

**"Of Flesh and Voices: Examining Queer Indigenous Embodiment
and Identity in the Novels *Johnny Appleseed* by Joshua Whitehead
and *A Minor Chorus* by Billy-Ray Belcourt"**

**"Von Körpern und Stimmen: Queer-indigene Verkörperung und
Identität in den Romanen *Johnny Appleseed* von Joshua Whitehead
und *A Minor Chorus* von Billy-Ray Belcourt"**

by

Laura Bretz

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

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Completing this thesis marks the end of a challenging journey, and I am grateful to those who have supported me along the way. I would like to thank my family and friends for their unwavering encouragement, especially during the times when motivation was hard to find.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates instances of embodiment in relation to queer Indigenous identity formation in Joshua Whitehead's *Johnny Appleseed* (2018) and Billy-Ray Belcourt's *A Minor Chorus* (2022), two critically acclaimed works in contemporary Canadian literature. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, informed by seminal works from queer feminist and Indigenous studies, as well as a decolonial theoretical perspective, this analysis focuses on how the protagonists' complex identities and sense of belonging within the broader context of settler colonial Canadian society are narrated, and how these novels challenge Western epistemologies and contribute to the reclamation of Indigenous ways of knowing.

Applying frameworks of felt theory and affect studies, this work examines how both works emphasize the queer Indigenous body's capacity for relational identity to enact a collective mode of resurgent embodied life despite the challenges of a settler colonial present. I argue that the authors foster a healing affective orientation among the characters in the novels,— an outcome significantly enhanced by the novels' autofictional forms. By focusing on affect theory as the primary methodology, this research investigates how emotions, sensations, and embodied experiences shape the storytelling and self-telling practices of the characters.

Through the close reading of *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus*, this study seeks to uncover the affective dimensions of resilience, resistance, and resurgence within Indigenous communities, demonstrating how these novels challenge and defy oppressive hegemonic narratives that constrain intersectionally marginalized voices. This thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of queer Indigenous literature, highlighting the transformative power of storytelling in fostering healing, resilience and resurgence. Ultimately, it advocates for continued scholarly engagement with the intersections of identity, community, and embodiment within marginalized narratives, emphasizing the importance of self-aware scholarship that respects and integrates Indigenous forms of knowledge within the academic sphere.

Diese Arbeit untersucht Darstellungen von Verkörperung im Zusammenhang mit queer-indigener Identitätsbildung in Joshua Whiteheads *Johnny Appleseed* (2018) und Billy-Ray Belcourts *A Minor Chorus* (2022), zwei renommierten Werken zeitgenössischer kanadischer Literatur. Unter Verwendung eines interdisziplinären Ansatzes, der zentrale Texte der queer-feministischen und Indigenous Studies sowie Dekolonialtheorie integriert, konzentriert sich diese Analyse darauf, wie die komplexen Identitäten und das Zugehörigkeitsgefühl der Protagonisten im breiteren Kontext der kolonialen kanadischen Siedlergesellschaft narrativ dargestellt werden.

Anhand von Felt Theory und Affect Studies als theoretisches Rahmenwerk wird untersucht, wie die beiden Romane die Kapazität des queer-indigenen Körpers zur Bildung relationaler Identität hervorheben, um trotz der Auswirkungen der kolonialen Siedlerpräsenz in Kanada einen kollektiven Modus verkörperten indigenen Lebens zu schaffen und zu stärken. Hierbei wird argumentiert, dass die beiden Autoren eine heilende affektive Positionierung sowohl bei den Romanfiguren schaffen – ein Aspekt, der durch die autofiktionalen Formen der Romane maßgeblich gesteigert wird. Mit dem Fokus auf Affekttheorie als primäre Forschungsmethodik untersucht diese Arbeit, wie Emotionen, Gefühle und verkörperte Wahrnehmungen die Erzähl- und Selbstdarstellungspraktiken der Figuren prägen.

Durch die textuelle Analyse von *Johnny Appleseed* und *A Minor Chorus* versucht diese Studie, die affektiven Dimensionen von Resilienz, Resistenz und Wiederauflebung innerhalb indigener Gemeinschaften aufzudecken und zu zeigen, wie diese Romane jene repressiven hegemonialen Narrative herausfordern und bekämpfen, die intersektionell marginalisierte Stimmen einschränken. Diese Arbeit trägt damit zu einem tieferen Verständnis queer-indigener Literatur bei, indem sie die transformative Kraft des Storytelling in Bezug auf Heilung, Resilienz und Wiederaufleben hervorhebt. Sie plädiert dabei für eine kontinuierliche wissenschaftliche Auseinandersetzung mit den Schnittstellen von Identität, Gemeinschaft und Verkörperung in marginalisierten Narrativen und betont die Notwendigkeit einer selbstkritischen wissenschaftlichen Arbeit, die indigene Wissensformen im akademischen Kontext respektiert und aktiv einbezieht.

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1. Introduction

Questions of identity, belonging and community, and survivance are pivotal themes in the exploration of queer (Hall et al. 2012) as well as Indigenous narratives¹ (D. D. Moses, Goldie, and Ruffo 2013). Featuring queer-Indigenous protagonists, the recently published autofictional novels *Johnny Appleseed* by Joshua Whitehead (2018) and *A Minor Chorus* by Billy-Ray Belcourt (2022), offer profound insights into the lived experiences of individuals who navigate multiple layers of marginalization inside and outside of their respective communities. Intricately woven into the fabric of the protagonists' journeys, both authors create a rich tapestry of personal and communal storytelling. Each of these contemporary works thereby not only aligns with a long-standing tradition of storytelling as a means of preserving and transmitting culture, history, and identity in Indigenous literatures (Justice 2018; Archibald 2008), but they also challenge and redefine them. With their unique approach to narrative and storytelling, both authors have not only been recognized for their academic work in the field of Indigenous Studies but have also become bestselling novelists (“Joshua Whitehead” 2022; “A Minor Chorus” 2022), which further reflects their significant impact on readers and within contemporary Canadian literature.

Johnny Appleseed has garnered numerous accolades, including being longlisted for the Giller Prize, and is celebrated for its vibrant narrative style and cultural authenticity (CBC Books 2017b). The novel follows the journey of its eponymous protagonist, a young Two Spirit person from the Cree nation, as he navigates the complexities of his identity within the confines of a settler colonial society. The story thereby reveals the profound impact of affective embodied experiences on identity formation, highlighting how Johnny’s physical and emotional experiences shape his sense of self. The novel's autofictional style further creates a more complex and engaging layer by connecting to Whitehead’s own identity as a Two-Spirit Oji-Cree person, allowing for deeper explorations of broader cultural implications of identity and community outside the narrative.

¹ For insights into primary works, *First Nation Communities Read (FNCR) - Ontario First Nation Public Library Community's contribution to the reading movement* – is a valuable online resource that recommends and promotes works from Indigenous authors. (“First Nation Communities Read,” n.d.)

Similarly, *A Minor Chorus* by Billy-Ray Belcourt presents a deeply introspective and relational exploration of identity through the protagonist's interactions with his community. As the unnamed narrator interviews various marginalized individuals from his hometown in rural Alberta in order to write a novel about his community, the storytelling process becomes a means of both giving voice to others and reflecting on his own identity and life purpose. Even more explicit than Whitehead, Belcourt's novel closely reflects his own experiences as queer-Indigenous author and academic of the Driftpile Cree Nation (CBC Books 2022), not only enhancing the narrative's authenticity but also underscoring its multilayered aspect in regards to its broader societal implications.

1.1 Research Aims and Thematic Outline

The success of both novels aligns with a broader trend in the Canadian literature market, which has demonstrated a strong interest in themes of inclusivity and representation over the past decade². Readers and publishers alike are increasingly embracing diverse voices and stories, seeming especially interested in narratives that address questions of identity and belonging, culture and community from a point of lived experience that enables deeper insights and relatability in a context of embodied readership. This trend is reflected by the authors and titles shortlisted for the Canada Reads award over the past decade (CBC Books 2017c). Additionally, *BookNet* Canada's survey on diversity and Canadian readers highlights a significant increase in demand for more diversity in the book market (2021). Considering the topical relevance and thematic depth of Belcourt's and Whitehead's novels, as well as their importance to discussions of queer identity and indigeneity, this thesis aims to address several key

² The foundation for this assertion derives from an analysis of the winners and finalists of the *Canada Reads* competition over the past decade. *Canada Reads* is an annual "battle of the books" competition organized and broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). This event aims to identify the "one book all of Canada should read" each year (CBC Books 2017a). *Canada Reads* holds substantial cultural significance as it not only highlights Canadian literature but also fosters national dialogue on critical issues. It celebrates the diversity and richness of Canadian storytelling, bringing together voices from various backgrounds to discuss and champion literature that resonates with contemporary readers. Among the 32 authors who were finalists each year over the past decade, 8 were Indigenous, an additional 9 had mixed ethnic backgrounds (including Indigenous), and another 9 were from other ethnic or immigrant backgrounds, while 17 identified as white Canadian authors. Moreover, 5 of these authors identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community, further diversifying the spectrum of voices represented in the competition (CBC Books 2017c).

key research questions in an effort to deepen our understanding of these works and their broader implications for current developments in queer-Indigenous and literary scholarship:

- How do relational physical and emotional experiences influence the protagonists' sense of self?
- How do the authors convey the complexities of navigating multiple layers of marginalization within and outside Indigenous communities?
- How do emotions shift depending on characters' immediate surroundings, reflecting either a sense of belonging or alienation?
- How does storytelling function as resistance, cultural reclamation, and a means of fostering resilience?

Through answering these research questions, this thesis aims to fulfill the following main objectives:

- Analyze how embodied experiences shape the protagonists' identities and overall well-being.
- Uncover the ways in which the authors portray the lived experiences of queer Indigenous individuals in contemporary settler colonial Canada.
- Examine the affective dimensions of resilience, resistance, and resurgence within Indigenous communities.
- Explore how storytelling and voice-giving to marginalized identities contribute to broader communal experiences of resistance and identity formation

This thesis thereby employs close reading and textual analysis, informed by affect theory and felt theory as its main methodology to examine selected passages from both novels. Particular attention is paid to the storytelling styles and voice-giving aspects, especially in *A Minor Chorus*. Thus, by addressing these aspects, my work aims to provide a holistic understanding of how embodiment and identity are portrayed in *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus*, contributing to both intersectional interdisciplinary academic scholarship and broader societal discussions on inclusivity and representation concerning healing, resilience, and resurgence.

In order to address these research questions and objectives and provide a logical flow of argument, this thesis is structured into several chapters. Having outlined the topical relevance of *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus* within the broader trend of inclusivity and representation in the Canadian literary market, and elaborated on my research questions and objectives in the introduction, the introductory

chapter ends with a short elaboration of the significance of this thesis for the academic discourse. This will then be followed by a section on positionality and power, which reflects on and discusses questions of researcher identity and position within this field of discourse, introducing decolonial theory through a close reading of *A Minor Chorus*. Following this first combination of theory and analysis, the literature review chapter provides a detailed overview of scholarship in queer Indigenous studies, affect theory, and felt theory to equip us with the necessary theoretical background for the subsequent analyses of the novels. It further discusses the significance of storytelling in Indigenous cultures in relation to knowledge and identity.

The theoretical understanding gained from the previous section will then be applied in the two analysis chapters for the novels. The analysis of *Johnny Appleseed* examines instances of embodiment and identity formation through close readings of selected passages, focusing on relational identity and the protagonist's capacity for resilience and resurgence, while the analysis of *A Minor Chorus* emphasizes the novel's storytelling style and voice-giving to marginalized identities and its alignment with Indigenous knowledge traditions. Lastly the concluding section of this thesis synthesizes insights from both analyses, discusses broader implications for understanding queer Indigenous identities, and considers the novels' challenge to settler colonial narratives.

1.2 Significance of the study and relevance to the field

The exploration of embodiment and identity in queer Indigenous novels, specifically in *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus*, represents a significant contribution to several fields of academic research. This section highlights the importance of this study, identifies existing gaps in literature, and discusses the potential impact of its findings.

While there has been an increased focus on Indigenous narratives within Canadian literature and academia (LaRocque 2015) the intersection of queer identity and Indigenous experiences, especially in the North American context, remains underexplored (Hames-García 2013; Driskill 2011; Tatonetti 2014). This study aims to address this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of queer Indigenous narratives, focusing on themes of embodiment and identity.

Moreover, this study uniquely integrates perspectives from queer studies, Indigenous studies, affect studies, felt theory, and decolonial theory. Such an interdisciplinary approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in the identity formation of queer Indigenous individuals. It emphasizes the importance of considering multiple overlapping theoretical frameworks to capture the multifaceted nature of embodied experiences (Ahmed 2014, 10; Tuck and Yang 2012, 3)

A notable aspect of this research is its focus on *A Minor Chorus*, Billy-Ray Belcourt's first foray into fiction. Its recent publication means that it has not yet been widely addressed in scholarly research. This study is among the first to critically engage with *A Minor Chorus* and its themes, thereby filling a crucial gap in the existing literature on Belcourt's oeuvre.

The findings of this study have the potential to significantly impact several academic fields:

1. In queer Indigenous studies, this research contributes to a richer understanding of the intersectionality of queer and Indigenous identities. It underscores the importance of representation and inclusivity in literature and highlights how storytelling can be a powerful tool for fostering resilience and community among marginalized groups (Driskill 2011, 65, 87).
2. For intercultural German studies, this thesis bridges the gap between Canadian literature and German academic discourse, offering insights into how themes of embodiment and identity transcend cultural boundaries (Bhabha 2004) ³.
3. In affect studies and felt theory, this study explores how emotions and bodily sensations are conveyed in literature, and how these affective experiences influence identity formation and community belonging (Ahmed 2014).

³ Bhabha specifically arguments for the notion of "Third Space" as a site of negotiation and transformation, that challenges fixed identities. They further emphasize the importance of cultural translation in the postcolonial context, involving the interpretation and reinterpretation of cultural signs and symbols across different (cultural) contexts, leading to new meanings and mutual understanding.

4. The integration of decolonial theory analyzes how these narratives challenge and resist the ongoing effects of settler colonialism, emphasizing the role of storytelling in the decolonization process (Tuck and Yang 2012).

The interdisciplinary nature of this study is crucial for a holistic analysis of embodiment and identity in queer Indigenous literature. By integrating various theoretical perspectives, this research provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the protagonists' experiences, contributing to a broader socio-cultural understanding of queer Indigenous voices.

2. Positionality and Power: Ethical Considerations for Marginalized Research

To begin outlining the theoretical frameworks that inform my thesis, it is necessary to address the methodological and ethical considerations for conducting research on marginalized experiences. This discussion explores the challenges and opportunities that arise from my unique perspective as an Intercultural German scholar, particularly in undertaking intersectional and intercultural research. This approach is crucial for decolonial efforts, which critique the colonial epistemologies that dominate global politics of knowledge production and academic methodologies⁴ (cf. W. Mignolo 2009a).

Informed by decolonial studies, this chapter intersects culturally sensitive research with queer Indigenous Studies to challenge oppressive structures that have historically marginalized Indigenous and queer communities within the heteropatriarchal colonial society (Finley 2011, 33f.). By adopting a decolonial lens, my research seeks to amplify the voices and narratives of queer Indigenous peoples, reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies and challenging the hegemonic dominance of Western knowledge traditions in academia.

This chapter will conclude with an in-depth analysis of *A Minor Chorus*, demonstrating how academia, as a hegemonic epistemological nexus grounded in Western universalism, both constrains and alienates the protagonist. We will his realisation that "grad school is hardly the place to end white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism" (B. R. Belcourt 2022, 10) and explore his quest for alternative, communal modes of knowledge production that resist individualistic and commodifying academic tendencies. This analysis shows how Belcourt's work challenges colonial structures and advocates for a decolonial approach prioritizing community, relationality, and Indigenous ways of knowing.

By foregrounding these critical frameworks, this chapter aims to provide a foundational understanding of the responsibilities and challenges researchers face, paving the way for more inclusive and ethical scholarly practices.

⁴ See further: Mignolo & Walsh on the colonial matrix of power in "On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis (2018)

2.1 Navigating Identity: The Intersections of Scholar and Subject

In her work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*, Māori scholar Linda Tuhiway Smith asserts that "research is a site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other", which frames contemporary politics of research, especially in the field of Indigenous Studies (1999, 2). As such, a reflection on researchers' identities in relation to their subjects becomes integral, as scholars occupy a position of relative privilege and authority within the academic institution (1), which becomes especially problematic in relation to research practices on marginalized communities as 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism (1).

Adopting the critical decolonial stance that a researcher's role is as integral to the subject as the subject itself, it is necessary to reflect on my own identity and consider how my experiences shape my research approach and interpretation. This reflexive practice is essential for properly contextualizing my findings within the broader framework of decoloniality. Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasizes in her work on intersectionality and identity politics that the way we understand and engage with our subjects is deeply influenced by our own identities and experiences (1991, 1244). This makes research not an objective process of data collection, but rather involves a complex and dynamic relationship between the researcher and the subject (Smith 1999, 137). As such, my background and identity significantly influence and inform the topics of my thesis and the way I approach them, but also open up new avenues for scholarly contributions to the field.

2.1.1 Ethical Boundaries: Authenticity and Representation in Cross-Cultural Scholarship

As a German scholar of Intercultural German Studies, I bring a unique perspective to my research on queer Indigenous narratives, as this cross-cultural lens allows for a comparative analysis of how themes of identity, belonging, and representation are addressed in different cultural contexts. The parallels between German Studies and Indigenous Studies are particularly pertinent here, as substantial parts of both fields focus on and grapple with the legacy of historical atrocities – the Holocaust in Germany and the colonial genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada – which often include discussions and tensions of their (moral) comparability (cf. A. D. Moses 2002; cf. Dudley 2017). While it would be morally

wrong to compare these histories by quantifying or evaluating the suffering of the affected individuals and communities, it is crucial to acknowledge the shared experiences that underpin both fields. These include marginalization, displacement, and the ongoing struggles for self-determination, representation, and resurgence, all of which continue to shape how survivors narrate their stories. For example, according to Corntassel et al, Indigenous storytelling plays a crucial role in conveying historical narratives and lived experiences, which stand in stark contrast to the Canadian state's glossing over of colonial atrocities and ignorance of the ongoing effects of colonization on Indigenous peoples in present day Canada, asserting that “telling these stories is a form of resistance to colonization [...] that respects and honours people while simultaneously documenting their reality” (2009, 147). Similarly, Rubinstein’s analysis of how elderly Jewish women in America narrate their experiences of suffering concludes that the Holocaust serves as a silent presence influencing their storytelling, exemplifying how women view suffering as a cultural, rather than individual matter. Recounting these narratives thereby serves as a personal and collective testimony, where each retelling of their stories affirms their survival and resilience despite their suffering (Rubinstein 2009). The significance of these narratives and their impact on not only the survivors and impacted communities but also general discourses in these contexts raise critical questions about authenticity and the ethical responsibilities of researchers and writers in studying this topic, especially given the historical and ongoing issues surrounding who has the right to tell certain stories (cf. Scholfield-Peters 2023; cf. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 2003).

This question is a critical and complex issue, particularly for marginalized narratives. Ethical considerations are central, as representing one's own experiences is a fundamental aspect of self-determination and cultural sovereignty (cf. Smith 1999, 151). For marginalized groups, such as Indigenous peoples, the ability to control their narratives is often constrained by dominant power structures that have historically silenced or misrepresented them. Colonialism has played a significant role in disrupting Indigenous knowledge systems and imposing external interpretations as “influenced by Western ethnocentrism, Western knowledge imposed a monolithic world view that gave power and control in the hands of Europeans [and] delegitimized other ways of knowing as savage, superstitious, and primitive” (Akena 2012, 600). This in turn raises important questions about authenticity, authority,

and representation: Who determines which stories are legitimate? How can we prevent the appropriation or distortion of these narratives by outsiders? And what happens when false claims of identity undermine the credibility of marginalized voices? Researchers must navigate these ethical dilemmas carefully, balancing respect for communities' autonomy with the unique insights scholars can offer. This involves rethinking traditional academic practices and a willingness to adopt more collaborative, community-based approaches.

