collective and the powerful, relational ways that two-spirit folks, and their stories, can heal and empower their wider communities. As such, I will now show that on top of Jonny’s exemplary physical behaviours and caring dialogue during scenes of storytelling, Jonny’s positive thoughts can teach Whitehead’s primary readers, by example, how they can tap into their innate Indigiqueer greatness and simultaneously be the “best medicine” (5) for themselves and their loved ones in realistic everyday circumstances.

Regardless of whether Jonny is the primary storyteller sharing with Tias or his kokum or his mother, or whether he is an active listener of one of their stories, his positive thoughts which narrate the experience serve as a secondary layer of storytelling that functions for the reader like “a fresh layer of medicine on an open wound” (Whitehead, *Jonny* 26).⁴⁶ His thoughts, or narration, exemplify to readers how they, too, can expansively approach stories in their own lives

⁴⁶ This quote originally refers to Jonny’s articulation that Indigenous laughter, as a positive reaction to various life events, is medicine. Because one’s mental commentary is also a form of reaction to life events, I argue that it can also work like “a fresh layer of medicine” (26) when oriented towards joy.

with joy, and how that embodied approach can be healing. Take again, for example, the scene wherein Tias discusses his little sister with Jonny, which I first used to convey the significance of discursive storytelling scenes as spaces for affective reworking and the cultivation of relational, embodied joy. Alongside his supportive physical actions and encouraging dialogue, Jonny's narration orients the reader towards the innate joy underlying Tias' story of love for his sibling, so that he is never fully determined by loss or disempowered by trauma. After Tias expresses his grief that "she's out there growing up...without me" and rubs at his teary eyes, Jonny thinks to himself, "[t]here he was, the boy beneath the surface, the one I loved [...] Tias was woven like a spider web, all curious, all tangled, all sticky in corners but dazzling in the centre where the light shone through and coalesced around every cranny" (210). Emanating with care, wonder, and love – collectively known in this thesis as queer Indigenous joy – this description of Jonny's beloved shows exactly how one could nurture a joyful orientation towards a realistic moment of grief. By equating Tias with a complex and beautiful entity of nature, Jonny reframes this scene with a "spiritual dimension, demonstrating the connectedness of the entire creation" (Cariou viii). In doing so, Whitehead conveys that there is nothing wrong with Tias or his processing of loss. Jonny's reference to Tias' "curious" way of being focuses on his natural sense of wonder and affective openness, and his attention to the "dazzling...light" at Tias' core, which coalesces all else (210), then highlights his spirit's immense vitality and expansive capacity for joy. Despite the significant harm the Canadian government's foster care system has caused Tias and his family, the tenacious "greatness" (Justice, *Why* 5) of Tias' spirit defines this storytelling scene because of Jonny's joyful approach to his story and to his experience of pain.

Importantly, this description of Tias as a "curious," "dazzling" source of light mirrors Whitehead's beautiful description of Jonny as a "glitter figure" whose life stories and expansive

way of thinking and being can serve as medicine for others, including Whitehead himself, his Indigiqueer readers, and their kin. This implies that Whitehead uses Jonny's narration, or the second layer of this storytelling scene, to emphasize that the qualities that comprise Jonny's role as a healing "avatar" who embodies and exudes the joy of queer Indigeneity are not exclusive, but inclusive and expansive. He shows that Tias, no less than Jonny, is also an affective storyteller with the innate capacity to be medicine, to help heal himself and others (including Jonny) through his loving, relational modes of expression. Even though, in this moment of grief for his sister, Tias himself cannot recognize his own inherent greatness or his capacity to survive, heal, and flourish while showing others how to do the same, Whitehead expresses that Tias' capacity for love, joy, and healing is present nonetheless. In doing so, he reminds his Indigiqueer readers that they too are already the best medicine for themselves and their communities, regardless of their current circumstances, and that they can nurture this strength by actively participating in scenes of collaborative, discursive storytelling that orient towards the joy that hardships cannot extinguish.