Regarding those questions, a discussion of authenticity and the politics of representation is further integral to my thesis, as both German and Indigenous Studies have witnessed significant controversies surrounding falsely claimed identities, which have undermined the credibility of scholarly work and the authenticity of narratives. A notable example is Bruno Dösseker, who fabricated the Jewish identity of Benjamin Wilkomirski in his acclaimed autobiography 'Bruchstücke'⁵ (Hefti et al. 2002). When revealed as a fraud, this case not only discredited Dösseker but also cast doubt on other Holocaust narratives, leading to harmful skepticism of genuine survivor stories. As Hasian explains, Wilkomirski's deception was especially troubling because "questioning him might mean questioning the veracity of all child survivors, and in the process, some facets of the Holocaust" (2005, 236), which is particularly dangerous considering that such cases play into the hands of Holocaust deniers, contributing to a "second Holocaust by extinguishing [Jewish] identity" (Geller 2002, 352) through the erosion of authenticity and trust in these vital historical accounts. This situation has prompted intense debate about authenticity criteria and ethical representation, compelling scholars to reassess the standards for validating personal narratives. In this regard, Hasian highlights the urgent need for a "re-evaluation of the ways that we think about the evidentiary hierarchies that are deployed in our public debates about Holocaust memories" (245). Furthermore, Dösseker's deceit had a profound impact on the Holocaust survivor community, as it took away focus from the topic of representation, survival, etc. in such narratives and even lead to the rejection of other survivor stories by publishers. For example, in the second part of her autobiography *Unterwegs verloren. Erinnerungen*, Ruth Klüger reports the first part of her work, *Weiter leben. Eine Jugend*, was rejected as "not literary enough." in comparison

⁵ See further: Schmidt (2014) "Konstruktionen", ch. 5, 195-233.

to Wilkomirski's work (2008, 162f.). This case highlights the critical need to address authenticity and representation in minority narratives, emphasizing the detrimental effects of fabrications on scholarly trust and community integrity in German Studies.

Similarly, the issue of so-called "pretendians" in Indigenous studies, where individuals falsely claim Indigenous identity without genuine lineage or tribal recognition, erodes the authenticity of Indigenous narratives. These false claims often perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, disrespecting the trauma and struggles of real Indigenous communities. (Tallbear, qtd. in Hilleary 2022). Furthermore, tribal sovereignty and resurgence are undermined as these individuals occupy spaces and opportunities meant for genuine Indigenous people, such as scholarships, grants, and prestigious positions in academia and the arts.⁶ To quote Indigenous researcher and scholar Kim Tallbear: "Non-Indigenous people with non-Indigenous community standpoints who pose as Indigenous and who rise through the professional ranks falsely represent our voices. They theorize Indigenous peoplehood, sovereignty and anticolonialism. They become thought leaders, institutional decision-makers and policy advisers to governmental leaders with regulatory and economic power over our peoples and lands" (ibid.).

A prominent example of this phenomenon in academia is Andrea Smith, whose claims of Cherokee ancestry have been widely discredited (Viren 2021). Smith's case illustrates the harm caused by individuals who falsely assert Indigenous identity, as she occupied significant academic positions over the span of her career and gained access to resources intended to support Indigenous scholars (ibid.). This not only undermines the work of legitimate Indigenous scholars but also distorts public and academic understanding of Indigenous issues. Smith's case represents a clear-cut instance of how such false claims can damage both scholarship and community by diverting opportunities and resources away from those who genuinely belong to these communities and damaging scholarly integrity and trust.

⁶ For further information on the impact of false claims of Indigenous identity and their effects on Indigenous communities and academia, see:

1. Indigenous Foundation: "Pretendians and Their Impacts on Indigenous Communities," n.d.
2. High Country News: Nagle 2019: How pretendians undermine the rights of Indigenous people.

However, the matter of tribal belonging is often more complex, particularly when viewed through the lens of historical and ongoing colonial practices that have disrupted Indigenous identities. This complexity is highlighted in the case of Qwo-Li Driskill, a prominent scholar and poet whose contributions to queer Indigenous Studies have recently been scrutinized due to questions surrounding their Indigenous identity (cf. *tribal alliance against frauds*, n.d.). Driskill, who identifies as an unenrolled citizen of tribal nations has been facing accusations of being a pretender due to lack of official tribal recognition, but unlike the case of Smith, Driskill remains a respected figure in Two Spirit/ queer Indigenous research circles and has not faced any preliminary actions. This situation is complicated by the broader question of what counts as ‘genuine’ indigenous. The process of defining and tracing Indigeneity is fraught with complexities, deeply rooted in historical and ongoing colonial practices. One significant challenge stems from the disruption of community connections caused by policies such as interracial adoption, foster care, and the residential school system, which forcibly removed thousands of Indigenous children from their communities. These individuals often grow up with tenuous or nonexistent ties to their cultural heritage, making it difficult for them to reassert their Indigenous identity later in life (Weaver 2001, 247). Additionally, Indigenous identity is a dynamic construct, influenced by both self-identification and the perceptions of others. Conflicts frequently arise when these perspectives clash, leading to disputes over who can legitimately claim Indigenous identity and who has the right to represent Indigenous interests (ibid., 243), as is the case with Driskill.

Novels, especially those with autofictional elements, are particularly valuable in the context of queer Indigenous studies and voice-giving. By focusing on works by self-identified Indigenous authors like Joshua Whitehead and Billy-Ray Belcourt, this thesis prioritizes authentic Indigenous voices and perspectives. This approach aligns with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's call for research that empowers Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories (1999, 28).

However, it's crucial to acknowledge the complexities surrounding Indigenous identity and scholarship. As demonstrated by the case of Qwo-Li Driskill, whose identity claims have been questioned but whose

work remains foundational in queer Indigenous studies⁷, we must approach these issues with nuance. While centering self-identified Indigenous voices, it's critical to engage in decolonial practices that amplify genuine Indigenous perspectives and counter distorted academic representations of Indigenous peoples (Smith 1999, 151). By examining autofictional novels, we can explore the multifaceted nature of queer Indigenous experiences, bridging personal narratives with broader cultural and historical contexts. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of identity formation, embodiment, and resistance to colonial structures. It also provides a safe space for authors to explore sensitive topics related to identity and colonialism, conveying embodied knowledge and felt experiences in ways that academic writing often cannot. Moreover, by engaging critically with these works, we contribute to decolonial efforts by prioritizing the substance and impact of Indigenous scholarship while also challenging the colonial structures that have historically dictated the terms of legitimacy and representation in academia. This balanced approach allows us to honor the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples while acknowledging the ongoing complexities of identity and representation in Indigenous communities.

2.2.1 Bridging Voices: Parallels between Indigenous and Jewish narratives

Having established the significance of narratives in relation to themes of identity, displacement and the struggle for representation and self-determination, as well as the importance of authenticity and integrity in minority narratives, it is equally important to address how my intercultural background can inform cross-cultural scholarship that further contributes to a body of research that connects German and Indigenous Studies by looking at the similarities between Indigenous and Jewish narratives.

⁷ Despite the questions surrounding their identity, Driskill's work remains foundational in advancing the discourse on queer Indigenous identities. Their scholarship on intersectionality, Two-Spirit identity, and the interplay of queer and Indigenous experiences provides insights that continue to shape the field (cf. Tallie 2013). By continuing to reference Driskill's work, I aim to acknowledge the complexity and depth of their contributions while maintaining a critical perspective on the issues surrounding their identity claims. In continuing this balanced engagement, I aim to contribute to decolonial efforts by prioritizing the substance and impact of Indigenous scholarship while critically engaging with the complexities of identity claims, but also challenge the colonial structures that have historically dictated the terms of legitimacy and representation in academia.

My background as a German scholar not only heightens my awareness for critical engagement with my own position in a system of power and knowledge production, but also equips me with a keen eye for the comparative potential between German-Jewish narratives and Canadian Indigenous ones. This perspective is informed by a deep sensitivity and self-awareness regarding the delicate nature of writing about marginalized communities. It balances a commitment to ethical scholarship with a desire to advance the visibility and discussion of these critical topics in intercultural research and public media. The historical contexts of the Holocaust in Germany and the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada provide a rich framework for examining how narratives of trauma, resilience, and identity are constructed and understood, as well as received across different cultural contexts. Despite my thesis' focus on Indigenous narratives, the introduction of a comparative framework emphasizes the universality of the challenges encountered by marginalized groups in articulating their histories and identities. This includes their ongoing struggle for recognition and the assertion of their right to sovereignty and resurgence. By examining these narratives, this research not only informs further scholarly inquiry in the field of queer Indigenous Studies, but also contributes significantly to broader discussions surrounding identity, belonging, and representation within post-traumatic societies. Examining these narratives can inform further research and contributes to broader discussions on identity, belonging, and representation, contributing to both Indigenous Studies and German Studies. Thus, while my analysis centers on Indigenous narratives, the methodologies and ethical considerations delineated herein are equally relevant to German Studies, thereby fostering interdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue on these critical issues.

3. Decoloniality as a Framework for Reflexive and Ethical Scholarship

The comparative analysis of Indigenous and Jewish narratives not only reveals the shared struggles of marginalized groups in articulating their histories and identities but also underscores the critical need for a framework that can adequately address these complex intersections. To move beyond mere acknowledgment of these struggles, it is imperative to adopt a decolonial framework that critiques the colonial roots of these power dynamics and offers a pathway for more equitable and reflexive scholarly practices (Mukavetz 2018, 126).

These struggles do not exist in a vacuum; they are deeply embedded within a global system of power relations rooted in colonialism. As a non-Indigenous, German scholar, the academic training and epistemological frameworks I have been exposed to are, according to decolonial theory, deeply rooted in Western, eurocentric traditions (cf. Mignolo 2002). These traditions have historically marginalized non-Western ways of knowing and have been instrumental in perpetuating the global hierarchies of knowledge that decolonial scholars like Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo critique.

Hence, my background inherently situates me within a position of power, particularly in relation to the "coloniality of knowledge," a concept articulated by Mignolo, which refers to the ways in which colonial power structures continue to shape what is considered legitimate knowledge within academic institutions, with eurocentricism as the focal point for the way knowledge is conceived and organized (Mignolo 2002, 84). This position necessitates a critical engagement with frameworks that seek to disrupt these colonial dynamics by questioning the very foundations of how knowledge is produced and validated. As Morgensen critiques: "the academy forms within settler societies as an apparatus of colonization. Indigenous researchers critically engage its colonial power by practicing Indigenous methodologies: an act that also implicates non-Indigenous people in challenging the settler academy" (2012, 805). This means that non-Indigenous researchers are called to not merely adapt methods to fit Indigenous contexts but rather to rethink the very epistemological assumptions of research (Smith 1999, 166) and, further, to participate in the (re-)establishment of Indigenous methodologies. For this thesis, this includes analyzing how novels like *A Minor Chorus* serve as artifacts of alternate forms of knowledge and how their very form can be deemed an example of academic disobedience, in that they

challenge dominant narratives of what constitutes valid academic knowledge production and reposition their value from being subaltern to reclaiming their validity, aiding in the resurgence of Indigenous culture and life. As such, this thesis aligns with goals of decoloniality in its advocacy for research that does not merely study marginalized groups but instead seeks to engage with and validate their perspectives and knowledge systems (cf. Quijano and Ennis 2000).

Central to the theoretic framework of decoloniality thereby is the concept of “coloniality of power” as coined by Quijano in his seminal work *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America*. His central argument is that structures of power established during colonialism have not disappeared but have been reconfigured to maintain control over social, political, and economic relations globally. This presumes a continued global state of coloniality that marks Western modernity (Escobar 2004, 218) even after the formal end of colonial administrations. It organizes the world into a hierarchy of superior and inferior races, cultures, and knowledges, perpetuating colonial domination in new forms through the so-called “colonial matrix of power.” This includes the imposition of a eurocentric perspective of knowledge, which “allowed the elaboration of the idea of race as an instrument of domination” (Quijano and Ennis 2000, 540).

Building on Quijano’s ideas, Mignolo further defines decoloniality as “epistemic disobedience” to the coloniality of knowledge—a necessary act to reject the universality claimed by Western knowledge systems and to validate alternative epistemologies. He asserts that decoloniality is not about a project of reform but a project of delinking from the colonial matrix of power (cf. Mignolo 2009, 160–62). A prominent view within Decolonial Theory assumes that there cannot be any true economic delinking without a prior, more fundamental epistemic delinking from the thought patterns of Western modernity⁸. This underscores the importance of critically engaging with questions of coloniality and its implications on research practices and assumptions in academia. It highlights the crucial need to create spaces for non-Western ways of knowing, as modernity/coloniality is not just a historical period; it is the constitutive element of a specific regime of truth and knowledge (W. D. Mignolo 2012, 49),

⁸ Cf., among others, „Coloniality of Power in postcolonial Africa” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

particularly in disciplines like Indigenous Studies, where colonial histories have long shaped academic discourse and obscured Indigenous voices.

For my thesis, Mignolo's concept of delinking is critical in developing a research methodology that moves away from traditional Western academic practices and instead foregrounds Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems. This approach challenges the hegemony of Western epistemologies in academia and seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable space for diverse ways of knowing, beginning with the role and power of language and literature and its potential to either maintain (cf. W. Mignolo 2012, 225) or challenge and subvert colonial power structures. Decolonial scholarship emphasizes the activist and transformative potential of research that challenges colonial power structures. As the sources note, Indigenous methodologies do not merely seek social justice within existing systems, but rather work towards the end of settler rule and the denaturalization of the colonial conditions that have shaped the politics of academic knowledge production. This radical impetus to dismantle, rather than reform, the colonial matrix of power is a key tenet of the decolonial approach guiding this research.

Dian Million's work is particularly significant in this context. Million challenges the Western academic tradition that often prioritizes rationality and objectivity over emotional and embodied knowledge. She argues that for Indigenous peoples, affective knowledge—how people feel and experience the world—is a valid and crucial form of knowledge and felt theory highlights the importance of narrative and storytelling in Indigenous cultures in this regard. Stories are not just ways of recounting events but are fundamental to the transmission of knowledge and cultural values. She emphasizes that storytelling is a method through which Indigenous peoples convey affective experiences and connect with their histories, making the emotional and affective dimensions of Indigenous storytelling integral to understanding Indigenous epistemologies ("Felt Theory" 2013, 65).

Having established decoloniality as the guiding theoretical framework for this research, it is crucial to outline how these principles will be translated into the specific methodologies and analytical strategies employed in the examination of *A Minor Chorus*.

We will look at how the narrator, as well as Belcourt as an author, move beyond traditional Western frameworks for academic writing, and instead draw on Indigenous methodologies emphasizing

storytelling, relationality, and embodied knowledge. This aligns with Dian Million's concept of "felt theory," which highlights the role of emotion and personal narrative in Indigenous epistemologies (Million, 2013).

The textual analysis focuses on how Belcourt's novel challenges Western literary conventions, examining narrative structure, language, and themes that subvert traditional academic discourses. This approach illustrates how the text functions as a decolonial act of literary resistance, mirroring broader critiques of colonial power dynamics within academia. Thus, the examination of *A Minor Chorus* will not only illuminate the novel's specific critiques of colonial structures within the academy but will also model a scholarly approach that privileges Indigenous ways of knowing and challenges the hegemony of Western epistemologies.

3.1 The Decolonial Critique of Academia in "A Minor Chorus"

Through the protagonist's journey, which mirrors Belcourt's own experiences as a queer Indigenous scholar (cf. Neilson 2022), the novel illuminates the profound exclusions and alienations that marginalized individuals face within academia. Belcourt's narrative underscores the persistent coloniality of knowledge, as especially the first chapter of the novel (p.3-20) thematizes the alienation that the narrator feels within the academic context, along with their critique of the utility of academic knowledge, that is presumed in regards to his work as well as his desire to engage in other forms of knowledge production – writing a novel – that align closer with his identity and values.

As a queer-indigenous scholar and writer from the Cree nation, Belcourt's own identity thereby situates him uniquely within the academy, making him acutely aware of the ways in which these institutions perpetuate colonial power dynamics (ibid.). His personal lived experiences in academia, as reflected in *A Minor Chorus*, reveal a deep sense of dislocation and disenfranchisement.

While *A Minor Chorus* is Belcourt's first plunge into fiction, his previous body of work, spanning academic essays, poetry and prose, has also been deeply embedded in the project of decoloniality as it constantly explores the ongoing effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples by challenging the authority that academia holds over knowledge production, particularly its tendency to marginalize non-Western epistemologies. As such it is a prime example of Mignolo's concept of academic disobedience

through engaging in what Doxtater describes as "reengaging Indigenous knowledge with a practiced culture rather than merely a performative culture." (2004, 629)

Exemplary, in *A Poltergeist Manifesto*⁹, Belcourt adopts a speculative and radical approach to decolonization, imagining new worlds where Indigenous and queer identities are not constrained by colonial legacies. In his memoir, *A History of My Brief Body* (2020), Belcourt further adds to the personal and political dimensions of his decolonial project as he candidly explores his personal experiences within the academy, as a queer Indigenous scholar navigating the fraught terrain of academia, where colonial structures continue to shape the production and validation of knowledge. He writes, "The university is a place where we are asked to transmute our pain into knowledge, but rarely are we allowed to do so in ways that are true to our traditions" (34).

This critique is further added onto through the medium of poetry. In the collection *This Wound Is a World* (2019), poetic form is used to resist the constraints of academic discourse and to reclaim Indigenous identity and challenge the colonial narratives that marginalize queer Indigenous experiences. Through these poems, Belcourt foregrounds the importance of lived experience, affect, and embodiment as central components of decolonial resistance, aligning with Million's concept of Felt Theory. By embracing poetry—a form that defies the rigid structures of academic writing—Belcourt offers a decolonial critique of how knowledge is produced and valued in the Western academy. His work challenges the notion that legitimate knowledge must conform to certain academic standards, instead advocating for the recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing that are often expressed through storytelling, art, and oral traditions. This resonates with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's call for research practices that "offer a space for self-determination, for revitalization and for a renewal of ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of living" (Smith, 1999, p. 24).

Belcourt's shift to novel writing in his most recent work, *A Minor Chorus*, represents a continuation of this decolonial project, by adding autofictional writing as yet another way of integrating alternative modes of expression and knowledge that align with Indigenous culture, as an embodied critique of the colonality of knowledge within academic institutions.

⁹ cf. feral feminisms: *A POLTERGEIST MANIFESTO* (2024)

By having his fictional protagonist choosing to write a novel instead of a traditional academic dissertation, Belcourt exemplifies the practical application of decolonial theory on a meta-level between fiction and real-world experience, positioning creative writing as a valid and powerful form of knowledge production that resists the constraints of colonial frameworks. In an interview with Shondaland, Belcourt discusses how *A Minor Chorus* was designed to defy traditional narrative structures, reflecting his own frustrations with the confines of academia. He mentions that his work is "far from a traditional novel" and that it "subverts the expectation of what a novel should be" (Belcourt, Shondaland, 2022). This subversion is reflective of Belcourt's broader critique of the academic institutions that often enforce narrow definitions of knowledge and success, excluding those who do not fit within these paradigms. He turns his novel into an extension of his critique of academic authority and his effort to create a literary form that can "hold the complexities of [his] life" (Shondaland, 2022), viewing the novel as a space where Indigenous and queer identities can be fully expressed without the limitations imposed by traditional academic or literary forms. "I wanted to write something that wasn't confined to the academic boxes I'd been stuffed into, something that could speak to people who had been pushed to the margins, just like me," Belcourt explains, underscoring his commitment to creating a form of literature that is inclusive and reflective of marginalized experiences (Shondaland, 2022).

The following analysis will now illuminate these points and demonstrate how Belcourt's work engages in what Morgensen (2012) describes as marking, crossing, exceeding, and disrupting the colonial conditions of knowledge production. Specifically, we will explore how the novel articulates the narrator's alienation within academia, critiques the perceived utility of conventional academic knowledge, and embraces alternative forms of knowledge and expression as acts of decolonial resistance.

3.1.1 Alienation within the Academic Framework

The narrator of *A Minor Chorus* experiences a profound sense of alienation within the academic environment, which is portrayed as a space that marginalizes non-Western ways of knowing and fails to accommodate the complexities of Indigenous and queer identities. This alienation is vividly captured

in a passage early in the novel, where the narrator reflects on his feelings of disconnection, and his struggle with writing his thesis, while observing a neoclassical building on campus.

"in my Cree body in the twenty-first century, I was a historical anomaly... I was fine with projecting my feelings of alienation onto what was so clearly a product of a longing for a heroic white past, however mythological. ...I was meant to be writing a dissertation, but what the sentences I'd been compiling in a document really added up to was a depression diary ... most days this 'research topic' was more accurately a kind of self-directed therapy. I'd been experiencing life as a 'problem of form': it is difficult to live in a world that corrodes freedom" (p. 3-4).

This passage exemplifies what Walter Dignolo terms the "coloniality of knowledge," which prioritizes Western epistemologies while devaluing alternative ways of knowing. The narrator's reference to his "Cree body" as a "historical anomaly" underscores the displacement he feels within an institution steeped in colonial history. Dignolo further elaborates on this concept, noting that lived experiences of racialized bodies have been shaped by the "racial matrix of the modern/colonial world." He points out how Christianity became a dominant force in classifying people and places, and establishing a hierarchy of humanity, particularly in the 16th century when "slavery became indistinguishable from blackness" (Dignolo 2009, 175). While Dignolo's example focuses on the Black experience, the concept applies similarly to Indigenous bodies within colonial institutions, highlighting the pervasive nature of colonial epistemologies in shaping perceptions and experiences of racialized individuals.

The neoclassical architecture, a "product of a longing for a heroic white past," symbolizes the enduring presence of colonial values within the university, which are incompatible with the narrator's identity and lived experience of trauma through the eradication efforts against his people — a legacy that still crucially effects indigenous peoples today. (cf. Cornthassel et. al. 2009, 178). His interpretation of the building as a "longing for a heroic white past", could be read as a critique of and his discontentment with the university's (and educational and political environment's general) lack of engagement with and recognition of, the atrocities of Canada's colonial past — an issue that is constantly being addressed, for example in numerous calls for the integration of Indigenous history in school and universities curriculums (ibid.).

The phrase "a problem of form" encapsulates the narrator's broader critique of the university as an institution that imposes rigid structures on knowledge production that constrain the expression of marginalized lived experiences and which are fundamentally at odds with the narrator's need for

freedom and authenticity. The general assertion that “it is difficult to live in a world that corrodes freedom” further highlights the universality of this struggle. It is not just the academia that corrodes his sense of authenticity and freedom, but the (colonial) world everyone lives in at large, which directly correlates with the theories of decoloniality on the colonial matrix of power that is at work globally.

The narrator’s growing detachment from the academic institution is further underscored by his reflection, “it wasn’t that I had been wronged by the university per se. Rather, something inside me shifted in the last year such that I was no longer moved to play by its rules” (p. 3). It shows that the narrator has come to the realization that the academic system, is fundamentally incompatible with his identity and aspirations for a form of expression that allows him to incorporate his lived reality, and which is more in alignment with his cultural identity and knowledge. His feeling that, “when walking through campus it feels like as if nothing of concern is happening elsewhere” (p. 7) underlines his sense of detachment and alienation, as the academic environment feels increasingly irrelevant to his personal concerns and lived experiences.

The broader critique of academia is evident in the narrator's reflection: “maybe Foucault was right. Maybe I'm not as free as I think I am. So many grad students are so fucking miserable—maybe the whole thing is rotten” (p. 9). This sentiment aligns with Scott Lauria Morgensen's analysis of how settler colonialism impacts Indigenous identities within academic spaces. Morgensen argues that “the academy forms within settler societies as an apparatus of colonization” and that Indigenous methodologies challenge this structure by “exposing normative knowledge production as colonial” (2012, 805)

The toll that academia takes on individuals due to this is poignantly captured in the narrator’s interaction with his supervisor: “Hannah looked compassionately at me, as she had done many times before, a compassion that seemed to acknowledge that we were situated inside a structure that depleted more than it enlivened” (p. 16). This quote reflects the recognition, even among those within the system, that academia often fails to support or sustain those it claims to serve, resulting in “the unlivability of the institution” (p. 17) and reflecting Tuhiway Smith’s call for the need to decolonize research methodologies in academia.

3.1.2 Critique of the Utility of Academic Knowledge

The narrator's alienation in academia is closely tied to a critique of academic knowledge's utility, particularly its tendency to commodify lived experiences and its failure to address deeper existential and structural issues faced by marginalized individuals. This critique reflects a broader decolonial call to challenge systems that disproportionately disadvantage marginalized groups. The narrator's disillusionment is captured succinctly:

"It seemed unavoidable that I wanted my writing not to advance an institutional body of knowledge, as is the case with a dissertation, but instead to invent an exit route, to make something out of nothing" (p. 4).

This passage reflects a rejection of the academic system's emphasis on producing knowledge within predefined structures, instead highlighting the importance of creating knowledge that serves marginalized communities' needs and aspirations.

The limitations of academic methodologies are further highlighted in Hannah's reflection:

"I hear everything you're saying, [...] I really do. It's an existential problem. [...] But I also know that there are few to no methodologies that can cure loneliness or whatever you want to call what it feels like to be besieged by structural forces that assail our joy" (p. 18).

This reveals the inadequacy of academic frameworks in addressing emotional and existential struggles, aligning with the decolonial project of reimagining academia to better serve marginalized communities and contest Eurocentric epistemologies, as they are not designed to align with other forms of knowledge which are capable of this, such as Million's concept of felt theory.

The narrator extends this critique further to broader academic structures, which he views as inherently co-opting and complicit in sustaining the status quo:

"Grad school is hardly the place to end white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism... The problem: universities are institutions inside which one could feel as if they were doing radical work when in actuality that radical work was being co-opted and diminished and transformed into 'diversity' and 'equity' data. ...our research output would likely be called forth as evidence of a structural reckoning that wasn't happening" (p. 10).

This passage examines how academic work is often absorbed into the very structures it seeks to challenge, resonating with decolonial theorists' arguments for delinking from Western epistemologies to create space for truly transformative knowledge production.

The commodification of lived experience, especially racialized ones, within academia is thereby starkly illustrated:

"Remember, I said, when that professor told me that I was lucky to be able to write from lived experience that that made me more valuable on the job market... I wish I would've said, Do you know what you're saying to me? That my suffering is an economic privilege" (p. 8).

This quote highlights how the academic system exploits personal trauma for institutional gain, reducing complex realities of racialized suffering to marketable assets. The professor's comment, suggesting that the narrator's lived experience makes him "more valuable on the job market," reduces the complex realities of racialized suffering to a form of economic capital. The narrator's line of thought ultimately culminates in his assertion that "as racialized people we can only really be in a relation of criminality to the university. We have to steal from it" (p. 10), supporting Gallien's notion that subversion, rather than collaboration, is the only viable approach for marginalized scholars within a system designed to exclude them (2020, 37).

3.3.1 Embracing Alternative Forms of Knowledge and Expression

Belcourt's notion of subversion takes the form of a new form of expression for the narrator, but also himself, as he shows with *A Minor Chorus* and his poetry collection *This Wound is a World*. The narrator ultimately rejects the individualistic and capitalistic nature of traditional academic work, seeking instead to create a literary form that "can hold the complexities of [both their] lives" (Neilson 2022) (cf. Belcourt) and speak to the experiences of marginalized communities. This shift towards novel writing represents a deliberate rejection of the commodification of knowledge within the neoliberal academy, as the narrator endeavors to produce a work that is grounded in communal, embodied ways of knowing, rather than the assumed detached, market-driven imperatives of traditional scholarship. According to Belcourt, this also extends to the way a novel is perceived as he notes "I think people generally know ... that the novel as we know it is rooted to the fetish of the individual, the novel as a sort of individualizing purpose, especially in the Western world. So, I had to confront and hopefully disrupt that individualizing tendency." (ibid.)

The narrator's turn to novel writing – a pathway that reflects his own (ibid.) – is not merely a rejection of academic norms but an embrace of Indigenous ways of knowing, which prioritize lived experience,

relational identity, and community-based knowledge over the abstract and often detached nature of academic discourse.

As Morgensen notes, Indigenous methodologies destabilize the settler academy by exposing its colonial underpinnings and emphasizing relational ways of knowing (Morgensen, 2012, p. 805). In *A Minor Chorus*, the narrator's rejection of the dissertation in favor of a novel can be seen as a decolonial act that challenges the individualism and objectivity traditionally valorized in academic knowledge production, and critique by decolonial scholars like Tubiway Smith (137). The protagonist's desire to create a work that can speak to the experiences of marginalized communities reflects a commitment to relationality, a core principle in Indigenous methodologies that underscores the interconnectedness of knowledge, identity, and community (Tatonetti 2014, 4).

The narrator's reflection, "But what if the act of writing a novel, I wondered, enabled one to practice a way of life that negated the brutalities of race, gender, hetero- and homonormativity, of capital and property?" (p. 27), highlights the potential of literature as a tool for decolonial resistance. This passage is key to understanding how the narrator views novel writing not just as an artistic endeavor, but as a decolonial practice that challenges the dominant narratives and structures that perpetuate oppression. By imagining "a different arrangement of bodies, feelings, and environments," (27) the narrator envisions a world where marginalized individuals can thrive, free from the constraints of colonial and capitalist systems.

Morgensen's emphasis on the relationality inherent in Indigenous methodologies is mirrored in the narrator's desire to create collective, community-oriented knowledge through novel writing. This is highlighted in the reflection: "What if I wrote something that sounded like dozens of people in protest?... Maybe what repels me about the dissertation is that it's so individualistic" (p. 18). This quote contrasts the individualism inherent in academic work with the collective, communal approach that the narrator seeks to embody in his novel. The narrator's longing for a form of expression that resonates with the collective voices of his community aligns with the relational nature of Indigenous methodologies, which emphasize the importance of community and the interconnectedness of all knowledge.

However, the tension the narrator feels about the role of the novel in the face of urgent social issues is captured in the passage:

"Why write a novel? There were the requisite answers: to think through questions that agitated thinkability... On the contrary, the news coming out of North America of late was, in a sense, an ongoing refutation of the novel, of anything that wasn't direct action, that didn't have to do with an immediate insurgency against those whose disregard for the livability of the oppressed amounted to a politics of socially engineered mass death. A novel, then, could be an indictment of the novelist, evidence of his inaction, his carelessness" (p. 29).

This quote adds complexity to the discussion of literature as a form of resistance, acknowledging the limitations and potential critiques of creative work in the context of urgent social struggles. Yet, this very tension reflects the decolonial challenge of creating space for alternative forms of knowledge within a system that often demands immediate, tangible results.

The connection between the narrator's physical and emotional wounds and his search for healing through writing is poignantly expressed in the passage: "Rusty was the only word I had for the effect of having a body with wounds that aren't recognized as wounds. Whether or not I could write my way back into an embodied space where repair was possible was a question I tasked myself with answering" (p. 25). This passage ties the theme of alternative forms of knowing to the narrator's personal journey of healing and self-discovery, linking writing to the process of reclaiming embodied knowledge and identity. Here, the act of writing becomes a form of what Morgensen (2012, 806) and Cornthassel et. al (2009, 378) describe as "resurgence"—a reclaiming of Indigenous ways of knowing and being that challenges and exceeds the limitations of the settler state.

Furthermore, Million's concept of Felt Theory complements this analysis by emphasizing the importance of emotion and affect in the production of knowledge. Million argues that Indigenous ways of knowing are deeply connected to the emotional and embodied experiences of individuals and communities (2013, 57). In *A Minor Chorus*, the narrator's turn to novel writing is not only a rejection of the detached, rationalistic approach of traditional scholarship but also an embrace of a form of knowledge production that is deeply rooted in the felt experiences of the marginalized. This is evident in the narrator's reflection on his physical and emotional wounds, as well as his desire to create a work that reflects the "emotional lives" of his community. By foregrounding these affective dimensions of

knowledge, Belcourt's novel aligns with Million's call for a decolonial approach to scholarship that prioritizes the lived, felt experiences of Indigenous peoples.

3.2 Conclusion: Towards Epistemic Disobedience and Decolonial Freedom

In conclusion, the decolonial framework applied to "A Minor Chorus" reveals how Belcourt's novel serves as both a critique of Western academic institutions and a powerful example of Indigenous knowledge production. Through the narrator's journey from academic alienation to embracing alternative forms of expression, Belcourt demonstrates the transformative potential of Indigenous epistemologies and storytelling practices.

This analysis contributes to our understanding of how queer Indigenous authors challenge dominant narratives through their work. By rejecting the constraints of academic discourse and embracing a more relational, community-oriented approach to knowledge creation, Belcourt's novel embodies the principles of epistemic disobedience outlined by Mignolo. The narrator's turn to novel writing as a form of decolonial resistance illustrates how Indigenous methodologies can destabilize settler colonial structures within academia and beyond.

The novel's exploration of alternative forms of knowledge production demonstrates how literature can serve as a site of cultural resurgence and decolonial resistance. Belcourt's work exemplifies how queer Indigenous authors are expanding the boundaries of literary expression, creating spaces where marginalized voices can be heard and validated.

As we move forward in our analysis, this chapter sets the foundation for understanding how storytelling practices in both "A Minor Chorus" and "Johnny Appleseed" contribute to the larger project of Indigenous resurgence and the reclamation of narrative sovereignty. It underscores the importance of centering Indigenous epistemologies in our approach to literary analysis and reinforces the transformative potential of queer Indigenous literature in challenging colonial power structures.

4. Conceptual Framework: Affect, Embodiment, and Storytelling in Queer Indigenous Studies

Building on the exploration of my positionality and the ethical considerations surrounding academic research from a decolonial perspective, this chapter transitions to a comprehensive review of the theoretical frameworks that further underpin my analysis of queer Indigenous narratives in Joshua Whitehead's *Johnny Appleseed* and Billy-Ray Belcourt's *A Minor Chorus*. The theoretical foundations laid out in this chapter will provide the necessary scholarly context to engage in a nuanced and interdisciplinary investigation of these themes.

The previous discussion under the framework of decoloniality, which touched on embodiment, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the significance of storytelling have set the stage for a deeper engagement with these themes, which are crucial for understanding the complex identities and experiences depicted in the selected works.

This review explores three key areas, which further illuminate the contextual framework in which this thesis is situated: queer Indigenous studies, Indigenous knowledge and storytelling, and affect studies and felt theory. Queer Indigenous Studies examines the intersection of queer and Indigenous identities, with scholars like Qwo-Li Driskill and Daniel Heath Justice emphasizing the intrinsic interplay between queerness and Indigeneity. The importance of Indigenous knowledge and storytelling in shaping self-concepts and preserving cultural heritage is then discussed. Finally, affect studies and felt theory, drawing on work by Sara Ahmed and Dian Million, are explored as frameworks for analyzing emotional and bodily experiences in queer Indigenous literature.

By situating my analysis within these theoretical frameworks and scholarly contexts, this literature review lays the groundwork for a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of queer Indigenous narratives, identity, and embodiment in contemporary Canadian literature. The integration of these diverse perspectives not only enhances the depth of my analysis but also contributes to a richer understanding of the complexities and intersections that define queer Indigenous experiences.

4.1. Meeting at the Intersections: Queer Indigenous Studies and Narrative Sovereignty

Queer Indigenous studies as a burgeoning interdisciplinary field bridges the gap between queer studies and Indigenous studies, in order to address the unique experiences of those intersecting identities and explore how they can resist and redefine colonial narratives. As such, it offers essential frameworks for analyzing the representation of queer Indigenous identity and embodiment in the selected novels. The interplay of queerness and Indigeneity thereby is not only an intersection but, according to Quo-Li Driskill, a fundamental aspect of identity that resists colonial erasure and asserts Indigenous presence through a 'Sovereign Erotic' — a term that describes “a return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures” (Driskill 2004, 56). They further assert that a sovereign erotic is expressed through literature an art, as Two-Spirit writers and artists use the concept of sovereign erotic in their work as a form of resistance and cultural affirmation, empowering Indigenous people to scrutinize and evaluate all aspects of their existence (ibid., 52).

Tatonetti's elaboration on the erotic as a theoretical concept complements Driskill's notion of the Sovereign Erotic, further illuminating its relevance to affect theory and embodied knowledge in Queer Indigenous literature. She describes the erotic as encompassing "nonnormative gender practices and, particularly, the experience, articulation, and generative nature of desire" (Tatonetti 2014, xix). This framing of the erotic as both "an active praxis and an analytic" (ibid.) aligns with Million's concept of felt theory, emphasizing the importance of embodied, emotional knowledge in Indigenous epistemologies.

By drawing on Audre Lorde's articulation of the erotic as a "power," a "resource," and a "creative energy" arising from a "depth of feeling," (ibid.) Tatonetti underscores the affective dimensions of the Sovereign Erotic. This perspective resonates with the exploration of embodied experiences and emotions in Whitehead's *Johnny Appleseed* and Belcourt's *A Minor Chorus*. The erotic's capacity to forge "activist consciousness" further illustrates how felt knowledge can be a catalyst for resistance and cultural affirmation, as depicted in these novels.

Tatonetti's framing of the erotic thus bridges Driskill's Sovereign Erotic with broader concepts of affect and embodiment, providing a theoretical foundation for analyzing how characters in queer Indigenous literature navigate their identities through embodied experiences and emotions.

Tatonetti connects (cf. *ibid.* 52)

Resisting colonial binaries of sexuality and gender expression, and returning to other, indigenous terms that encapsulate these complexities, such as 'Two-Spirit' - a term that is sovereign from white GLBT movements (Driskill 2004, 52) - serve as broader acts of cultural resurgence and political resistance and are thus in alignment with decolonial efforts of reclaiming Indigenous traditions and knowledges and establishing "new ways of being" as in "more relational ways of relating to [...] one another" that challenge the colonial limitations placed on both gender and cultural expression (Justice 2018, 171–72). Perspectives such as this one then provide a critical lens for examining how Whitehead and Belcourt as authors, but also their characters within the novels use narrative and storytelling, and embodied instances of relational identity as acts of resistance, asserting their identities against constraining colonial narratives.

Qwo-Li Driskill's *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory* is a foundational work that introduces the concept of 'Asegi', a Cherokee term that means "strange" or "queer" (2016, 6). Driskill defines Asegi stories as narratives that exist outside the confines of colonial heteronormativity As Driskill writes, "they are the stories that [...] Two-Spirit people tell each other in order to revise cultural memories [...], an act of resistance to the erasures of Asegi memories in imaginations of both colonizers and the colonized. And it is through the (re)telling and (re)imagining of these Asegi stories that we [...] can work to place gender and sexuality at the center of radical decolonial work" (7).

This concept of storytelling as resistance aligns with Daniel Heath Justice's assertion that Indigenous literature is a crucial site for Indigenous survival and resurgence, the assertion of sovereignty and the reclamation of Indigenous narratives" (Justice 2018, 5f.). Driskill contends that reclaiming Two-Spirit traditions is not only about survival but about the flourishing of Indigenous communities" (52), echoing Lisa Tatonetti's observation that the literary tradition of queer narratives disrupt the colonial imposition of heteronormative gender roles, offering a space for Indigenous queer identities to be seen and heard (Tatonetti 2014, 7, xix). By drawing on these insights, my analysis will demonstrate how especially

Whitehead's novel uses the protagonist's personal journey to engage in broader cultural and political acts of resurgence, resulting in what Driskill describes in terms of an "erotic wholeness and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive" (Driskill 2004, 51).

Building on Driskill's concept of Asegi stories, Scott Lauria Morgensen's *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* further provides a critical examination of how settler colonialism impacts queer Indigenous identities. Morgensen argues that in a white settler society, "seeking homonationalist alignment with the settler state creates non-native queer modernities as normatively white appeals to settler citizenship" (2011, 27), creating liminal spaces for the complexities of Indigeneity and queerness. This concept of existing in liminal spaces resonates with the characters in both *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus*, as both novels thematize motifs of isolation, alienation and loneliness within a metaphoric and literal landscape shaped by colonial legacies and ongoing marginalization, even within queer communities. The characters are tasked with continually redefining their identities while asserting their presence in settler colonial society, echoing Morgensen's observation that "all queer modernities under white-supremacist settler colonialism respond to its power, the very power native queer and two-Spirit critiques continue to contest." (ibid.) By examining these literary representations, this thesis aims to illuminate how the queer Indigenous characters in *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus* navigate the complexities of identity formation within settler colonial contexts, contributing to what Morgensen describes as "a critique of settler colonialism" (28).

Another highly important resource to address in the field of queer Indigenous studies is Lisa Tatonetti's contribution to the field through her analysis of queer Indigenous literary genealogy in *The Queerness of North American Literature*. By engaging with Tatonetti's work, my analysis demonstrates how Whitehead's and Belcourt's novels participate in a broader literary tradition that asserts the presence and significance of Two-Spirit identities. Tatonetti argues that "Contemporary queer Indigenous literatures and theories index a Native literary archive that stretches both backward and forward in active continuity" (2014, 27). This perspective positions Whitehead's and Belcourt's works within a rich historical context, demonstrating that they are not isolated phenomena but part of a long-standing

tradition of queer Indigenous literary expression. Tatonetti's approach to this literary tradition is particularly illuminating. She explains:

"I speak here about a literary [...] tradition—in the sense of genealogy as a map of relationship(s), as a way to better see and recognize kinship. The story of queer Native literature [...] narrates genealogy through the web of such relationships. These relationships, like third and fourth gender roles in Native communities, may at times have been driven underground, overlooked, or even reviled, but the connections between and among queer Indigenous peoples themselves, as well as the webs that tie contemporary Indigenous peoples to earlier Native understandings of sexuality and gender, remain extant. (p.2)"

Tatonetti's perspective allows us to view Whitehead's and Belcourt's novels as part of a broader narrative of queer Indigenous resilience and cultural continuity, challenging both heteronormative and colonial narratives. This approach emphasizes queer native literary tradition as a web of interconnected relationships, highlighting the importance of community, kinship, and shared histories in shaping contemporary queer Indigenous identity. It aligns with Indigenous epistemologies and storytelling methodologies, which prioritize the relational and collective nature of knowledge and lived experience. Tatonetti's framework underscores how queer Indigenous literature forms a collective narrative that spans time and space, reflecting traditional Indigenous knowledge systems that value communal wisdom and intergenerational connections.