While many sections in the novel focus on how Jonny and Tias nurture one another during trying circumstances throughout their youth, Whitehead frequently expands our attention beyond this single intimate relationship to show that the healing influence of Jonny's tenacious joy expands intergenerationally to his mother and kokum, and to their larger community. In this respect, Whitehead's work coheres with Belcourt's, which includes his *nôhkom* in his theorizing. Together, they demonstrate that this new generation of writers is invested in conveying that joy is not limited to individual relationships between intimate friends and lovers, as Scofield's primary focus in his erotic poetry might seem to imply, but that it can be an affective mode of collectivity that Indigenous folks of various genders, sexualities, and generations can

collaboratively reinforce.

Unlike in Belcourt's *History*, however, Whitehead's novel provides concrete examples of how his two-spirit protagonist's joyful orientation then impacts these community members and their ways of thinking, being, and relating to others. One particularly strong example of Jonny's impact takes place when he listens to his mother, Karen, recall a dream wherein she joyfully reimagines their entire community and her relationship with her mother, Frances (Jonny's kokum), because of the influence of Jonny's disposition and actions. In providing this example near the end of the novel, Whitehead's narrative leaves readers with a palpable sense that embracing queer Indigenous joy as healing medicine, in scenes of storytelling and beyond, is a liberating enactment of radical resurgence that can support entire Indigenous communities.

To see how this piece of Whitehead's felt-theorization comes together in Karen's radically resurgent story, it is helpful to recall Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's theoretical vision of resurgence in *As We Have Always Done*, as discussed in previous chapters, and to situate how it relates to Jonny's most precious familial relationships. In her influential monograph, Simpson argues that for Indigenous nations to escape the ongoing violence of settler colonialism, "Indigenous life cannot destroy the worlds of queer youth" but must instead accept these youth "as our teachers" (144), and as valuable contributors to the "rebellion of love...and profound caring" which can enable collective flourishing (9). In *Jonny*, both maternal figures in Jonny's life are accepting of his two-spiritedness; when Jonny has a crush on a boy at eight years old, Jonny's mother tells him "I'm fine with that, son, Creator, he made you for a reason – you girl and you boy and that's fine with me" (63). Similarly, when he nervously comes out to his kokum, she says "Jonny, m'boy, your kokum old but she ain't dull. You's napêwiskwewishot, m'boy, Two-Spirit. You still my beautiful baby grandkid..." (48). These statements of loving

acceptance, rooted in their Cree philosophy and language, open up to what Simpson would call the “world of queer youth,” constituting subtle acts of radical resurgence which make space for more to follow. Over the next decade and more, Jonny builds on their acceptance not just by accepting himself as a natural part of creation, but also by embracing his two-spirit lifeways as medicine he can share with others, as we have seen, through his caring words and stories, through his erotic and compassionate body, and, most importantly, through his all-encompassing joyful affective orientation.⁴⁷ Crafting his life as a radically resurgent “rebellion of love...and profound caring” (Simpson, *As We* 9), Jonny is a source of joy and inspiration for alternative modes of life even in the present.

Understanding this, Jonny’s kokum and mother value his embodied knowledge immensely, considering him to be what Simpson would call a “teacher” with whom they can have a reciprocal learning relationship that inspires mutual growth and transformation. When Jonny leaves the reservation to live in Winnipeg, his kokum even says, “you gonna be changing, and that’s fine, but you come back when you do, okay? You come back here and you change me, too” (213). Although Jonny does not make it back home to Peguis in time to share stories of how he has changed or what he has learned with his kokum before she passes away, he does fulfill her request to come back, bringing with him his eagerness to cultivate collective healing through scenes of storytelling. As he arrives on his mother’s doorstep after years away, he thinks, “I hoped she would ... reel me into her weathered arms ... and tell me stories of how we’ve lived, and loved, and grown” (196). The fact that this is Jonny’s first thought upon arriving home emphasizes how valuable positive affective storytelling is to him; he longs most for relationally embodied connection in the form of a hug and stories about the communal means (“how *we*’ve

⁴⁷ Recall that these components of the chapter’s analyses explore Jonny’s assertion that “my voice, my body, my life — every piece of me is a bundle of medicine that gives and burns and smudges” (109).

lived,” emphasis added) through which he, his mom, and their kin have continued to foster collective growth with and through love. As he hopes, throughout the following days before and after his stepfather’s funeral, Jonny, Karen, and a range of other kin become their “own best medicine” (80) as they share healing stories of both the pain and the joy of their intertwined experiences, exemplifying for readers a powerful, yet realistic way that they too could perform radical resurgence with their own communities.

As mentioned, most notably among the shared stories is Karen’s dream wherein their community is transformed by Jonny, who becomes the immediate source of collective flourishing which is joyously celebrated by all. Importantly, the storytelling scene that describes this collective joy is opened with reference to Jonny’s late kokum (Frances), who told Karen before her death that she would have a dream about Jonny and that, when she did, she had to retell it to him (205). By calling on her late mother’s prediction as her story’s opening line, which makes Jonny aware of his kokum’s relevance to this moment, Karen expands the relationality of this storytelling scene such that three generations – representing the past, present, and future – are involved in the vision’s resurgent implications. In her dream, “big-ass Native men in regalia” are unsuccessfully spearfishing as she and Jonny look on, laughing (205). At first, when Jonny attempts to move forward to try to help, the men deny him, saying the task is “only for *men*” (206, emphasis in original). But after failing repeatedly, the men acquiesce and allow Jonny into the water, although they jeer at him by calling him “girlboy” as he moves forward. Karen tells Jonny he does not need to “prove nothing to no one” by attempting to participate, but he gets involved anyways, and successfully spears a massive fish on his first try (206). In her retelling, Karen recalls proudly that “you turn around to all of us, that fucking smirk of yours, sassy as ever” and the large community, in shock and appreciation, begin to cheer and

laugh (206). The group's good spirits lift even more when, as they all gather around Jonny and his fish, he confidently states, "I ain't only a gatherer, I'm a hunter too!" (206),⁴⁸ which joyfully puts his two-spiritedness in the center of his community. Afterwards, Jonny leads the same men back into the water and patiently teaches them, with great success, how to spearfish, thus demonstrating that Jonny's actions help to shift the community's dynamics, and ways of relating to one another, in a generative way.

This dreamscape shows how Jonny has the capacity to be a teacher and leader that his entire community can learn important, collectively nurturing behaviours from, including the men in his community who were initially non-receptive to Jonny's contributions. Furthermore, Karen's dream telling also describes how Jonny's lifeways enable her and Frances, who had a turbulent relationship with one another before and throughout Jonny's life, to reconcile and heal their pain with and through joy. Near the end of the dream, Jonny's kokum, who was laughing and proudly smiling alongside other community members throughout these events, then approaches Karen to tell her, "[t]hat boy of yours...he is his own best thing" (207). At seeing and hearing her mother's joy and pride regarding her grandson's joyful, two-spirited way of being, Karen begins to cry and apologizes to her. Seemingly aware that Karen is apologizing for her past absences and other issues between them, Frances responds with care, "[m]e too baby, me too, but you're here, Karen, you're finally here" (207). Then, after re-waking from her dream telling, Karen tells Jonny with great emotion, "you my everything, m'boy," "you ... the one who ground me. Ground me up into a medicine" (207). This set of exchanges, between Karen and

⁴⁸ Jonny references traditionally gendered roles of hunting (predominantly performed by men) and gathering (predominantly performed by women) which, as discussed in the introduction, does not mean that gender-diverse people did not exist, or that people of various genders did not perform a wide range of tasks to support the well-being of the entire community. For the sake of this storytelling scene, Karen implies that Jonny refers to these roles to situate that he is a proud, young two-spirited member of their community that has many diverse and valuable contributions to make to the collective.

Frances, and Karen and Jonny, valuably shows how Jonny's alternative way of being, as medicine, brings two of his most precious relatives together through a shared source of joy and communal love (despite previous rifts in their relationship), providing them the necessary space for healing and growth. Although Karen (like Frances) always had the wisdom and joy within her to accept and embrace her child's two-spiritedness, it was only through Jonny's persistently joyful influence throughout his upbringing and early adult life that she is able to accept and embrace her mother with love and joy in this dreamscape, and to recognize herself as medicine with the capacity to heal. The expansive joy within the various components of this dreamscape is abundant, and the resurgent possibilities that come from sharing it are even more so.