This understanding of (queer) Indigenous literature as a relational web rather than a linear progression is picked up on in more recent debates in the field, which continue to explore the interconnectedness of queer Indigenous experiences across different eras and contexts, by highlighting the importance of traditional Indigenous knowledge and storytelling in understanding queer Indigenous identities. Daniel Heath Justice's *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* asserts that Indigenous literature is a crucial site for the assertion of sovereignty and the reclamation of Indigenous narratives (2018, xviii). He highlights the importance of relational concepts and kinship in forming (queer) Indigenous identity, arguing that those complex webs of relationship shape our understandings of the world and our places within it (44). This perspective resonates with the characters in both "Johnny Appleseed" and "A Minor Chorus," who find strength in their connections to communities and cultural traditions while navigating colonial challenges. Qwo-Li Driskill expands on this, noting that Indigenous traditions provide the language and context for understanding Two-Spirit identities, which have been marginalized by colonial histories, stating that "Two-Spirit people carry very particular medicine [...] one rooted within Native

world views and landbases, and separate from non-Native belief systems as part of larger practices of maintaining and continuing Native cultural practices.” (2016, 37). This is particularly relevant for analyzing works like "Johnny Appleseed," where the protagonist's Oji-Cree heritage is central to his identity formation.

Queer Indigenous Studies provides essential frameworks for analyzing queer Indigenous identity and embodiment in Whitehead's "Johnny Appleseed" and Belcourt's "A Minor Chorus". Scholars like Driskill and Morgensen highlight how the interplay of queerness and Indigeneity resists colonial erasure and asserts Indigenous presence. This positions the novels within a rich tradition of queer Indigenous literary expression, where storytelling serves as a tool for cultural resurgence and reclaiming narrative sovereignty.

Transitioning to the discussion of Indigenous storytelling, it becomes clear that these narrative practices are not only central to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, but also actively challenge dominant power structures and assert the continued vitality of Indigenous knowledge and identity.

4.2 Stories as Epistemic Windows: Indigenous Narratives and Knowledge Reclamation

Scholars have emphasized how storytelling is a fundamental aspect of Indigenous cultures, serving as a means of preserving heritage, transmitting knowledge, and asserting cultural identity. Storytelling thereby not only serves as vital cultural practice in the self-understanding of Indigenous communities, but it also acts as a form of resistance and resurgence, essential for preserving and transmitting Indigenous identity and culture and epistemologies across generations. Integrating this understanding is crucial for analyzing how the authors of *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus* employ storytelling to portray the lived experiences of their queer Indigenous protagonists. By exploring the novels' engagement with these Indigenous narrative forms, we can gain deeper insights into how the authors challenge dominant narratives and assert the presence and resilience of queer Indigenous identities.

In *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*, Nishnaabeg writer and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson emphasizes the centrality of storytelling in fostering cultural resistance and resurgence among Indigenous peoples. She argues

that storytelling is more than preserving history; it is a means of engaging in the production of Indigenous knowledge and theory — “in opposition to the academy as resistance, resurgence, and sustenance — through our own systems” (2011, 31). Simpson maintains that storytelling grounds practices of “self-actualization, the suspension of judgment, fluidity, emergence, careful deliberation and an embodied respect for diversity” (12), allowing Indigenous communities to envision and embody alternative futures rooted in their cultural values and knowledge systems.

She further elaborates that these narrative traditions are “extremely important to our way of being” and are “told and retold in our communities throughout one’s life” (20). Crucially, she notes, “Our Elders tell us that everything we need to know is encoded in the structure, content and context of these stories and the relationships, ethics and responsibilities required to be our own Creation Story.” (ibid.) This highlights the relational and dynamic nature of storytelling as a lived practice that connects past, present, and future.

This emphasis on storytelling’s role in cultural resurgence aligns with the narrative strategies in the novels. Whitehead’s protagonist, Johnny, reclaims his Oji-Cree heritage and asserts his queer Indigenous identity through storytelling, weaving together personal and cultural narratives to resist the erasure of his Two-Spirit identity. Belcourt’s “A Minor Chorus” similarly employs storytelling as a form of cultural resurgence and resistance but on a broader level through the narrator’s project of collecting and curating stories from his community. Thus, they both serve as both a personal journey and a broader act of reclaiming Indigenous narratives.

While Simpson emphasizes the role of storytelling in cultural resurgence and resistance, Margaret Kovach’s work *Indigenous Methodologies* further illuminates the critical role of Indigenous knowledge systems and storytelling traditions in shaping literary analysis. Kovach emphasizes that “story is methodologically congruent with tribal knowledges” (2021, 35), complementing Simpson’s insights by focusing on how these narrative practices can be integrated into academic methodologies. This provides a bridge between traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and contemporary scholarly approaches. Kovach aligns with theories of storytelling as a form of relational worldview, thus supporting concepts of relational identity. This perspective is deeply rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, as Kovach explains: “relational worldview, from a tribal perspective, is one that assumes relationships between all

life forms that exist within the natural world" (34). This suggests that storytelling, as a form of Indigenous knowledge and methodology, is a way of maintaining relationships between people, land, and non-human entities. By centering Indigenous epistemologies and storytelling traditions in the analysis of works like *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus*, the narrative techniques and thematic elements take on deeper cultural resonance. Kovach explains that in Indigenous contexts, "story is not a culturally neutral form of expression, but is taken up in different ways by different cultures" (18). The novels' employment of storytelling, non-linear narratives, and blending of personal and communal histories can thus be understood as a deliberate engagement with Indigenous culture and knowledge frameworks. Daniel Heath Justice emphasizes hereby that stories are, unending connections to past, present, and future" (Justice 2018, xvii). This relational approach to knowledge emphasizes the interconnectedness of identity, community, and place, reflecting how storytelling contributes to the formation and expression of relational identity in Indigenous contexts.

Building on the insights from Kovach and Simpson, we can further enrich our understanding of Indigenous storytelling through the work of Jo-Ann Archibald (Q'um Q'um Xiiem). In *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, Archibald emphasizes that storytelling in Indigenous communities serves not just as entertainment, but as a holistic educational tool that engages all aspects of a person. She notes that "each Aboriginal nation has particular traditions, protocols, and rules concerning stories and the way that stories are to be told for teaching and learning purposes" (2008, 83). This framework helps us understand how Whitehead and Belcourt employ storytelling in their novels as a means of cultural education and resilience. We see the protagonists engaging with stories that connect them to their cultural heritage, echoing Archibald's assertion that stories are "the only valuables we can give you – but life is in them for those who know how to ask and how to learn" (17).

Archibald's statement, thereby encapsulates the essence of Indigenous knowledge transmission and resonates with our earlier discussions on decolonial frameworks and ethical considerations. It reminds us of the researcher's responsibility when engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems, aligning with Mignolo's concept of epistemic disobedience. Archibald's words challenge traditional academic paradigms, positioning Indigenous storytellers as primary knowledge holders and inverting typical

research power dynamics. Ultimately, this perspective underscores the transformative potential of Indigenous storytelling and the importance of approaching Indigenous literature with a decolonial mindset.

In conclusion, storytelling emerges not only as a crucial tool for cultural continuity and resistance but also as a dynamic method for expressing and reshaping identities within contemporary contexts. The narrative strategies employed in *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus* exemplify how storytelling serves as a powerful means of asserting Indigenous perspectives and challenging dominant colonial narratives. By examining the ways in which these novels utilize storytelling, we gain insight into the ongoing processes of cultural resurgence and identity formation.

4.3 The Body Speaks: Queer Indigenous Identity Through Affect and Embodiment

Building on the pivotal role of storytelling in shaping queer Indigenous identities and resisting colonial narratives, this section explores the affective embodied dimensions of such narratives in relation to Whitehead's Belcourt's works. Central to this exploration is the understanding that identity, belonging, and community are inextricably linked to emotional and sensory experiences.

By integrating perspectives from affect studies, felt theory, and embodiment research, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of how queer Indigenous identities are formed, expressed, and negotiated through emotional and sensory landscapes.

Affect studies and felt theory thereby offer critical frameworks for examining the emotional and sensory landscapes within which these narratives operate. As Gregg and Seigworth note in *The Affect Theory Reader*, affect is about "intensities that pass body to body [...] and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (2010, 1). This concept of affect as an intensity that moves between bodies and objects is particularly relevant when examining how the characters in *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus* navigate their identities in relation to family, community, and broader society.

By analyzing how emotions and bodily sensations are represented and how they shape the experiences of the characters, we can enhance our understanding of the intricate interplay between identity,

embodiment, and community. These theoretical perspectives resonate with the objectives of this thesis, illuminating the complex ways in which queer Indigenous individuals navigate and express their identities in the face of colonial pressures and cultural erasure.

4.3.1 Affect Theory: Key Concepts and Applications

Affect theory posits that emotions are not merely internal, individual experiences but are socially and culturally constructed phenomena that circulate between bodies and objects. This perspective allows us to examine how emotions shape both individual and collective identities, particularly within marginalized communities. It's important to note here the distinction between affect and emotion as articulated by Megan Watkins in Gregg & Seigwort's *Affect Theory Reader*. Here, affect is described as "the biological component of emotion [...] as bodily memory that, while both aiding cognition and inducing behavior, may evade consciousness altogether." (2010, 278). Further, quoting Massumi, she describes emotion as the "capture of affect given that the latter 'escapes confinement'" (ibid. 279). In her terms then, affect can be described as the embodiment of emotion, an intensity, often occurring below the threshold of conscious awareness (cf. ibid.), distinct from but related to emotions. Emotions then, in this context, can be understood as the socio-linguistic fixing of affect, where affect is a bodily experience and emotion is the awareness and expression of this experience. For the objectives of this thesis, affect and emotion will be used synonymously, acknowledging their close relationship while recognizing the nuanced distinctions in affect theory discourse.

Sara Ahmed's seminal work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* provides a foundational understanding of how emotions circulate and shape both individual and collective identities. Ahmed argues that emotions are not simply private experiences but are inherently social and political. She writes: "Emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" (2014, 10). This relational understanding of emotion is particularly relevant for examining how the characters in the novels navigate their identities in relation to family, community, and broader society.

Ahmed's concept of "sticky" emotions further illuminates the close relationship between emotions and affect by conceptualizing how certain feelings become viscerally attached to bodies and objects over

time, influencing not only perceptions and relationships but also physical sensations and reactions. She notes: "Some signs [...] increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become" (45). This notion of emotional stickiness helps explain how shame, pride, or desire may cling to certain aspects of queer Indigenous identity in the novels, manifesting in bodily responses such as flushing, tensing, or relaxing. These embodied reactions shape characters' self-perceptions and interactions, demonstrating how affect operates on a corporeal level. For instance, a character might physically recoil from a situation that triggers shame, or experience a surge of energy when feeling pride in their identity. This bodily dimension of affect underscores how emotions are not merely abstract concepts but lived, physical experiences that profoundly impact one's engagement with the world.

In *Johnny Appleseed*, for instance, Whitehead vividly portrays the protagonist's navigation of shame and desire as he comes to terms with his Two-Spirit identity. Consider this passage: "I still always felt a wave a shame rush through my body whenever someone might associate me with being Two-Spirit" (Whitehead 2018, 131). This visceral description exemplifies Ahmed's notion of emotions as bodily sensations that shape one's relationship to the world. Johnny's shame is not merely internal but influences his physical comportment and social interactions. Similarly, in "A Minor Chorus", Belcourt explores the affective dimensions of queer Indigenous experience through its unnamed narrator. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors the complex emotional landscape of its protagonist. The previously discussed passage "I was experiencing life as a 'problem of form': it is difficult to live in a world that corrodes freedom" (B. R. Belcourt 2022, 4) also encapsulates the visceral impact of societal constraints on the body and psyche, as the feeling of constraint becomes attached to the very experience of living in a colonial world. The narrator's bodily sensations of alienation and belonging are not merely abstract feelings but tangible experiences that shape his interactions with academia, his community, and his own sense of self. This embodied narrative approach allows readers to viscerally engage with the complex affective dimensions of queer Indigenous life, illustrating how emotions are not just internal states but lived, physical realities that profoundly impact one's engagement with the world.

4.3.2 Felt Theory and Indigenous Contexts

Million emphasizes the importance of embodied, emotional knowledge in Indigenous epistemologies and healing practices, extending affect theory's insights to collective historical experiences. She posits that emotions and bodily sensations are not just individual phenomena, but are deeply connected to shared cultural knowledge and intergenerational trauma. In *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*, Million critiques the marginalization of this approach: “our felt scholarship continues to be segregated as a 'feminine' experience or as polemic, or, at worst, not as knowledge at all” (57). She argues for the recognition of collective affective experiences: “we have a lot to offer society. But we have to look at the bad stuff, and what has happened to us, and why... we cannot do this without going through the past, and watching ourselves and analyzing ourselves, because we are carrying a pain that is 400 years old” (67). This perspective aligns with affect theory's emphasis on the circulation of emotions between bodies and objects, but extends it to encompass historical and cultural dimensions. Million's work thus highlights how collective emotional experiences, understood through the lens of affect theory, contribute to community resilience and resistance against colonial structures by acknowledging the embodied nature of historical trauma and its ongoing impact on Indigenous communities.

It is further particularly relevant for analyzing queer Indigenous literature, as it allows us to understand how characters' personal emotional journeys are tied to broader community experiences and historical traumas. In *Johnny Appleseed*, we see this collective dimension of affect when the protagonist finds solace and strength in shared cultural practices and stories. Whitehead writes:

I never cried when my kokum died—I reserved my energy for telling stories and making everybody around me laugh. [...] When her bloated belly stopped filling with breath, I rubbed it and felt it gurgle. My kokum taught me long ago when my aunty died, that we need to rub the breath out of the belly of the dead. “It’s to help them on their way,” she said. “That’s what us women do—we help them on their way back home.” (109)

This scene illustrates Million's concept of felt knowledge as a source of healing and connection, demonstrating how shared emotional experiences and cultural knowledge are transmitted through embodied practices, and how they are “a primary form of knowledge production for Indigenous peoples” (Million 2013, 12).

Having established the intrinsic link between affect and embodiment through Million's and Ahmed's works, we can further explore the relevance of these concepts for queer Indigenous identity in particular. While affect theory and embodiment studies offer valuable insights into the formation and expression of identity in general, they are particularly relevant to understanding queer identity formation. As queer identities often challenge normative expectations of gender and sexuality, they make the embodied and affective dimensions of identity especially salient.

Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, as outlined in *Gender Trouble*, complements these affect-based approaches by providing a foundational understanding of queer embodiment. Butler's theory posits that gender is not an innate essence, but rather a series of repeated acts that create the illusion of a stable gender identity over time. She writes that gender (and by extension, sexuality) is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, 33). This concept is particularly relevant to understanding how the queer Indigenous characters in the novels perform their identities through embodied actions and affective expressions.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler further develops this idea, arguing that performativity is "not a singular 'act' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition." (1993, xxi). This suggests that the characters' gender and sexual identities are not fixed, but are constantly being enacted and re-enacted through their behaviours, gestures, and interactions. This concept aligns with Ahmed's notion of sticky emotions, as the repetition of gendered acts can be seen as a process of emotional adhesion to certain bodily performances.

For the Johnny Appleseed and the unnamed narrator in *A Minor Chorus*, this performative aspect of identity becomes particularly complex, intersecting with Million's concept of felt knowledge. They are navigating not only the performative aspects of gender and sexuality but also the expectations and norms associated with their Indigenous identities. Their embodied actions and affective expressions become sites of negotiation between these intersecting identities, reflecting both personal and collective histories.

A passage in "Johnny Appleseed" vividly illustrates this complex interplay of affect, embodiment, and queer Indigenous identity: Johnny recalls feeling pressure to conform to traditional masculine roles, such as learning to chop wood and hunt, while his desires and self-expression aligned more with traditionally feminine or queer-coded activities, like dancing the Jingle Dress dance. He reflects on feeling like a "self-ordained Injun glitter princess," (192) a phrase that encapsulates the intersection of his queerness and Indigenous identity. This internal conflict exemplifies Million's felt theory, as Johnny's emotional and physical experiences of gender and cultural expectations are inseparable from his sense of self and community belonging. Moreover, it demonstrates Ahmed's concept of sticky emotions, as feelings of shame and pride adhere to different aspects of Johnny's identity and bodily expressions.

In conclusion, affect theory, embodiment studies, and Indigenous concepts of felt knowledge provide a robust framework for analyzing queer Indigenous narratives. These approaches illuminate how emotions and bodily experiences shape identity formation and cultural resilience in works of queer Indigenous literature. By examining the interplay between individual and collective affective experiences, we gain insight into how queer Indigenous characters navigate complex intersections of identity, community, and historical trauma. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for exploring how Whitehead and Belcourt use their novels to articulate the nuanced realities of queer Indigenous life, bridging personal narratives with broader cultural contexts. Ultimately, this framework allows us to understand these novels not just as literary works, but as embodied acts of resistance and cultural reclamation that challenge dominant colonial narratives and assert the validity of Indigenous ways of knowing.

4.3.3 Applying the Conceptual Framework

This literature review has explored the intersecting frameworks of queer Indigenous studies, Indigenous storytelling traditions, and affect theory, providing a robust foundation for analyzing queer Indigenous narratives. The works of scholars like Driskill, Justice, and Tatonetti illuminate how queer Indigenous literature functions as a form of resistance against colonial erasure, asserting the presence and vitality of Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous identities. Their conceptualization of Indigenous literature as a

relational web rather than a linear progression aligns with traditional Indigenous epistemologies, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual and communal experiences.

The exploration of Indigenous storytelling practices, as articulated by Simpson, Kovach, and Archibald, reveals how narratives serve not only as cultural preservation but as active forms of knowledge production and resistance. This perspective challenges what Mignolo terms the 'scientific window' of Western academia, offering alternative ways of knowing that are grounded in lived experience and cultural continuity.

Affect theory and felt scholarship, as developed by Ahmed and Million, provide crucial tools for understanding how emotions and bodily sensations shape identity formation and cultural resilience. These frameworks allow us to examine how queer Indigenous characters navigate the complex emotional landscapes of their identities, resisting what the "golden rule" of Western knowledge production that requires a detached and objective lens towards scholarship.

As we transition to the analysis of Whitehead's *Johnny Appleseed* and Belcourt's *A Minor Chorus* in the following two chapters, we will apply these theoretical lenses to examine how these novels embody epistemic disobedience. By exploring how the authors employ storytelling, affect, and embodiment to articulate queer Indigenous experiences, we can understand these works as more than just narratives – they become acts of resistance against colonial epistemologies and assertions of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

These analyses will demonstrate how Whitehead and Belcourt's novels contribute to the ongoing project of decolonial knowledge production, challenging the scientific window through which Indigenous experiences have traditionally been viewed. By centering queer Indigenous voices and experiences, these works open up new epistemic windows, offering alternative perspectives that resist colonial narratives and assert the validity and vitality of Indigenous knowledge systems.

5. Narratives of the Flesh: Embodied Identity and Cultural Resilience in *Johnny Appleseed*

Johnny Appleseed follows the journey of Johnny, a Two-Spirit Oji-Cree young man, as he navigates his queer Indigenous identity between the Peguis First Nation reserve in Manitoba and the urban landscape of Winnipeg. The novel unfolds through non-linear vignettes, interweaving Johnny's childhood memories with his present-day experiences as a sex worker in the city.

The narrative is set in motion by the death of Johnny's stepfather, Roger, which necessitates Johnny's return to the reserve for the funeral. This event serves as a catalyst for Johnny's reflections on his past and his complex relationships with family and community. Central to the story is Johnny's relationship with his grandmother (kokum), who acts as a nurturing presence and cultural anchor throughout his life.

As Johnny moves between reserve life and the city, the novel explores his early awareness of his sexuality, his experiences of discrimination both on and off the reserve, and his ongoing efforts to reconcile his queer identity with his Indigenous heritage. In Winnipeg, Johnny works as a cybersex worker, navigating the complexities of urban queer spaces while maintaining connections to his cultural roots.

Through the unfolding narrative of the protagonist journey, the novel delves deep into themes of intergenerational trauma, colonial legacies, and cultural resurgence. It portrays Johnny's struggles with identity, belonging, and the impacts of historical and ongoing colonialism on Indigenous communities. At the same time, it celebrates resilience, depicting Johnny's journey of self-discovery and his embodiment of Two-Spirit identity as acts of resistance and survival.