Indeed, this dreamscape reveals that Jonny's way of life can powerfully contribute to the flourishing of his familial relations and his greater community, both within and beyond his mother's dream world. In her story, by endearingly referring to "that ... smirk of yours, sassy as ever" (206), Karen signals to the reader that the version of Jonny within her dream is truly a reflection of his real-world modes of expression and being. Implying that he is normally sassy subtly reminds readers of his animated and joyful affective approach to life which, as her dream shows, can ignite that sense of spaciousness and joy in others if they are open to accepting it, and him. As in Simpson's theoretical vision of radical resurgence, when the community decides to change their exclusionary heteropatriarchal ways and accept this queer youth as a valuable teacher, the entire community benefits. Those who were starving, "bellies rumbling like thunder" (207), gain physical and affective nourishment for their bodies and the skills with which to continue that communal well-being long-term, all of which is made possible by a two-spirit person who is centred in his community with respect. And by telling Jonny that he "ground [her] up into a medicine" (207), Karen shows that her son's alternative way of life, which she has

accepted and embraced, gives her the space to likewise reimagine her relationships and her community in an alternative, healing way on both a personal and collective level. As medicine, she too has the power to help heal and connect her kin with “the greatness of who we’re meant to be” (Justice, *Why* 5). By demonstrating that the queer Indigenous joy underlying the entirety of this novel contributes to the positive transformation of Indigenous communities in this way, Whitehead performs a joyful enactment of radical Indigenous resurgence that all Indigenous readers can work with, especially in their own relational experiences of storytelling.

With these interventions, Whitehead’s YA realist novel provides invaluable insights into the practice and function of queer Indigenous joy in everyday life for both queer Indigenous youth and their kin, which Belcourt’s and Scofield’s texts could not provide to the same degree. Certainly, both Whitehead’s novel and Belcourt’s memoir work in tandem in the vanguard of contemporary queer Indigenous affect theory by dealing directly with the “asphyxiating” (Belcourt, *History* 8) implications of colonialism to assert the importance of positive forms of affective community-building. And, at the same time, Whitehead’s *Jonny* works in tandem with Scofield’s watershed erotic poetry because he too connects lovers, nonhuman nature, Cree language, and expressions of spirituality to highlight two-spirit joy. But by also focusing on the exemplary ways that Jonny supports himself and his loved ones, especially Tias and his mother, through caring practices of dialogic storytelling, Whitehead’s text uses his complementary understanding of joy to move in an indispensable new direction that his wide readership can undoubtedly benefit from. *Jonny Appleseed* intimately performs how Indigenous folks of all genders and sexualities facing a wide range of life circumstances can work with and re-story even their most painful experiences. By doing so, Whitehead assures his queer Indigenous readers that, regardless of how their life circumstances look, they can cultivate relational joy

through their bodies, their everyday lives and relationships, and their storytelling practices as the “best medicine” (80) for healing their communities and moving towards radically resurgent modes of collective life.

Conclusion

In a settler colonial country that carries with it “the long history of the catastrophization of NDN life and bodies” (Belcourt, *History* 152), Indigenous-authored texts that acknowledge the full realities of two-spirit people’s lives in Canada – including the enduring presence of joy – are of utmost importance. This Indigiqueer literature, as felt theory, affirms life and engenders futurity for people who have been made to “take on a mode of embodiment that erodes from the inside out” (11). Resisting colonial, heteropatriarchal forces of harm and erasure, Belcourt, Scofield, and Whitehead work in diverse yet complementary ways to show Indigiqueer readers and their broader communities the sociopolitical value of more collective, joyful modes of embodiment and affective orientation. By approaching these transformative interventions from the intersection of Indigenous studies and queer feminist affect studies, this project contributes to the burgeoning field of queer Indigenous literary studies by arguing that joy is a remarkably useful, radically resurgent affect, which, if granted the attention and nurturing that it deserves, can continue to facilitate more collective, utopian ways of life.

In his memoir *A History of My Brief Body*, Billy-Ray Belcourt states that joy is a “momentous facet of NDN life” and assures his readers that “I will spend the rest of my life enfleshing this argument. This catalogue, then, doesn’t and can’t end” (111). Invigorated by the future-oriented argumentation of writers such as Belcourt, I insist that the analysis of Indigiqueer joy featured here should not end here either — it cannot end here. Through this thesis, I have provided a small but useful opening to the burgeoning field of queer Indigenous literary studies as it intersects with queer feminist affect studies. However, I crafted this project knowing that for liberatory queer joy to gain the widespread recognition that I argue it deserves as a rebellious affect rather than a regulatory affect, more co-conspirators will need to “write against the

unwritability of utopia” (Belcourt, *History* 9) as Belcourt, Scofield, and Whitehead have in their diversely joyful texts and as I have through this affect study. As such, rather than concluding this thesis by retracing the three chapters’ distinct arguments to neatly close things off, I will more productively open things up by sharing three opportunities for the study of Indigenous joy that can extend the efforts of my project, and champion this growing corpus of radically resurgent material.

During the drafting of this thesis, numerous exciting works of Indigenous studies scholarship and Indigenous-authored literature have been published or announced for future publication in 2022, each one resisting settler colonial imperatives of heteropatriarchy in their own compelling ways. I have been able to briefly engage with some such texts, if only in secondary drafts, including Tatonetti’s *Written By the Body: Gender Expansiveness and Indigenous Non-Cis Masculinities* and *Transmotion*’s special issue, *Transgender, Two-Spirit and Nonbinary Indigenous Literatures*, but these texts could be used as gateways to different projects that can productively build on my study of joy. Because none of these scholars or their literary subjects directly focus on joy, besides Tatonetti’s essay on Max Wolf Valerio’s trans Indigenous perspective (*Transmotion*), future scholarship could bring into sharper focus how these authors reorient themselves and their readers towards more collective, utopian possibilities for relational life using their distinct practices of joy. Take, for instance, James Mackay’s “‘#morelove. always’ Reading Smokii Sumac’s Transmasculine First Nations Poetry,” which analyzes how Sumac digitizes his poetic praxis of queer, trans Indigenous embodiment on social media platforms as a methodology for fostering community and “resist[ing] fragmentation” (Jobin and Pyle 6). Using joy as a lens to build on Mackay’s research could produce a fruitful exploration of

how “queer NDN joy” (Belcourt, *History* 67)⁴⁹ proliferates in and through digital modes of communication and community building (for both literary characters and real-world internet users), which are becoming increasingly common among Indigiqueer writers, artists, and activists, especially those of this newer generation.

As a second avenue for future study inspired by this recent edition of *Transmotion*, consider June Scudeler’s “‘You Can’t Be an NDN in Today’s World:’ Tommy Pico’s Queer NDN Epic Poems” in which she discusses Pico’s recently published poetry quartet as a distinctly queer Indigenous subversion of the Western epic poem and its colonial, heteropatriarchal traditions. This unique piece evidences that there is much more analysis to be done regarding recent Indigiqueer methods of genre-bending, which I see as a rebellious, literary mode of joy-making that undermines Western genre conventions and the often oppressive values they uphold. While a small part of my thesis considered how Belcourt’s, Scofield’s, and Whitehead’s enactments of joy vary based on their approaches to a range of literary forms and genres, there are forthcoming opportunities to extend this aspect of my project given that Whitehead will release his first work of non-fiction *Making Love With the Land* in August 2022, and Belcourt is set to release his first novel *A Minor Chorus* in September 2022. I wonder, what could these works by two of this generation’s most prominent Indigiqueer thinkers do for their readers on a sociopolitical level that their previous texts could not? How will their approaches to joy as we have seen thus far translate into these different literary genres, and what new insights might we gain through these translations? In a recent interview about *A Minor Chorus*, Belcourt stated, “I

⁴⁹ Recall that “NDN” is internet shorthand commonly used by young Indigenous authors like Belcourt and Whitehead, among many others, which suggests the cybersphere’s relevance to contemporary Indigiqueer theorizing. The fact that the term “Indigiqueer” was first popularized via hashtag on social media platforms also points to the usefulness of the internet for two-spirit resurgence, which could be explored more in future literary studies.