As such, *Johnny Appleseed* stands as a significant contribution to queer Indigenous literature, offering an unapologetic portrayal of Two-Spirit experiences and a fresh perspective on the intersections of sexuality, gender, and Indigeneity in contemporary Canadian society, providing a narrative space for voices that have been historically silenced.

5.1 Restatement of Key Themes and Research Questions

Through looking at Johnny's complex journey, this analysis will explore the novel's portrayal of queer Indigenous identity formation, the role of affect and embodiment, and the significance of storytelling in cultural preservation and resistance. To guide this analysis, we will address the following research questions:

1. How does the novel depict the formation of a queer Indigenous identity in both reservation and urban contexts?
2. How do affect and embodiment contribute to Johnny's understanding of his identity?
3. How does storytelling function as a means of resistance and cultural preservation?
4. What role do community and relationships play in shaping Johnny's sense of self?

To address our research questions, we will employ the integrated approach outlined in the theoretical framework, drawing on affect, embodiment, and storytelling traditions.

Our analysis will examine how Johnny's affective responses are expressed through embodied experiences, which in turn become part of his personal and communal narratives. This approach allows us to explore the relational nature of identity formation, reflecting Indigenous epistemologies that emphasize interconnectedness and resist compartmentalization, thus allowing us to better understand how Johnny's physical and emotional experiences shape his sense of self and his relationships with his community. This holistic approach will illustrate, how identity, emotion, and narrative are deeply intertwined.

Answering those research objectives, our analysis of *Johnny Appleseed* follows the novel's narrative arc, beginning with an exploration of the formative experiences in Johnny's childhood, which form the basis of his identity. This chapter will look at how his family dynamics and his environment on the reservation shape Johnny's initial understanding of himself and his queerness. The analysis will then shift to Johnny's life in the city and the tensions between his queer and his Indigenous identity. Here we will examine Johnny's experiences of discrimination in white settler society, his continued ties to his indigenous heritage and his efforts to reconcile his dual identities. We will further analyse his work as a cybersex worker and how he resists the objectification and dehumanization he faces. Lastly, we

will look at the ways in which storytelling, both personal and communal, becomes a means for Johnny to reclaim agency, preserve his cultural traditions, and foster healing connections within his Indigenous community that ultimately allow him to fully embrace and celebrate his Two-Spirit identity.

5.2 Foundations of Identity: Childhood Experiences and Family Dynamics

Johnny's identity emerges as a complex interplay of early childhood experiences, family dynamics, and the cultural milieu of the reservation. These foundational elements shape his evolving self-awareness, queer identity, and embodied Indigenous experience. By exploring Johnny's relationships, particularly with his kokum and mother, alongside the absence of his father and his experiences with peers, we will illuminate how storytelling and embodied experiences shape his childhood identity and initial sense of self. This approach aligns with Million's emphasis on the "affective, emotional and cognitive dimensions that activate or fail to activate ethical imperatives" ("Felt Theory" 2013, 76). We will examine how Johnny's relationships and experiences emotionally impact his sense of self, recognizing that these affective dimensions are crucial in understanding the formation of his identity. As Million suggests, these emotional experiences are not separate from knowledge, but are integral to how Indigenous people understand and navigate their world. By analyzing the emotional landscapes of Johnny's childhood, we can gain deeper insights into the complexities of his identity formation as a queer Indigenous youth

5.2.1 Early Embodiment and Self-Awareness

Johnny's early awareness of his queerness emerges at the intersection of his physical environment and media exposure, with his kokum's home serving as a pivotal space for identity exploration.

"I figured out that I was gay when I was eight. I liked to stay up late after everyone went to bed and watch *Queer as Folk* on my kokum's TV. She had a satellite and all the channels, pirated of course." (7)

This passage encapsulates Johnny's early self-realization and the sense of secrecy surrounding it. The act of watching TV late at night, when the household is asleep, mirrors the hidden nature of his growing awareness of queerness. His kokum's home, symbolized by the pirated satellite TV, becomes a space

of illicit freedom, a place where Johnny can connect with narratives of queerness that resonate with and reflect his own emerging desires. This relationship between physical space and self-exploration speaks to the queer theoretical notion that identity formation often takes place in the margins—in hidden, private spaces that resist dominant cultural norms due to the gender and sexual heterogeneity that comprises minority cultures as a result of forced assimilation into binary Western notions during colonization (Driskill 2010, 75). This is true in a double sense here as the pirated satellite TV of his Kokum's home on the reservation already symbolizes a deviance from the mainstream society that marks indigenous life on the reservation. As such Johnny's late-night viewing of "Queer as Folk" represents a form of cultural resistance. This moment can be understood through James C. Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts," where marginalized individuals express subversive ideas or behaviours in private spaces, away from the surveillance of dominant power structures (cf. Scott 1992).

The description of Johnny's sexual awakening during these instances of secret late-night TV-watching further exemplifies the embodied nature of identity formation:

"I always swallowed my breath and curled my toes tightly to avoid gasping whenever I was about to come. When I finally did, I thought, this must be what beauty feels like: my skin tight and burning, body wet as mud." (ibid.)

The imagery of "skin tight and burning" and "body wet as mud" emphasizes the visceral nature of Johnny's queer awakening. It illustrates that the feeling of beauty that Johnny associates with his sexuality is not just a cognitive realization but a deeply felt physical experience, connecting affective orientations to embodied physicality.

5.2.2 Roots and Rupture: Family Relationships in the Context of Cultural Survival and Colonial Displacement

Johnny's early sense of self is profoundly shaped by the complex emotional landscape of his family, which can be seen as exemplary for broader themes of cultural continuity and colonial disruption in Indigenous communities. His relationship with his kokum is central to his identity formation, providing both emotional nourishment and cultural grounding. She embodies what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson terms "grounded normativity" - the lived expression of Indigenous knowledge systems and ethical frameworks that are rooted in the land and ancestral teachings. Through her storytelling and everyday actions, Johnny's kokum enacts this form of grounded normativity, providing him with a

connection to his heritage that resists the forces of colonial erasure. As Simpson emphasizes, grounded normativity is not a static set of cultural practices, but a dynamic, fluid, and reciprocal relationship with the land and community, transmitted through intergenerational knowledge-sharing. Kokum's influence, then, represents both a form of cultural resistance and a pathway for Johnny to navigate his queerness and Indigeneity within the broader context of colonial disruption (cf. L. B. Simpson 2017, 22).

"Kokum and I did all sorts of crazy shit when she babysat me. She used to tell me scary stories about the wendigo and Nanabush, stories about ghosts and aliens. She [...] was dead set that she would see Bigfoot at least once in her life. Once she took me out into the bush late at night, like she used to do with my uncles, flashlights in hand, to look for him." (52)

Through storytelling, Johnny's kokum engages in what Thomas King describes as the transformative power of Indigenous narratives (cf. King 2008). The stories of the Wendigo and Nanabush - central figures of Indigenous oral traditions - serve as vehicles for cultural knowledge transmission. This storytelling practice resists colonial erasure through the perpetuation of traditional narratives and practices. The act of storytelling becomes a means of both cultural preservation and personal affective bonding, allowing Johnny to situate himself within the broader framework of Indigenous knowledge systems and relationship networks. For Johnny, these stories are not just entertainment; they are a way to connect with his heritage and make sense of the world around him.

In contrast, his relationship with his mother is marked by emotional distance, highlighting the tension between care, survival, and cultural dislocation. The relationship with his mother is framed by her practicality, which stems from the broader socio-economic pressures of life on the reservation, reflecting the complex realities of Indigenous life under ongoing coloniality in the form of economic hardship.

"If life were a game of Monopoly, my mother would be the banker. She was as economical as they came; she could turn seven dollars into a meal for eight." (100)

This passage illustrates the concept of resilience - the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress¹⁰ - Johnny's mother's focus on practicality

¹⁰ This definition is taken from the American Psychological Association (2014): The Road to Resilience.

reflects the material realities of reservation life. Her economic resourcefulness can be read as a form of resistance against systemic poverty imposed by colonial structures.

This passage illustrates Johnny's admiration for his mother's resourcefulness, but it also highlights the tension between her and Johnny's kokum regarding Johnny's upbringing. His mother's focus on practicality and survival often leaves little room for the emotional connection Johnny finds in his kokum's stories and care. The tension between these two maternal figures in the novel represents the broader struggle between traditional Indigenous ways of caregiving and the modern pressures of life on the reservation.

This tension becomes explicit in a confrontation between Johnny's kokum and his mother, where the emotional absence of his mother is called into question:

"'You take care of that boy, Karen, you damn well hear me?' She pushed her words out with labored breath. 'Hmph, you want me to take advice from the woman who broke my baby?' 'Least I was here, Karen. At least I was here.'" (54)

This exchange exemplifies what Dian Million terms felt theory, where intergenerational trauma and resilience are expressed through affective, embodied experiences (cf. 2013, 66). Her critique of his mother's perceived failure to be emotionally present for Johnny speaks to broader patterns of family disruption in Indigenous communities that are affirmed through voicing, according to felt theory (ibid.). This moment underscores the clash between traditional forms of caregiving, represented by Johnny's kokum, and the demands of modern life, represented by his mother. Through these relationships, Johnny navigates what Kim TallBear describes as the "co-constitution" of Indigenous identity, where selfhood is formed through complex relational networks rather than individualist notions (cf. TallBear 2013). The struggle between these two figures contributes to Johnny's understanding of family and care, where he is pulled between the practical survival strategies of his mother and the emotional and cultural nurturing of his kokum. This dynamic illustrates the ongoing negotiation between cultural continuity and the disruptive forces of colonialism, often resulting in fragmented familial relationships, which are even more explicit when we look at the effect of Johnny's father's absence from his life, and how this influences his understanding of men and masculinity in his reservation environment.

5.2.3 Influence of Colonial Legacies: Setting the Stage for Intergenerational Trauma

Before looking deeper into Johnny's notions towards his absent father, it's crucial to understand how the broader colonial legacies shape Johnny's early experiences on the reservation. These ongoing impacts of colonialism, including poverty, violence, and heteronormativity, profoundly influence Johnny's sense of self and his perception by others.

"You see, I've never liked my birth name, Jonny. My parents named me after my dad, a residential school survivor, alcoholic, and would-be country star. I never heard from him again after he left. We found out later that he died in a fire on another rez." (p.9)

This passage encapsulates the intergenerational effects of colonial violence on Indigenous families¹¹. Johnny's rejection of his birth name symbolizes his desire to distance himself from a traumatic legacy, one that embodies the broader colonial histories affecting Indigenous communities. His father's identity, marked by the devastating impacts of residential schools and addiction, exemplifies what Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart terms "historical unresolved grief" in Indigenous populations – a concept that refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations resulting from massive group trauma experiences. For Indigenous populations, this includes the devastating impacts of colonization, forced assimilation policies, and the residential school system (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998, 60f.).

Brave Heart further argues that this unresolved grief contributes to ongoing challenges in Indigenous communities, stating that "the power of the partially repressed and unresolved historical grief was challenging and, at times, overwhelming." (ibid., 73) This grief can manifest as internalized oppression, identification with aggressors, and a sense of inherited trauma.

In Johnny's case, his father's experiences with residential schools and addiction exemplify this historical unresolved grief. The impact of this trauma is passed down generationally, affecting Johnny's own sense of identity and relationship to his Indigenous heritage.

Johnny's ambivalence towards his father's memory can be understood as a response to this inherited trauma. His emotional detachment (I don't care) may serve as a coping mechanism against the weight

¹¹ See further: *Historic Trauma and Aboriginal Healing* (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004)

of this historical grief, reflecting the complex ways in which intergenerational trauma shapes Indigenous experiences and identities in contemporary contexts.

This context of colonial legacies sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how the absence of Johnny's father specifically impacts his understanding of masculinity and his own identity formation. The complex interplay between communal memory, personal experience, and intergenerational trauma revealed in this passage provides a foundation for understanding the nuanced ways in which Johnny's relationship with his absent father shapes his journey of self-discovery.

"He'd often ask about my dad and I'd never have much of a reply except for the automated response I'd memorized, the 'I was two years old and he died in a rez fire, it was real tragic' spiel. Truth is, I never knew my father. When he died in the fire a few years after he left us, Mom said he was messing around with some slooze named Pauline because he couldn't handle being a dad."
(p.111)

His father's legacy, shaped by the trauma of being a residential school survivor and an alcoholic, speaks to the intergenerational impact of colonialism. The trauma his father endured, and his subsequent inability to fulfil his role as a father, reflects the broader historical forces that have disrupted Indigenous family structures. The striking lack of affect in Johnny's narration is emphasized by the word "automated". Johnny's emotionless recitation of his father's death suggests a learned suppression of or moving away from a feeling, a common response to trauma that Ahmed identifies as a way of navigating painful histories (cf. p. 24). The "automated response" Johnny has memorized acts as an affective shield, protecting him from the emotional weight of his father's absence and the broader colonial traumas it represents. It can be argued that Johnny's matter-of-fact tone, devoid of the expected emotional markers of loss, speaks to a deeper, internalized pain that has become normalized within his community. The absence of visible emotion doesn't indicate a lack of feeling, but rather points to what an affective state shaped by generations of colonial violence and disruption. By presenting his father's absence and death without emotional embellishment, Johnny resists the expectation of performing trauma for outside observers. This refusal to engage in expected emotional displays can be read as a form of resistance against the commodification of Indigenous pain.

5.2.4 Safe Spaces and Identity Formation

Despite the complexities of his family dynamics, Johnny's kokum's home offers him a safe space to explore his identity without fear of judgment. In her presence, Johnny is free to engage in gender play and self-expression, which are often suppressed in other parts of his life.

"Sometimes we listened to her favourite song, 'Come and Get Your Love' by Redbone. Heck, when we did, we used to throw on her old shawls and dance around as the adults sang. 'Hell, what the matter with your head?' they'd sing and Kokum said my dancing looked like the fancy shawl dance, but I thought I looked more like an epileptic groundhog." (p.52-53)

In this passage, Johnny's dancing with his kokum becomes an embodied form of resistance to traditional gender norms. The playful, unstructured movement contrasts with the rigidity of the gender expectations Johnny faces elsewhere, allowing him to express his queerness in a safe, nurturing environment. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, we can interpret Johnny's dancing as a subversive act that challenges the binary gender expectations imposed by colonial structures. The juxtaposition of the fancy shawl dance, traditionally performed by women, with Johnny's self-deprecating description as an "epileptic groundhog," highlights the complex negotiation of gender and cultural identity. His kokum's acceptance of his playful dancing further solidifies her role as a guardian and facilitator of Johnny's identity exploration. Thus, the act of dancing, framed by traditional music and cultural references, connects Johnny's queerness to what Qwo-Li Driskill terms "sovereign erotics," where queer Indigenous bodies become sites of resistance and cultural reclamation. The affective dimensions of this scene are crucial to understanding its significance in Johnny's development. Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economy helps explain how emotions circulate between people, objects, and spaces, shaping collective experiences and identities. In an affective economy, emotions do not reside within individuals but instead move through and "stick" to certain bodies or groups (Ahmed 2014, 8). This process reinforces social and power dynamics, as emotions such as fear, love, or pride attach themselves to particular identities or ideas. For example, in the case of Johnny's laughter and music, positive emotions become attached to his queer and Indigenous identity, forming a counter-narrative to the negative affects historically imposed on Indigenous and queer bodies by colonial systems. By circulating positive emotions, the scene reshapes how Johnny relates to both his cultural heritage and his personal identity.

5.3 Navigating Queerness and Identity in Adolescence

Johnny's transition into adolescence is marked by complex negotiations of his queer Indigenous identity within the constraints of his family and community. This section examines how Johnny's embodied experiences and affective responses shape his understanding of masculinity, gender roles, and his Two-Spirit identity. Drawing on queer Indigenous theory, affect studies, and concepts of embodiment, we analyze how Johnny both resists and internalizes societal expectations.

5.3.1 Embodied Resistance to Hegemonic Masculinity

Johnny's discomfort with traditional notions of masculinity becomes more apparent during his adolescence, as he struggles to fit into the gendered expectations imposed by his family and community. In a society where masculinity is often associated with physical strength and practical skills, Johnny feels disconnected from these ideals, finding solace instead in his feminine traits and preference for female company.

"Truth be told, I was afraid of men and I learned a lot about my masculinity by playing with those dogs. The men in my family often tried to teach me practical skills like how to use tools, start a fire, hunt, and skin animals. I never had an aptitude for many of these [...]. I always preferred having female teachers, friends, and guidance counselors. The men in my life liked to pressure me to butch myself up and ridicule me for my feminine ways." (p.172)

Johnny's discomfort with traditional masculine roles imposed by his family reveals a broader tension between colonial gender norms and Indigenous identities. His struggle with skills like hunting, fire-starting, and furniture assembly metaphorically represents his resistance to conforming to rigid gendered expectations. Johnny's preference for female teachers and friends, and his comfort in expressing femininity, challenge the heteronormative masculinity enforced within his community.

The ridicule Johnny faces for his "feminine ways" and the pressure to "butch up" underscore the pervasiveness of strict gender norms in both his family and broader community. His inability to master traditionally masculine skills becomes a form of embodied resistance to what scholars describe as the imposition of settler sexuality, where heteronormative masculinity is enforced as part of the colonial project.

As Hokowhitu argues in *Indigenous Men and Masculinities* the gendered dichotomization of Indigenous societies results from contact with Euro-American hegemonic heteropatriarchal cultures. The emerging type of masculinity that proliferated was "in a constant apprehensive state regarding the contamination of the masculine by the feminine" (Hokowhitu 2015, 88). This imposed hegemonic masculinity is built upon the subordination of non-hegemonic masculinities, women, and other sexualities, reinforcing colonial power structures through gender norms.

5.3.2 Affective Responses to Peer Perception

Johnny's queerness is not only challenged by his immediate family network, but also becomes increasingly visible to his peers during adolescence, leading to bullying and ostracization. However, his response demonstrates a complex interplay of vulnerability and resilience:

"At the time I wasn't out, but the others at school knew I was different. They called me fag, homo, queer—all the fun stuff. But I never let it bother me. I sometimes caught both girls and boys sneaking glances at my body. I went by a hundred different names. No one outside of my family called me Jonny;" (p.9)

This passage can be analyzed through Sara Ahmed's affect theory, which examines how emotions circulate between bodies and objects, as elaborated earlier through her concept of affective economies. Johnny's claim that the bullying didn't bother him suggests a subversion of a hateful/ shameful economy, where Johnny attempts to redirect the negative emotions projected onto him. The derogatory terms used by his peers in relation to his identity and sexual orientation demonstrate the hostility he encounters, yet Johnny remains unfazed. His statement "I never let it bother me" signals a form of resilience, suggesting that while the bullying may have impacted him, he refuses to allow it to define him. Additionally, the glances from both girls and boys at his body hint at Johnny's awareness of his physical presence and his appeal to others, even as he navigates the complexities of being othered in a heteronormative environment.

5.3.3 Resistance to Gender Norms

The heteronormativity Johnny tries to resist is not only encountered in his interactions with his peers, but also, and maybe precisely, through his stepfather Roger, who serves as another symbol of hypermasculinist violence in Johnny's life.

"When I was in the fourth grade, my school had a Halloween dance. I wanted to be Minnie Mouse, but Roger wouldn't let me buy a girl's costume—instead, he bought me the Mickey Mouse version." (p.172)

This incident exemplifies what Judith Butler describes as the performative nature of gender and the societal policing of gender expression (cf. Butler 1990, xv). Johnny's desire to dress as Minnie Mouse represents an early attempt to challenge the binary gender expectations imposed on him. However, Roger's insistence on the Mickey Mouse costume illustrates what Scott Morgensen terms the "settler colonial politics of gender," where Indigenous bodies are subjected to heteronormative expectations as part of the colonial project (Morgensen 2011, 26).

The tension between Johnny's desire for self-expression and the restrictive norms enforced by his stepfather reflect a complex negotiation between traditional Indigenous understandings of gender and the imposed colonial binary that Johnny persistently resists. This resistance forms a crucial part of Johnny's identity formation, illustrating how his queer Indigenous selfhood develops through a series of negotiations and challenges to societal expectations.

The enforcement of gender norms, however extends beyond costume choices, often escalating to more severe forms of control and punishment. A particularly traumatic incident occurs when Johnny is physically punished by Roger for his gender nonconformity in the same plot event in 4th grade:

"Roger pulled me over the table, pulled down my underwear, and gave me one hell of a lickin while my kokum and mom yelled for him to stop. 'Boys don't'—smack—'dance with'—smack—'boys'—smack. I took off my pants and lay on the carpet on my stomach. I rested the cool side of my pillow on my ass. That's when I discovered the sensations my body could produce." (173)

This passage further illustrates the violent enforcement of heteronormative gender roles within Johnny's family. Roger's actions and words—"Boys don't dance with boys"—reveal the deeply ingrained homophobia and rigid gender expectations in Johnny's community, that lead to a disaffected and disembodied mode of life. Paradoxically, this moment of punishment becomes a site of conflicting emotions for Johnny. The physical pain inflicted upon him ironically leads to his discovery of pleasurable bodily sensations, marking an early sexual awakening at around 8-9 years of age. This complex interplay of pain and pleasure embodies the Sovereign Erotics of Two-Spirit experience—where queerness is employed "as a tactic of resistance to heteronormalizing practices in nationalist discourses" (Driskill 2016, 26).