wanted to write a book that felt communal at its core” (“Billy-Ray” n.p)⁵⁰, which pairs especially well with the final sentence in his PhD dissertation: “[i]n a minor chorus of rebellious voices we will fashion a joyous world where NDN freedom isn’t an exception to the anthropological rule” (*Conspiracy* 164). Taken together, these quotes imply that *A Minor Chorus* will extend *History*’s felt-theoretical work with queer joy by adopting a more intimate community-oriented approach to his performance of joy-making, perhaps bringing an even broader range of Indigenous experiences to the fore through the lens of joy. Future studies could analyze whether (or to what extent) Belcourt and his contemporaries foster more communal forms of joy than in their previous works by experimenting with and shifting between genres, thus adding to our understanding of the resurgent work that joy can do through literature as a relationally collective affective orientation.

This leads to my third and final suggestion for further investigation, which pertains to the diverse thinkers that likely make up Belcourt’s “chorus of rebellious voices” (*Conspiracy* 164), many of whom I could not discuss at length in this project. My thesis focuses on texts by two queer Indigenous men and one two-spirit author because their works have had a notable amount of traction among academic audiences and the general public, which signalled to me that their dialogic modes of felt-theorizing strongly resonate with many people, and therefore warrant further collective consideration. That said, there are numerous emerging trans and non-binary Indigenous writers as well as Indigenous women writers (queer and otherwise) whose creative works on erotics, affects, and intersectional experiences of Indigenous embodiment⁵¹ deserve

⁵⁰ Belcourt’s desire for his forthcoming novel to *feel* communal seems to capture his desire for his audiences to have embodied experiences of relational collectivity in and through his writing, such that they can carry the joyful value of this mode of being into their own worlds as a felt theory.

⁵¹ This refers to the intersecting categories of identity including sex, gender, sexuality, and race (among many others) which comprise one’s experience of embodiment and oppression (Crenshaw). For example, a trans Indigenous woman will have a different intersectional experience of Indigeneity than a cis-gendered Indigenous woman, and written works on both experiences are worthy of attention and care.

more analytic attention.⁵² This includes recently published memoirs like Jas M. Morgan's *nîtisânak* and Alicia Elliott's *A Mind Spread out on the Ground*, and poetry collections such as jaye simpson's *it was never going to be okay*, Arielle Twist's *Disintegrate/ Dissociate*, and Tenille K. Campbell's *#IndianLovePoems* and *Nedí Nezu (Good Medicine)*. An adjacent affect study that considers how the concept of joy relates to or works within these decolonial literatures, which focus on differently gendered experiences of Indigeneity, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy, could add meaningfully to the "broader social project ... of rendering what an Indigenous future might look like" (Belcourt and Morgan n.p) by adding to the breathing room for joy right now.

This utopian project relies on the present and ongoing practices of a multitude of rebellious thinkers, including diverse modes of felt-theorizing, community building, and caring for one another. In reference to Judith Butler's assertion that "language and styles of behaviour are citational, that they echo from a history of use," Belcourt states, "[j]oy, then, is a politics of citation" (*History* 16). The expansion of joy therefore depends on the extent of its usage, on the willingness of many diverse people to engage with joy as a valuable, rebellious affect deserving of deep consideration. To have other thinkers take up these joyful analytic efforts alongside me, then, will not only acknowledge the importance of joy as an affective orientation, but will contribute to joy's reach and the radical work that it can do for queer and racialized communities; indeed, by continuing to consider how and where joy can show up and foster change, we can continue to demonstrate in an "always-loudening chant" (14) that the colonality

⁵² My focus on newly emerging writers here intends to highlight the current state of the Indigenous literary field and its promising future, but it is important to acknowledge that there are many valuable literary works by diverse Indigenous women from the past fifty years. I have traced the intellectual lineage between Scofield and a younger generation of writers through Belcourt and Whitehead; future studies could usefully trace the affective connections between various generations of Indigenous women's writing and their enactments of joy.

of the present is not all that there is or can be. By following the lead of such valuable resurgent writers as Belcourt, Scofield, Whitehead, and the growing list of their gender and sexuality diverse Indigenous contemporaries, we can together reshape the discursive and material realities of collective life.

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