5.3.4 Friendship and Emotional Intimacy with Tias: A Queer Refuge

In contrast to the disaffected bullying and rigid gender norms Johnny encounters from male community members, his relationship with Tias offers a different model of masculinity and affective being. Their friendship, which eventually evolves into a romantic relationship, serves as a crucial source of emotional support and intimacy during Johnny's adolescence. Their bond becomes a refuge from the societal pressures they both face, with their shared experiences of marginalization creating a deep sense of connection.

"I wondered if we were like that, two mutant boys shielding one another from all the things that wanted to martyr us—how long could we hold out? Of course, old Jean Grey ended up dead at the end of the episode, but me, well, I was still a young buck with a whole lot of hate and an endless supply of energy." (p.56-57)

This passage illustrates an instance of queer possibility world-making through affective orientations that disidentify with the normative scripts of heteronormativity¹². The image of "shielding one another" from the forces that seek to "martyr" them suggests that their friendship is not just an escape from oppression, but an active defiance of the expectations imposed on them by society. By positioning themselves as mutants—figures of difference and transformation—Johnny and Tias carve out a space for themselves, resisting the forces of colonialism, racism, and heteronormativity. Their bond, based on shared marginalization, becomes a site of resilience and survival, where love and friendship become acts of resistance that are based on affects of love and care.

In this queer refuge, Johnny finds both comfort and power, illustrating how friendships and emotional intimacy can serve as critical sources of strength for marginalized individuals. Their relationship offers an alternative to the violence and rejection Johnny faces in his community, providing him with a model of masculinity that embraces vulnerability and emotional connection. By nurturing this connection, Johnny and Tias create their own space of belonging, embodying the idea that queer love and friendship are integral to the survival and resurgence of Indigenous communities.

This relationship provides what Sara Ahmed might term an affective economy of love, where shared experiences of marginalization create deep emotional bonds (cf. 141). In contrast to the disembodied

¹² See further: *Cruising Utopia: the The and There of Queer Futurity*. 2009

and disaffected mode of being Johnny adopts in response to bullying and loss, his connection with Tias allows for a more emotionally engaged and embodied form of being and resisting. This emotional intimacy serves as a counterpoint to the toxic masculinity and gender policing Johnny faces elsewhere, offering a glimpse of alternative ways of being and relating that affirm his queer Indigenous identity. His comparison to the demise of the fictional character Jean Grey from the X-Men thereby powerfully illustrates Johnny's orientation towards a possible futurity for queer individuals.

5.3.5 Traditional Practices, Exclusion, and Two-Spirit Identity

As Johnny navigates his queer Indigenous identity, he encounters both acceptance and rejection within traditional cultural spaces. This tension illustrates the complex interplay between Indigenous traditions and contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality¹³.

One pivotal moment occurs when Johnny is denied entry to a sweat lodge due to his gender expression:

"An elder told me once that I could heal myself of my drinking habits if I went to a sweat lodge. He said that I'd have to wear something modest. I planned to go with my kokum, who was going to wear a long skirt adorned with ribbons that she had made. I loved it so much that I asked if she could make me one. She smiled, sent me home with a slab of bannock, and when I returned the next day, she had sewn me one just like hers. But when we arrived at the sweat lodge, the elder wouldn't let me in. 'Modesty,' he repeated, 'is key.' While my kokum argued with him in Cree, I flipped him off and stormed back to the van. It turns out that tradition is an NDN's saving grace, but it's a medicine reserved only for certain members of the reservation, and not for self-ordained Injun glitter princesses like me. " (p.79f.)

This passage not only illustrates the gendered restrictions within certain Indigenous traditions but also reveals the deep-seated effects of colonial gender impositions on Indigenous communities. The elder's refusal to allow Johnny into the sweat lodge due to his non-conforming gender expression exemplifies the displacement of Indigenous gender systems by colonial patriarchal structures as articulated by, for example, Paula Allen Gunn (quoted in Leigh 2009).

As Allen notes, "This involved the displacement of Aboriginal women from government and power through the establishment of fraternal links between Indigenous and colonial men. In order to be

¹³ For an in-depth discussion on the colonial impact on 'traditional' gender roles in Indigenous communities see *Indigenous Men and Masculinities: Legacies, Identities, Representation* (2015).

rewarded with access to patriarchal settler power, Indigenous men engaged with its authoritarian, punitive model, which involved centralised, coercive power, particularly visible within the family" (Gunn 1992, 41 qtd. in Leigh 2009, 76).

In this context, the elder's insistence on "modesty" can be seen as an internalization of colonial gender norms. By denying Johnny access to the sweat lodge, the elder is reenacting the "authoritarian, punitive model" of colonial patriarchy. This action reinforces a binary gender system that was not necessarily inherent to many Indigenous cultures pre-colonization, but rather imposed through colonial contact and assimilation policies.

The elder's behavior reflects the complex ways in which Indigenous men have been compelled to adopt and enforce Western gender norms to maintain their authority within colonial power structures. As Allen suggests, those who refused to subscribe to these imposed norms were "denied access to authority endorsed by official church or political institutions." In this case, the elder may be unconsciously perpetuating these colonial gender norms to maintain his position of authority within the community. Johnny's experience of exclusion thus becomes a vivid example of how colonial gender impositions continue to be internalized and reenacted within Indigenous communities. His self-description as a "self-ordained Injun glitter princess" directly challenges these imposed norms, making visible the tension between traditional Indigenous understandings of gender diversity and the more rigid, binary system imposed by colonialism.

This experience of exclusion sets the stage for Johnny's deeper exploration of his Two-Spirit identity. The term, poignantly introduced to him by his kokum, represents a reclamation of Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality that predate colonial impositions:

"Jonny, m'boy, your kokum old but she ain't dull. You's napêwisk-wewisehot, m'boy, Two-Spirit. You still my beautiful baby grandkid no matter what you want to look like or who you want to like."[...] 'You come down here, m'boy, and I'll tell you a story about who you are. You come and you'll know. Kihtwâm, m'boy, kisâkihitin.'" (p.48)

This passage marks a pivotal moment in Johnny's journey toward understanding his Two-Spirit identity. His kokum's use of both Cree and English to describe him reflects the intersection of cultural and personal identity that defines Johnny's sense of self and aligns with Tallbear's concept of the relational co-constitution of identity. Here, traditional knowledge intertwines with contemporary

understandings. The term *napêwisk-wewisehot* links Johnny's identity to Cree cultural knowledge, while "Two-Spirit" connects his identity to broader queer understandings. The casual yet loving way his kokum acknowledges his identity reinforces her acceptance, and the promise of storytelling ties Johnny's identity formation to the cultural practice storytelling, emphasizing the central role of storytelling in Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge transmission¹⁴.

The term "Two-Spirit" represents a complex and nuanced concept within Indigenous cultures that challenges simplistic colonial definitions of gender and sexuality. As Driskill explains, "The term 'Two-Spirit' is a word that resists colonial definitions of who we are. It is an expression of our sexual and gender identities as sovereign from those of white GLBT movements" (Driskill 2016, 30). This pan-Indigenous term serves not to create a monolithic understanding across all Indigenous cultures, but rather to express the diversity of gender and sexual identities that exist within tribal contexts. Importantly, Driskill notes that Two-Spirit identity often doesn't align neatly with Western LGBTQ+ terminology: "I'm not necessarily 'Queer' in Cherokee contexts, because differences are not seen in the same light as they are in Euroamerican contexts" (ibid.). This highlights how Two-Spirit identity is deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts and resists translation into Western concepts of gender and sexuality. Instead, it asserts the centrality of ceremonial and spiritual traditions, as well as relationships with medicine, in constituting Indigenous gender and sexual identities. Thus, Two-Spirit identity emphasizes the intimate connection between Indigenous gender and sexual expressions and the broader contexts of land, community, and history.

However, Johnny's internalized shame which is reflected on in an internal monologue later on in the novel, ("I still always felt a wave a shame rush through my body whenever someone might associate me with being Two-Spirit" (131)) reveals the ongoing impact of colonial heteronormativity. Despite his kokum's acceptance, Johnny's journey toward embracing his Two-Spirit identity is marked by affects of both pride and shame, as he grapples with the intersection of his queerness and his cultural heritage.

¹⁴ cf. the conceptual framework of this thesis.

In conclusion, Johnny's adolescence is a period of significant tension and growth, as he navigates the complexities of his queerness, gender identity, and cultural heritage. His experiences of bullying, exclusion, and familial pressure shape his understanding of himself, while his relationships with Tias and his kokum provide emotional support and validation. The interplay between traditional Indigenous practices and Johnny's queerness reveals the challenges of reconciling multiple aspects of identity, while his growing awareness of his Two-Spirit identity marks a key moment in his journey toward self-acceptance. Through the lens of affect and embodiment, Johnny's adolescent experiences highlight the ways in which his identity is shaped by both personal and cultural narratives, setting the stage for further exploration in subsequent section.

5.4. Urban Experiences and Sex work

Building upon the analysis of Johnny's formative experiences and early identity formation, this section examines his urban experiences in Winnipeg and his engagement with sex work. These experiences mark a significant shift in Johnny's journey where his understanding of his queer Indigenous identity and the challenges in integrating these two aspects of himself, as well as his connection to his home and indigenous roots are reflected on and shaped by the urban settler context he is moving in.

We will explore how Johnny navigates the emotional and physical dimensions of displacement and alienation he encounters, focusing on his affective responses to urban queer spaces and the commodification of his body through sex work. Butler's concept of performativity will inform our analysis of how Johnny keeps negotiating his dual identity in these new environments. Furthermore, this section will examine how Johnny's experiences in the city not only reflect broader patterns of Indigenous urbanization but also how victimizing narratives of Indigenous Identity are resisted and reframed by Whitehead, through Johnny's narration of his experiences. We will consider how storytelling and humor function as strategies for resilience and cultural continuity, even as Johnny grapples with feelings of alienation and erasure.

By analyzing these urban experiences through our established theoretical framework, we aim to illuminate the complex interplay between individual identity formation and systemic forces of marginalization and resistance in Johnny's journey.

5.1 Transition to Urban Life

Johnny's decision to leave the reservation marks a critical juncture in his development as a queer Indigenous man. This transition signifies not only a physical departure but also an emotional and psychological endeavor to redefine his sense of self. The urban environment offers Johnny an escape from the constraints imposed by his upbringing, particularly the opportunity to embrace his queerness more openly. However, this departure also severs his immediate connection to community, confronting him with the stark realities of racial and economic colonialism in urban spaces. Consequently, Johnny grapples with complex, often conflicting emotions about his Indigenous roots and their enduring influence.

This is vividly articulated the following passage:

"Nobody prepares you for the sting when you're about to leave home. All my life I wanted to leave the rez—and every time I was about to, I stopped myself... It hurt. Leaving hurts. It's not glamorous like Julia Roberts makes it seem... believe it or not, even in the twenty-first century, two brown boys can't fall in love on the rez. Sorry, Julia, your rah-rah-we're-all-the-same walk-through didn't work for me. I'm still me: a brownskin boy who loves the X-Men and Jake Bass." (p.20)

Drawing on Ahmed's affect theory, we can understand Johnny's emotions as not merely internal states, but as deeply intertwined with his spatial and social surroundings. His desire to leave is driven by a need for freedom to embody his queer desires, yet the emotional pain of leaving home is physically embodied as a "sting." The reference to mainstream media narratives—Julia Roberts' glamorized depictions of leaving—underscores the disconnect between his lived reality and societal expectations, while also highlighting Johnny's resilience through self-aware, almost sardonic humour.

The impossibility of "two brown boys" openly expressing love on the reservation highlights the intersectionality of Johnny's struggles, where his queer identity clashes with the heteronormative and patriarchal structures of his Indigenous community.

The complexity of Johnny's departure is further compounded by cultural and familial expectations:

"My stepdad Roger called me an apple when I told him I wanted to leave the rez. 'You're red on the outside,' he said, 'and white on the inside.'" (p.11)

Roger's "apple" metaphor vividly illustrates the internalized colonial narrative that conflates geographical displacement with cultural disconnection. By employing this visceral comparison, Whitehead deftly portrays identity as embodied—literally inscribed within Johnny's physical being.

This interaction encapsulates the broader cultural tensions Johnny must navigate, highlighting the conflict between his pursuit of individual autonomy and the weight of communal expectations. Roger's statement reflects a deeply entrenched colonial perspective that confines Indigenous identity to a specific geographical and cultural space, tied to land and community. This rigid conceptualization, however, dismisses the possibility of a fluid, intersectional identity capable of thriving in urban environments. It reduces Indigenous identity to a binary opposition against settler society, a framework ill-equipped to accommodate the complexity of Johnny's queer Indigenous selfhood. This reductive view not only limits Johnny's potential for self-expression but also reveals the inadequacy of such rigid identity constructs in addressing the multifaceted nature of queer Indigenous experiences.

Johnny's later reflections on home however, defy the notion of home and identity as tied to spatial locations by locating them within the body as affective, sensory experiences:

"One fact I'd learn is that leaving always hurts—home isn't a space, it's a feeling. You have to feel home and to feel it, you have to sense it: smell it, taste it, hear it. And it isn't always comfortable—at least, not an NDN home." (p.20)

Aligning with theories of embodiment, Johnny's understanding of home transcends physical boundaries, becoming a sensory and affective experience, “a feeling” that remains with Johnny even as he leaves. Home is something embodied, tied to routines, smells, tastes, and sounds that connect Johnny to his cultural identity, even when those routines may not always be comfortable. Here, the felt nature of home represents Johnny's understanding of his Indigeneity as something that can exist beyond the geographical confines of the reservation. He carries his cultural traditions with him, even as he attempts to navigate life in the city.

5.2 Navigating Urban Queer Spaces

With Johnny's entrance into urban living, he encounters new challenges in negotiating his intersectional identity, as his indigeneity is often denied, marginalized or exocitized. This tension exemplifies what Scott Lauria Morgensen terms the 'settler homonationalism' of urban queer spaces, where queer acceptance often comes at the cost of assimilating into white, settler norms, while simultaneously being subjected to racial marginalization, leading to feelings of alienation and dissonance. Morgensen elaborates on this concept, stating, "In a white settler society, seeking homo- nationalist alignment with the settler state creates non- native queer modernities as normatively white appeals to settler

citizenship." (2011, 27) This process of alignment with settler norms is particularly evident in urban queer spaces, where, as Morgensen notes, "modern queers are homonationalists" whose aspirations "traverse the normative routes of settler citizenship, by aspiring to civilizational modernity, but also by incorporating and transcending the primitivity that settlers definitively supplant and recall." This framework helps explain the complex dynamics Johnny navigates, where his queerness is more readily accepted when he performs whiteness, effectively "playing white in order to be queer.":

"You have to perform in any situation, so you may as well pick your battles. Hell, I played straight on the rez in order to be NDN and here I played white in order to be queer. You can't win in every situation, that's just the way it is." (p.44)

This passage illuminates the performative nature of identity, aligning closely with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, as Johnny's queerness and Indigeneity are shaped by the social norms of the spaces he inhabits. Johnny's conscious shifts between performing straightness on the reservation and whiteness in urban queer spaces demonstrate how identity is not fixed but enacted through repeated behaviors shaped by social norms (cf. Butler 1999). His fluidity and conscious ability to shift between these performances reflect his capacity for resilience regarding his intersectional identity, but also the pressures and constraints imposed upon him by societal norms. This performance, while necessary for survival, comes at the cost of fully realizing his true self in either environment.

The erasure of Johnny's Indigeneity in queer spaces is further explored in this scene:

"We're all white here," my gays would say, then point towards me, the new NDN, "except you, but you look white, I mean, you're pretty much, you know?" (p.44)

This interaction describes as the colonial gaze within which native bodies and concepts of gender and sexuality are queered, even within queer communities, as they are constructed against a notion of whiteness as the default (Driskill 2016, 80) resulting in the minimization of Johnny's Indigenous identity as the expense for assimilation into queer urban spaces. The casual dismissal of Johnny's Indigeneity reflects broader patterns of racism and settler colonialism within LGBTQ+ spaces, challenging notions of queer solidarity and inclusivity. Johnny's hesitation to reveal his Indigenous background reflects the fear of being othered once again, this time within a community that is supposed to offer acceptance and solidarity.

Despite these pressures to assimilate, Johnny maintains a strong connection to his Indigenous roots, often through embodied and affective experiences. He often reflects on his grandmother's teachings and cultural rituals as a source of comfort and grounding, particularly in moments of alienation. In one poignant reflection, he says:

"The skies are grey these days and I got used to telling myself that it's just my kokum having a great smudge in Saskatoon and that this smoke, which smells of cedar and ash, is her medicine floating across the border." (p.23)

Here, emotional and sensory experiences combine to become ways of knowing and maintaining cultural connections and lived memory, aligning with Millions concept of felt theory. Johnny's invocation of his kokum's smudging ceremony demonstrates a way of maintaining his cultural roots in a space that often feels hostile or alienating and how Indigenous spirituality and cultural practices can persist in urban environments, serving as forms of resistance against colonial erasure.

Through these experiences, Johnny embodies Indigenous survivance as he actively asserts his Indigenous presence and adapts to new environments while maintaining cultural continuity¹⁵. His navigation of urban queer spaces becomes a complex dance of performance, resistance, and cultural affirmation, challenging both heteronormative Indigenous expectations and homonormative settler queer norms.

5.3 Sex Work and Identity

Sex work becomes a key aspect of Johnny's survival in the city. It allows him to maintain financial independence but also offers a unique space in which Johnny negotiates his identity, power, and vulnerability, illuminating further how he resists and redefines the colonial notions of erasure discussed in the previous section. His body becomes both a site of economic survival and a means of self-expression, albeit one shaped by the transactional nature of his work. However, it is through the

¹⁵ The concept of survivance has no distinct or precise definition. It is a concept that exists unmistakably in Native stories, natural reason, active traditions, customs and narratives of resistance. Native survivance is a continuance of Indigenous stories and culture: acts and stories of survivance create a Native presence that upsets European control over Native peoples and public discourse (Koch 2019).

narration of Johnny's experience and the way relates those stories of his, that he resurges as agentive, refusing colonial narratives of victimization and powerlessness¹⁶.

Johnny's initial reflection on the physical toll of sex work offers insight into how his body is commodified:

"My body was going to hurt, but I remember reading a Shakespeare play at school once that said it takes a pound of flesh to earn a pound of cash." (p.57)

The evocation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* metaphorically encapsulates the corporeal cost of Johnny's work, illuminating the complex interplay between colonialism, capitalism, and the commodification of Indigenous bodies. Quijano's concept of coloniality provides a crucial framework for understanding this dynamic. He argues that coloniality operates on two fundamental axes: the idea of race as a biological justification for domination, and "the constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources and slavery, serfdom, small independent commodity production and reciprocity, together around and upon the basis of capital and the world market"(Quijano and Ennis 2000, 533). In this context, Johnny's body becomes not just a personal "pound of flesh," but a site where colonial and capitalist forces converge. His engagement in sex work reflects the ongoing impact of these historical processes, where Indigenous bodies are often devalued and commodified within the settler-colonial economy. However, Johnny's strategic use of his body and identity in this work can also be read as a form of resistance against these structures, asserting agency within a system designed to exploit him.

"I can inhabit so many personas while the client can only be one—that excites me. I have so much power when I transform—all that power over blood, veins, and nerve endings." (p.26)

His strategic use of racial stereotypes to attract clients—"work smart, not hard"—shows a calculated approach to his survival in the world of sex work. While his clients may see him as an exotic commodity, Johnny manipulates these projections to his own benefit, demonstrating a form of

¹⁶ A paper that addresses the framing of Indigenous victimhood and agency can be found in Audra Simpson's article *Consent's Revenge* published in *Cultural Anthropology* (2016). In this paper, Simpson critiques how colonial frameworks often seek to limit Indigenous peoples' agency by positioning them as passive victims who must consent to colonial power structures. She argues that Indigenous refusal and resistance—what she calls "refusal as political"—are vital forms of agency that challenge and subvert colonial narratives.

resilience and defiance. This is a form of reverse discourse where the marginalized reclaim the language and power used against them for their own purposes. According to Butler, reverse discourse is a concept that was coined by Foucault (1990) to describe how subjects marked by subalternity involve the categories and vocabularies of the disciplining rhetoric, precisely in order to contest it. Given that subjects are constantly in the process of being produced and are repeatedly constituted in subjection, this enables the reverse discourse; that is, the possibility of a repetition that repeats against previously established meanings” (Butler 1995, 236). Johnny’s fluidity regarding his invocation of different personas during sex work allows him to exercise control over the encounter, turning what could be a space of vulnerability into one of empowerment. His manipulation of "blood, veins, and nerve endings" signals his ability to control not only his own body but also the desires and expectations of his clients. This negotiation of power and desire against racialization and fetishization is further shown in his reflections about his interactions on Grindr, a gay dating platform that he uses to garner clients:

"The funny thing about Grindr is that it's full of treaty chasers. They'll fetishize the hell out of you if you tell them you're a real NDN wolf-boy, that you got arrows pointing at their faces and cocks. But I was a professional—work smart, not hard. I used the collage that I had made of dick-pics to help me gather clients." (p.18)

Here Johnny strategically performs stereotypes of Indigeneity to navigate the colonial gaze of his clients. His approach of "work smart, not hard" demonstrates a form of agency within oppressive structures that try to commodify and reduce Johnny to an object of fetishization. "Treaty chasers," a term used by him to describe non-Indigenous individuals who seek out Indigenous partners for the exotic appeal, reflects the ongoing colonial dynamic of objectifying Indigenous people. The reference to “arrows pointing at their faces and cocks” exemplifies how Indigenous symbols are sexualized and exploited within the framework of colonial desire. However, Johnny reverses the discourse throughout this novel on numerous occasions, as he takes advantage of the racial and objectifying desires of his clients financially and sarcastically reflects on his experiences, ultimately bringing him into a position of power where he can embrace his queerness, especially in defiance of colonial heteronormative and rigid notions of Indigeneity, as symbolized by his clients.

5.4 Marginalization and Resilience

Johnny's identity as queer Indigenous exposes him not only to alienation and marginalization due to his queer identity but also to blatant racism and stereotypes. This section will continue to explore instances of Johnny's adverse experiences in Winnipeg, and explore the way he counters the multiple layers of racism, homophobia, and the ongoing effects of colonialism through humor, storytelling, and cultural connection.

In one particularly poignant scene, Johnny reflects on his marginalization in the city:

"There isn't much to see beyond my bathroom window but [...] a pigeon building its nest on the windowsill of an abandoned building across the alley. Every morning we meet here: me, rubbing the ash and crusty scum from my lips, and that bird neatly piling little sticks, roaches, and chicken bones on the ledge. Silly little bird, I always think, building a home in a dead place... I wonder if the bird thinks the same of me, if, in its own pigeon-head, it's saying: what a silly man, making a home on the land of ghosts." (p.23)

This passage captures Johnny's sense of alienation and displacement in the urban environment. The imagery of the pigeon building a nest in a "dead place" mirrors Johnny's own struggle to create a sense of home in a city that feels hostile and unforgiving. The comparison between Johnny and the pigeon suggests a shared sense of survival in spaces that are inhospitable and devoid of life. The phrase "making a home on the land of ghosts" alludes to the colonial history that underpins the urban landscape, where Indigenous peoples have been displaced and marginalized. Johnny's existence in this space feels precarious, as though he, like the pigeon, is simply making do with the remnants left behind by others. The phrase "making a home on the land of ghosts" further invokes the notion of Patrick Wolfe's concept of a 'logic of elimination' in settler colonialism, where Indigenous peoples are rendered invisible or "ghostly" in urban landscapes.¹⁷

However, Johnny's reflections on land and belonging continue to show a continued tie to traditional knowledges and practices, that he uses to assert his right to exist on "settler land":

¹⁷ The "logic of elimination" is a concept introduced by **Patrick Wolfe** in his seminal work titled *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native* (2006). In this paper, Wolfe argues that settler colonialism operates through a distinct "logic of elimination," meaning that the goal of settler colonial projects is not just the exploitation of Indigenous people but their removal and eventual replacement by settlers. This logic drives policies such as land dispossession, assimilation, and genocidal practices aimed at erasing Indigenous peoples' presence from the land.

"My landlord says I'm not supposed to smoke in the building but I really don't give a fuck, I think I've every right to destroy my body, to be ceremonial on settler land." (p.78)

Here, Johnny's defiance against the smoking restrictions placed upon him are framed as an act of cultural defiance and reclamation that Whitehead skillfully blends into a scene, that initially frames Johnny as a delinquent who proves negative prejudices. His smoking becomes an act of 'refusal' in Audre Simpons terms, of colonial impositions on Indigenous practices and knowledges. Framed as "ceremonial", the act of smoking a cigarette invokes Indigenous spiritual tobacco practices, even in a mundane setting, and serves as an assertion to Indigenous rights to exist and practice their culture, even on "settler land". This moment of resistance highlights Johnny's refusal to be marginalized or controlled by settler-colonial laws and norms. His assertion that he has "every right to destroy" his body is both a commentary on the destructive forces of colonialism and a reclaiming of agency over his own life and choices.

Johnny's marginalization is not limited to his interactions with authority figures. He also faces direct racism and homophobia in everyday encounters with the same defiant attitude, as seen in the following passage:

"Can't you read?" a voice shouted from behind me. "No loitering!" I brushed the man off with my hand and felt him shove a corn broom against my back. "Goddamn Natives, always sitting around here. Hurry up and leave before I call the cops." The store manager hit me with his broom again and held it there; the bristles dug into my back. It felt kind of exciting. I pushed back against the bristles. It felt good to be hurt like that. He pushed harder and knocked me off the curb [...] I lit a cigarette and puffed on it without any hands. Smoke slithered out of my nostrils. I winked at him. "You know," I stated between puffs, "this is my land, you ingrate." (p.101-102)

This encounter exemplifies the everyday violence Johnny experiences as a queer Indigenous man in urban spaces. The store manager's aggressive actions and racist remarks underscore the pervasive marginalization Johnny faces. However, Johnny's response—physically resisting the broom and asserting land ownership—demonstrates his resilience and defiance. This scene embodies Sarah Hunt's concept of "embodied sovereignty," where Indigenous individuals assert their presence and rights in urban environments through physical and verbal acts. Johnny's corporeal resistance and declaration directly challenge settler-colonial narratives of belonging. The physical discomfort he experiences can be interpreted through Dian Million's felt theory as a visceral reminder of generational trauma. Paradoxically, this pain becomes almost pleasurable for Johnny, affirming his existence and resistance

against forces that seek to erase or harm him. In this moment, Johnny transforms potential victimization into an act of empowerment and cultural resilience.

While Johnny's experiences of marginalization in urban spaces are profound, they also serve as catalysts for his resilience and cultural reclamation. As we've seen, Johnny employs various strategies to navigate and resist the discrimination he faces. These strategies are not merely coping mechanisms but powerful tools for asserting his identity and challenging colonial narratives. However, he still struggles with integrating his various identity aspects and the pain and loneliness he feels. In the following section, we will explore how Johnny's journey culminates in a deeper reconnection with his Indigenous identity through relational concepts of community and spirituality that are in alignment with theoretical notions on indigenous worldviews and ways of being and knowing.

This process of reclamation, while deeply personal, is also inherently political and communal. Through storytelling and a renewed engagement with his cultural heritage, Johnny finds ways to heal from the traumas of displacement and discrimination, ultimately embracing the fullness of his queer Indigenous identity. This exploration will reveal how Johnny's individual journey reflects broader themes of Indigenous resurgence and the power of narrative in cultural preservation and resistance.

5.5 Reclaiming Indigenous Identity through Storytelling

In the concluding chapter of *Johnny Appleseed*, Johnny's reclamation of his Indigenous identity through storytelling serves as a powerful synthesis of the novel's key themes—affect, embodiment, and relationality. This process illustrates how storytelling functions not merely as personal expression, but as a culturally embedded practice connecting Johnny to his land, community, and ancestry.

5.5.1 Home as a Feeling: Storytelling and Cultural Identity

Johnny's understanding of "home" is a recurring theme in the novel, one that shifts from being a physical space to an affective experience rooted in memory and storytelling. As Johnny matures, home is no longer a fixed place but a feeling—a sense of belonging that he carries with him, intertwined with the stories of his ancestors and his lived experiences.

This transformation aligns with Sara Ahmed's work on affect and emotion, where feelings are culturally and relationally constructed. She argues that "Emotions provide a script, certainly: you become the 'you' if you accept the invitation to align yourself with the nation, and against those others who threaten to take the nation away" (Ahmed 2014 12.) While Ahmed discusses this in the context of national identity, we can apply this concept to Johnny's evolving sense of home. Johnny's realization that "home isn't a space, it's a feeling" (20) reflects his resistance to aligning with the dominant settler-colonial narrative of place and belonging. Instead, he creates his own emotional "script" that aligns with Indigenous understandings of land and place as spiritual and emotional connections rather than mere geographical locations.

In the novel, this idea of home is often metaphorically linked to land-based knowledge, particularly through the recurring image of the sunflower:

"Sunflowers always face the sun, even on cloudy days. They're resilient like that, always knowing where home is." (p. 20)

The sunflower becomes a symbol of resilience, a plant that flourishes even in challenging conditions, much like Johnny himself. The sunflower becomes a symbol of resilience and orientation, reflecting Johnny's journey to find his cultural "home" amidst challenging circumstances

Through storytelling, Johnny nurtures his own identity, reclaiming the parts of himself that had been fractured by the colonial forces of heteronormativity and urbanization. Johnny's dialogue with his deceased grandmother further illustrates the power of storytelling in reconnecting with cultural identity:

"I want to tell you so many things Kokum, tell you, I think I made it, you know, travelled south and survived. I want to say, I just hope I ain't changed too much, y'know, hell, I hope I ain't changed into no emblem of shame. And I know what you gonna say to me, you're gonna say humility, m'boy, sacred teaching, don't you know? And I'll say what humility got to do with shame?" (p. 216)

Here, Johnny's dialogue symbolizes his journey of returning "home" to his cultural identity. Johnny's imagined conversation with his kokum becomes a way to process his experiences, blending personal memories with broader Indigenous knowledge systems. The tension between his affects of shame and humility reflects the complex emotional landscape Johnny navigates as he reconciles his urban experiences with his cultural teachings. This passage demonstrates Jo-Ann Archibald's

conceptualization of stories as both a pedagogical tool and a means of healing (cf. Archibald 2008). Through his Kokum's teachings, which Johnny carries with him as embodied, felt knowledge, he engages in a process of affective transformation.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of sticky emotions (cf. Ahmed 2014, 195) we can understand how shame has adhered to Johnny's sense of cultural identity, a result of colonial pressures and displacement. However, through the act of storytelling and remembering his kokum's wisdom, Johnny begins to unstick these negative affects and replace them with more empowering emotions.

This process is further reflected in felt theory's notion that emphasizes the importance of emotional knowledge and relationality in Indigenous epistemologies (2013, 75). Johnny's emotional journey is not just personal but deeply relational, connected to his Kokum, his community, and his cultural heritage. Johnny's sense of self is not constructed in isolation but through ongoing dialogue with his Kokum's teachings, even in her absence. This aligns with Indigenous concepts of identity as inherently relational, extending beyond the individual to include family, community, land, and ancestors.

By engaging in this imagined dialogue, Johnny is not only processing his personal experiences but also reaffirming his place within a broader cultural context. The storytelling becomes a means of reconnecting with and reinterpreting cultural teachings, allowing Johnny to navigate the complex emotional terrain of his queer Indigenous identity in a way that is both personally healing and culturally affirming.

5.5.2 Narrative Medicine and Healing through Stories

This line of thought does not only attest for Johnny himself, but extends to his wider community, where storytelling functions as a form of narrative medicine — a concept rooted in Indigenous healing practices. Through telling and retelling stories, communal healing and resilience are facilitated through affective relationality¹⁸. This aligns with what Million describes: Stories form bridges that other people might cross, to feel their way into another experience. That is the promise of witness. These feelings, these affects, are part of their power of transformation in politically charged arenas, as 'embodied pain, shame, distress, anguish, humiliation, anger, rage, fear, terror, can promote healing and solidarity . . .

¹⁸See further: *Storytelling, Culture, and Indigenous Methodology* (2021).

and provide avenues for empathy across circuits of difference.'" (Million 2008, 76). This narrative medicine is evident in Johnny's interactions with his family and friends, where stories become the glue that holds relationships and identities together, fostering healing and resilience in the face of intergenerational trauma and ongoing colonial pressures.

"We told stories and laughed, which may sound like a weird thing to do after the death of the matriarch who held us all together like a glue that couldn't quit [...] Big old haunted house planted there in the middle of the rez, windows lined with dust, lights stained that old yellow hue, everything screaming: witness me." (p. 214)

In this scene, storytelling serves as a collective act of grieving and healing. Even in the face of death, the stories of Johnny's kokum live on, sustaining the family's connection to each other and to their cultural roots. The metaphor of the "haunted house" emphasizes the persistence of memory and history, with the house itself becoming a witness to the ongoing narrative of Indigenous survival. Storytelling, here, is not only a personal practice but a communal ritual that sustains cultural continuity despite loss. The haunted house's silent plea of "witness me" powerfully embodies Dian Million's concept of felt theory. Million argues that Indigenous knowledge and experiences are deeply emotional and embodied, not just intellectual. The house, personified in this passage, becomes a physical manifestation of collective memory and intergenerational trauma, demanding acknowledgment through visceral, emotional engagement. This aligns with Million's assertion that Indigenous peoples' experiences of colonialism and resistance are deeply felt, lived realities. The act of witnessing, as called for by the house, requires Johnny and his family to engage emotionally and physically with their history and identity. This process of embodied witnessing becomes a form of storytelling and remembering that is central to Indigenous ways of knowing and healing, underscoring the importance of bearing witness not just as passive observers, but as active participants in the ongoing story of Indigenous survival and resurgence.

The following passage further relates the concept of felt reality further to the affective experience that accompany Johnny's narrative and stories. Here, Johnny directly speaks about the paradoxical nature of trauma, where sites of wounding can become sources of resilience and transformation:

"And that's sometimes the strangest thing about pain, that sites of trauma, when dressed after the gash, can become sites of pleasure." (p. 179)

Johnny's body, marked by both emotional and physical wounds, becomes a canvas for his narrative—a site where stories of pain are transformed into stories of survival and love. This process of healing through storytelling aligns with the novel's broader themes of affect and embodiment, where identity is formed through the lived experiences of the body and the emotions attached to those experiences. In Johnny's case, the pain of trauma becomes intimately linked with pleasure and resilience, illustrating how emotions can transform and redefine bodily experiences. Through the act of storytelling, Johnny engages in what Ahmed calls 'affective reorientation' (Ahmed 2014, 8), where the emotional valence of traumatic experiences is shifted, allowing for new possibilities of being and relating.

This process of healing through storytelling aligns with the novel's broader themes of affect and embodiment, where identity is formed through the lived experiences of the body and the emotions attached to those experiences. It demonstrates how storytelling can serve as a powerful tool for reclaiming agency over one's emotional and physical experiences, allowing for a reimagining of the self that resists colonial narratives of victimhood and embraces Indigenous resilience.

Moreover, this transformation of pain into a source of pleasure and strength reflects what Ahmed describes as queer feelings - emotional states that challenge normative expectations and open up new possibilities for identity and community (cf. Ahmed 2014, 144-155). For Johnny, the reclamation of his traumatic experiences through storytelling becomes a queer act of resistance, affirming his complex identity as both Indigenous and Two-Spirit.

5.6 Conclusion: Integrating Identities through Embodied Storytelling

The journey of Johnny Appleseed powerfully demonstrates the intricate interplay of affect, embodiment, and storytelling in shaping queer Indigenous identity. Johnny's return to the reservation marks a pivotal moment of cultural resurgence, where storytelling facilitates his reconnection with his Indigenous roots. Throughout the novel, Johnny's stories are infused with a deep relationality—an understanding that identity is shaped through relationships with others, including family, community, and land, which ultimately serve as tools for healing, resistance, and self-reclamation, as poignantly captured in the phrase "My voice, my body, my life—every piece of me is a bundle of medicine " (109).

His storytelling practices challenge colonial narratives that have sought to erase Indigenous histories and replace them with settler stories, such as the myth of Johnny Appleseed, which Johnny critiques throughout the novel.

Our analysis has offered a nuanced understanding of how identities are constructed through lived experiences and emotional connections by looking at the novel from a theoretical standpoint informed by affect and felt theory.

Johnny's experiences—from his early interactions with his kokum to his exploration of sexuality and his return to the reservation highlight the importance of relationality and corporeal knowledge in identity formation and cultural continuity in the face of a persistent coloniality. The novel's portrayal of cultural resurgence through storytelling is thereby particularly poignant. As Whitehead himself articulates:

“I write this book with the goal of showing you that Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous folx are not a ‘was,’ that we are not the ethnographic and romanticized notations of ‘revered mystic’ or ‘shamanic,’ instead we are an is and a coming.” (221)

This statement powerfully asserts the ongoing presence and future of queer Indigenous communities, challenging colonial narratives that attempt to relegate Indigenous people to the past. It exemplifies what Dian Million terms felt theory, where emotional and embodied knowledge becomes a form of resistance and a means of imagining Indigenous futures.

The novel further illustrates how this cultural resurgence is enacted through everyday practices that blend tradition with contemporary experiences. By sharing his personal and cultural stories, Johnny reclaims the power to define his own identity. His stories subvert the settler-colonial framework, which has long sought to categorize Indigenous people in terms of deficiency or absence. Instead, Johnny's narratives assert the richness and complexity of Indigenous identity, particularly in its intersection with queerness. The continuity of Indigenous peoples in modernity is poignantly captured in this passage:

“As we grew drunker, we slapped on A Tribe Called Red and had our own stadium pow wow. None of us knew the words but we sang along anyways, ‘way, yah, hey-ya-how.’ We thought we were hardcore traditionalists, but we probably sounded like a pack of rez dogs.” (127)

This scene demonstrates how Johnny and his community reclaim and reinterpret cultural practices, creating a living form of cultural continuity. It reflects Ahmed's chapter on queer feelings, challenging normative expectations and opening new possibilities for identity and community. Whitehead's

autofictional approach, rooted in his lived experience as a Two-Spirit Oji-Cree person, lends authenticity to the narrative while challenging preconceived notions of "authentic" Indigenous stories. The autofictional elements allow Whitehead to explore the complexities of queer Indigenous identity without conforming to external expectations of authenticity. As an author and community member, Whitehead has a unique authority to tell this story. He views his body as "embryonically tied to the body of texts," indicating a deep connection between his personal experiences and his writing.

By infusing the narrative with humor and contemporary references, Whitehead presents a dynamic, evolving Indigenous identity that incorporates both traditional and modern elements. This approach challenges the settler-colonial gaze that often seeks to freeze Indigenous cultures in a mythical past. The inclusion of humor and joy asserts the fullness of Indigenous life, resisting expectations that Indigenous narratives should primarily focus on trauma.

Johnny Appleseed makes a significant contribution to queer Indigenous literature by expanding the representation of Two-Spirit experiences. It challenges colonial narratives, offering a rich portrayal of how queerness and Indigeneity intersect in contemporary contexts.

Ultimately, *Johnny Appleseed* demonstrates how storytelling, rooted in affect and embodiment, can be a powerful tool for resilience, healing, and cultural resurgence. It invites readers to engage with the ongoing story of Indigenous survival and resurgence, recognizing queer Indigenous identities as dynamic, embodied realities that continue to shape and be shaped by contemporary experiences

Building on our analysis of *Johnny Appleseed*, we now turn to Billy-Ray Belcourt's *A Minor Chorus*, which offers a complementary yet distinct exploration of queer Indigenous identity. While both novels employ narrative as a means of reclaiming agency and resisting colonial erasure, Belcourt's work shifts the focus from the visceral, embodied experiences central to Whitehead's narrative to a more introspective, intellectualized approach to voice-giving, resurgence and its relation to identity formation.

In *Johnny Appleseed*, we witnessed how conceptions of identity are deeply rooted in physical experiences and cultural traditions. *A Minor Chorus* expands on these themes, but approaches them through a more philosophical and meta-textual lens. Belcourt's unnamed narrator, a doctoral student

turned novelist, engages in a process of collecting and curating stories from his community, reflecting on the very act of storytelling itself.

This transition allows us to delve deeper into our research questions concerning the role of narrative in shaping queer Indigenous identities and resisting colonial structures. Where *Johnny Appleseed* provided insights into the intimate affective embodied aspects of queer indigenous identity formation, *A Minor Chorus* offers a platform to examine the intellectual and political dimensions of voice-giving. Belcourt's novel invites us to consider how academic discourse intersects with Indigenous ways of knowing, and how the act of storytelling, as exemplified in the form of the novel itself, as well as the stories that it centres on, can bridge these often disparate worlds. The narrator's journey from academic isolation to community-based knowledge collection mirrors broader decolonial efforts to recenter Indigenous epistemologies, part of which have already been analysed earlier in this thesis.

As we continue our analysis of *A Minor Chorus*, we will explore how Belcourt's approach to storytelling serves not only as a means of personal identity formation but also as a method of collective resistance against the silencing effects of colonialism. We will examine how the novel's structure, which weaves together multiple voices and perspectives, reflects the relational nature of Indigenous identity and knowledge systems.

In this way, Belcourt's work parallels *Johnny Appleseed* in its exploration of the transformative power of storytelling. Yet, while Johnny's stories are often visceral, tied to the land and his physical experiences, *A Minor Chorus* foregrounds the intellectual labor of storytelling—how narrative and voice can serve as tools for both personal healing and collective resistance.

As we will see, Belcourt's narrator uses stories to assert his presence in a world that constantly seeks to deny it, creating a space where Indigenous lived realities can be voiced, heard, and understood. This aligns with Dian Million's concept of felt theory, where emotional and embodied knowledge are recognized as valid forms of understanding. By collecting and sharing stories, the narrator engages in a process of affective knowledge production, allowing for the expression of lived experiences that are often marginalized in traditional academic discourse. This approach not only validates Indigenous ways of knowing but also creates a visceral, emotional connection between storyteller, listener, and the

broader community, fostering a deeper understanding of queer Indigenous realities that complements the more intimate, physical exploration of these themes in Whitehead's novel.

6.A Chorus of Resilience: Voice, Body, and Resurgence in Belcourt's Novel

Building on our analysis of *Johnny Appleseed*, this section explores how *A Minor Chorus* approaches themes of identity, voice, and community through a more collective lens. Our analysis will focus on:

1. The transition from the academic isolation that we already analyzed earlier in this thesis, to community-based approach to writing as a form of storytelling that aligns more closely with indigenous ways of knowing and being
2. The role of voice-giving in personal and communal healing
3. The connection between embodiment, physicality, voice, and identity
4. The representation of Indigenous voices and cultural resurgence

These themes complement our exploration of *Johnny Appleseed* by expanding the scope from individual experience to collective narrative. While Whitehead's novel focused more heavily on the main character's intimate journey and affective relations, Belcourt's work examines indigenous history and identity more broadly and more explicit in relation to history. It thereby places greater emphasis on the discursive dimension of stories and how they anchor individuals within this relational network, fostering a more integrated self-concept for the narrator.

The structure of this analysis will thereby orient itself more thematically on the themes and motifs of the novel, moving from the role of the narrator in relation to stories to an examination of the tension between voice and silence. This is then followed by an exploration of the physicality of voice in relation to affect and embodiment, and finally to a discussion of storytelling as a form of indigenous knowledge and epistemology that facilitates communal healing and cultural resurgence. Through this progression, we will trace how the narrator's engagement with his community shapes both personal identity and larger processes of decolonization and cultural reclamation.

By examining these themes, we aim to illuminate how *A Minor Chorus* contributes to the field of queer Indigenous literature, offering new perspectives on the power of written storytelling in the form of a novel, its affective potential for the narrator and his community which can be applied to broader societal notions outside of the novel, and, as such, the ongoing process of Indigenous resurgence in the face of colonial pressures.

6.1. Silence and Voice giving

6.1.1 The Narrator as a Collector of Stories

In *A Minor Chorus*, the narrator's transition from academic isolation to community-based storytelling reflects a broader decolonial practice that prioritizes Indigenous ways of knowing. This shift, previously explored in our decolonial analysis, aligns with Indigenous epistemologies that view knowledge as relational and communal rather than individualistic.

The act of collecting stories becomes a way of reclaiming voices that have been erased, acknowledging the resilience and emotional complexity of those who live on the outskirts of the modern.

The narrator's methodology for story collection thereby reveals his commitment to capturing the collective emotional life of his marginalized community on the one hand, while simultaneously establishing this mode as a valid form of intellectual academic practice that opposes the coloniality of academia discussed previously:

"Within hours, I had devised a methodology: I would collect the testimonies of those who were, in an existential sense, contortionists, people whose personal histories were marked by structural neglect, by cruel fate, by heavy silence, by a joy that pressurized sociological theories of deficiency. There was nothing new to say about the city and everything still to say about the outskirts of the modern, about the zones of existence where the present was always the past... In talking to those who came from where I came from, I also hoped light would be shed on the person I was or the person I might become. Perhaps I was no longer repressing the fact that I was as determined as anyone else by the milieu into which I was born." (32-33)

This passage highlights the narrator's critique of academic frameworks that often pathologize marginalized experiences. Instead, he focuses on the "outskirts of the modern," giving voice to those rendered invisible by colonial modernity. This approach aligns with our research question on how storytelling functions as a means of resistance and cultural preservation. His decision to collect testimonies from "contortionists"—a term that suggests flexibility, adaptation, and resilience in the face of adversity—highlights the narrator's recognition of the value inherent in these stories and their deservingness of being considered in mainstream sociological studies. In turning his attention to the emotional and existential realities of those who exist on the "outskirts of the modern," he applies Million's concept of felt theory and points out that modernity itself—often synonymous with

colonialism and neoliberalism (cf. W. D. Mignolo 2011) — has pushed certain groups to the margins, rendering their stories invisible, i.e. subaltern. The narrator's project, then, is to bring these stories to the forefront, not as objects of study, but as voices that challenge the very systems that have marginalized them.

His decision to collect stories is thereby deeply tied to his own identity. The narrator's search for stories is not just about documenting other people's experiences but also about understanding himself. This reflects a key theme in Indigenous storytelling traditions, where personal identity is shaped through relationships with others and with the land but also translates into Indigenous research methodologies as elaborated by Tuhiway Smith. By collecting stories, the narrator is engaging in a process of self-discovery that is inherently relational—his identity and approach to research is inseparable from the community he comes from.

This connection between personal and communal identity is further explored in another passage:

"I believe every person is a repository of a community's memories. A town speaks when its people do. I want to capture that voice... Through people like you, I want to summon an honest emotional voice." (Belcourt, 59)

Here, the narrator explicitly frames individuals as "repositories" of collective memory. This perspective aligns with Indigenous epistemologies that view knowledge as relational and communal rather than individualistic, as Kovac writes: Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete affirms the relational perspective of Indigenous knowledges: they are, he says, about 'honoring the primacy of direct experience, interconnectedness, relationship, holism, quality, and value' (Cajete qtd. in Kovach 2021, 34). The idea that "a town speaks when its people do" underscores the collective nature of identity and memory. The narrator's goal is not to capture isolated, individual experiences, but to give voice to a community's shared emotional life. This collective approach to storytelling resists the colonial tendency to fragment Indigenous peoples into isolated subjects for study. Instead, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual stories and the community's collective resilience.

This passage also highlights the affective dimensions of the narrator's project. It ties back to Ahmed's notion of emotional economies and their stickiness, reflecting how emotions are shared and circulated within entire communities as communal affects and how certain affects adhere to specific communities

due to structural conditions. Further, the narrator's focus on collecting "testimonies" and capturing "voices" suggests an attention to the bodily and experiential aspects of emotional knowledge.

6.1.2 From Personal Experience to Communal Storytelling

The communal affective aspect of this project is further elaborated on through the narrator's realization that his novel could be "a kind of literary ethnography of sadness and hope" in this passage:

"Once we stopped laughing, it occurred to me that I wanted to examine how we live under conditions of duress, both visible and invisible. My novel, then, would be a kind of literary ethnography of sadness and hope, of constraint and possibility. I would write a book that reflected a community's emotional lives rather than just my sensory experience of the present. I would drive into town with graffitied fists and make art that would matter." (32)

The narrator's vision of a "literary ethnography of sadness and hope" marks a significant shift from the individual focus of affect and embodiment described seen in *Johnny Appleseed* to a more explicit collective approach. The narrator's conscious reimagining of ethnography as an emotional and narrative engagement as opposed to the dictated detached, observative approach valued in western academic knowledge policies, further establishes the decolonial orientation of the fictional novel and *A Minor Chorus* itself — blurring the boundaries between author and narrator.

By expanding his focus to encompass communal experiences, the narrator's project complements and contrasts with Johnny's more personal journey in *Johnny Appleseed*, though both approaches contribute to our understanding of how queer Indigenous identities are formed and expressed through relational narrative.

6.2 Tension between Silence and Voice in Marginalized Communities

In *A Minor Chorus*, the tension between silence and voice emerges as a central theme, reflecting the broader struggles of marginalized communities to articulate their lived experiences. This tension aligns with our research question on how queer Indigenous authors challenge dominant narratives through storytelling. Unlike Johnny's more embodied experiences and forms of resilience, Belcourt's narrator grapples directly with the intellectual and emotional labor of reclaiming voice in a world that erases or distorts marginalized experiences, further broadening the scope of impact of such stories.

The novel illustrates how voice is often constrained by systemic structures, which also holds important insights for German Studies as exemplified in the chapter on positionality and power. One powerful passage explicitly points out this systemic silencing or continued ignorance to marginalized voices.

"During the phone calls, it occurred to me that so few of us are given permission to theorize about our lives, so many are bound to the register of everyday chitchat. It made me wonder: If there isn't time or space to account for or to avow with bewilderment and frustration and joy the emotional fabric of one's life, to assert one's enmeshment in a narrative of humanness that continues to unfold, where does that language go, where does it pile up?" (35)

This passage reflects the narrator's frustration with the ways in which marginalized people are denied the opportunity to "theorize" their own lives. The distinction between "theorizing" and "chitchat" highlights the disparity in who is allowed to articulate their experiences in meaningful ways and who is relegated to the realm of the trivial or inconsequential. This lack of permission to theorize is not simply an intellectual grievance but a profound critique of the erasure of emotional and existential complexity. The "language" of these lived experiences— i.e. embodied affects of, for example, frustration, and joy—has no space in a society that limits marginalized voices to superficial registers and disavows theories of felt knowledge, creating a tension, where the unsaid builds up, accumulates, and remains unexpressed, leading to a form of emotional and intellectual suffocation. Belcourt's use of the phrase "where does that language go, where does it pile up?" suggests that the unsaid does not simply disappear; it accumulates, creating a silent, invisible weight carried by those who are denied the space to express themselves. This accumulation of unspoken emotions and experiences reflects the broader social structures that keep marginalized people from accessing the platforms needed to voice their felt existence. In this sense, silence becomes both a burden and a form of oppression.

To resist silence as a tool of colonial oppression the narrator establishes written language early on in his life as a refusal to conform to the colonial demand for invisibility. Much like Johnny in his interactions with clients subverts notions of power and narratives of subordination and victimization of Indigenous and queer identities, Belcourt's narrator too establishes his visibility on his own terms:

"You could see the tattoos on my knuckles, which spelled out my username: CREE HOMO. In my early-twentysomething mind, the act was an homage to Barthes's declaration that language is a kind of skin. I interpreted the aphorism literally, wanted to turn my body into a book of sad poems. I convinced myself that the tattoo would amount to a small refusal of the ways colonial systems

demanded my invisibility. I hadn't yet understood that visibility begot its own kind of endangerment." (22)

The narrator's tattoo serves as a powerful form of identity assertion that transcends structural conditions of forced silence, transforming the body into a platform for recognition and resistance. By inscribing "CREE HOMO" on his skin, the narrator engages in a deliberate act of defiance against colonial erasure, echoing Indigenous traditions of body modification while simultaneously asserting a contemporary queer identity. This permanent marking embodies the intersection of historical cultural practices and modern expressions of sexuality and ethnicity. The narrator's invocation of Barthes's concept of language as skin underscores the intimate connection between language, body, and identity, aligning with Ahmed's theory of how emotions and identities stick to certain bodies - here in a quite literal sense. By reimagining his body as a "book of sad poems," the narrator reclaims language as a tool of self-expression, resonating with Indigenous storytelling traditions where the body serves as a vessel for cultural memory and resistance. This act of embodied storytelling not only challenges colonial narratives but also demonstrates how affect and physicality intertwine in the expression of queer Indigenous identities.

6.2.1 Silence as a Manifestation of Emotional and Intellectual Isolation

Silence is not only a response to external forces but also reflects the narrator's internal state of emotional and intellectual isolation in academia.

"I was in the world, restless. The world was around me, cacophonous, fluttering. Everything I wrote seemed comparatively noiseless, unalive. I had simply continued in the disaffected mode that characterized most of my time as a grad student. This disheartened me." (Belcourt, 25)

Here, the narrator's writing feels "noiseless" and "unalive," reflecting the disconnect between his inner emotional life and the academic world he inhabits. The "disaffected mode" of his graduate studies contributes to this sense of lifelessness, as the intellectual frameworks of academia fail to capture the emotional and existential depth of his experiences. The contrast between the "cacophonous" world around him and the "noiseless" quality of his writing highlights the tension between the vibrancy of lived experience and the sterility of academic discourse, that leads to the narrator's writing being drowned out by the noises in the world and as such, silenced.

"After he left, when I was alone in a throbbing silence, I thought: Maybe I'm predisposed to being a writer because I radiate emotion so openly. What if I'm a beautiful wound people dance inside of?" (24)

The "throbbing silence" following the encounter viscerally depicts the narrator's profound alienation and disconnection. This silence transcends mere absence of sound, embodying the emotional void experienced in a world that fails to validate his existence. The narrator's metaphor of being "a beautiful wound people dance inside of" and his reflection on writerly predisposition can be interpreted as a transformation of affective states. His emotional expressiveness and capacity for embodied relation enable a shift from individual pain to communal joy, symbolized by dancing. Similarly, Johnny reflects on trauma's transformative potential: "And that's sometimes the strangest thing about pain, that sites of trauma, when dressed after the gash, can become sites of pleasure" (Whitehead 2018, 168).

Both novels explore a common theme: the metamorphosis of pain into catalysts for transformation and intimacy. Despite their differing expressions - Belcourt's abstract metaphor versus Whitehead's more corporeal reference - both authors convey how vulnerability and trauma can be reimagined as spaces of engagement and pleasure. This reconfiguration occurs through relational connections with others, fostering healing and resurgence. Thus, these narratives illustrate how sites of suffering can evolve into loci of profound personal and communal transformation.

6.2.2 Voice-Giving as Personal and Communal Healing

In *A Minor Chorus*, voice-giving emerges as a vital act of personal and communal healing, offering a counterpoint to the systemic silencing explored earlier. Drawing on Dian Million's concept of felt theory, we can understand how the act of telling stories and expressing emotions becomes a way for the narrator and those around him to reclaim agency, confront trauma, and foster resilience within marginalized communities. This process can be seen as an active sense of presence and continuance of Indigenous peoples through storytelling.

Belcourt's narrative shows that voice-giving is not simply about speaking out but about creating spaces where marginalized individuals can express themselves without fear of reprisal or judgment. It is through these acts of collective storytelling and self-expression that personal and communal healing

occurs, as individuals reclaim their stories and share them with others in ways that validate their experiences and emotions.

A passage that establishes writing as a valuable form of voice giving is when the narrators friend, River, talks about his writing workshop for queer youth:

"Fieldwork's been magical, River said. The other day I did a writing workshop using Audre Lorde's poems on silence and her calls to build alternative models of social action that uplift the oppressed. The youth really got it, wrote these heartbreaking poems about what they wished they could say if they could figure out how to not be afraid. At the end of the session, I told them they did figure it out, that they weren't as afraid as they thought they were. I cried. That kind of misknowing is everywhere, River said. My research, my work, I suppose, aims to combat that. I think my problem is that I don't know what social good my research has, I said. I spend all this time alone in my apartment writing about the grief of being queer and Cree in a settler state while that grief compounds." (8)

This passage illustrates the power of voice-giving through poetry, particularly for young people who have been silenced by systemic forces. River's workshop, which draws on Audre Lorde's work on silence and oppression¹⁹, becomes a space for the youth to articulate the things they have been afraid to say. By engaging with poetry, the youth confront their fears and find their voices, demonstrating what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls "grounded normativity" - the lived enactment of Indigenous philosophies that challenge colonial impositions.

The transformative power of voice-giving is viscerally embodied in the workshop's conclusion. When River tells the youth they "weren't as afraid as they thought they were," it marks a palpable shift in the affective atmosphere. The youth's act of expressing themselves through poetry becomes a corporeal experience of fear transmuting into courage, demonstrating how voice-giving can physically and emotionally reconfigure one's relationship to trauma and silence.

For the narrator, witnessing this scene triggers a somatic response of his own, heightening his awareness of his isolation and distance from more aligned forms of knowledge production. The physical contrast between River's engaged, community-oriented body of work and the narrator's solitary, desk-bound thesis writing underscores the embodied nature of their different approaches to academic work. This juxtaposition highlights how the act of expression is inherently relational and embodied. It suggests

¹⁹ See further: (Lorde 1984)

that true healing and resistance against colonial structures require not just individual articulation, but the creation of spaces where bodies can collectively experience and transform affect.

This concept aligns with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's vision of Indigenous resurgence, as she states: "I wanted to be part of a community, a real-world community of Indigenous peoples actively creating the alternative. This Nishnaabeg future, though, at this point in time, exists in our minds, bodies, and practices." Simpson's words resonate with the narrator's struggle, emphasizing the importance of communal, embodied practices in Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural revitalization. The narrator's isolation thus becomes a physical manifestation of the colonial fragmentation of Indigenous communities, while River's workshop represents an embodied practice of decolonial resistance and communal healing. (L. B. Simpson 2017, 67)

6.3 Embodiment and the physicality of voice

While the previous section explored the tension between silence and voice-giving, we now turn our attention to how these dynamics manifest physically in the characters' experiences. The contrast between academic isolation and community connection is not merely conceptual but deeply embodied, affecting how the narrator and others physically inhabit and interact with their environments. This section examines how the novel portrays the somatic realities of academic work versus community engagement, highlighting the ways in which colonial structures and decolonial resistance are inscribed on and expressed through the body.

By analyzing these embodied experiences, we gain deeper insight into how queer Indigenous identities are shaped by physical spaces and collective practices, further illuminating the novel's exploration of resistance and resilience through corporeal means.

6.3.1 Embodied Experiences of Isolation in Academia vs. Connection in Community

The narrator's experiences in academia, as thoroughly discussed earlier in the thesis, provide a stark contrast to the communal and relational identities found within Indigenous knowledge systems. The following passage briefly revisits these feelings:

"The thought of remaining a student with funding that is barely livable and a life that seems like a worse version of Barthes's 'solitude with regular interruptions'—because the regular interruptions have been racism and bureaucratic violence—is unbearable." (17)

His reference to Barthes's notion of solitude underscores the profound loneliness he feels, where the "regular interruptions" in his life are not moments of connection but instances of violence and marginalization. The narrator's body becomes a site of tension, constantly navigating the oppressive structures of academia while grappling with the emotional toll of racism and systemic neglect. In his current environment the affects that stick to ne narrators body are contingent on his surroundings and shaped by them.

In contrast, the narrator's encounters with Indigenous pedagogies offer moments of embodied connection, that ultimately spur his decision to leave academia:

"The point was to make use of a writing practice that was in concert with the earth, that wasn't about the singular 'I' we'd been elsewhere instructed to pledge allegiance to the way one does a nation. She was teaching us to be citizens of the air and water and sunlight. Afterwards, I felt that I inhabited my body differently and that this was the kind of pedagogy and intellectual culture I ached for, but later I was once more engulfed by sadness at the realization I hadn't encountered it until that moment." (18)

This passage illustrates what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson terms grounded normativity, where Indigenous ways of being are intimately tied to the land and relational networks (cf. L. B. Simpson 2017, 22). The narrator's experience of inhabiting his body "differently" during this class demonstrates how Indigenous pedagogies can foster a sense of embodied connection that is largely absent from Western academic spaces. However, the narrator's subsequent sadness highlights the disconnection he feels from these Indigenous ways of knowing, which are largely absent from his academic environment. The contrast between these experiences highlights the tension between Western individualism and Indigenous relational identities. While academia enforces a disconnected, singular "I," Indigenous knowledge systems emphasize interconnectedness. This dichotomy is not just intellectual but deeply physical, affecting how the narrator inhabits and experiences his own body. As Daniel Heath Justice articulates, "whatever our particular gifts or challenges, we're born into a web of relationships, responsibilities, and complex legacies that precede us and will continue long after we're gone." (Justice 2018, 33). This perspective underscores how Indigenous worldviews see individuals as part of a larger, interconnected whole that includes not only human relationships but also connections to the natural world. Justice further emphasizes the importance of oral storytelling in Indigenous communities, noting that "Reading can be a very isolated and isolating experience; sharing stories orally is done in the

context of living, dynamic peoplehood— one reason why it's so significant to Indigenous communities, where so much knowledge is transmitted between living people, not mediated by objects like books." (ibid., 25) This highlights how the relational nature of Indigenous knowledge systems extends to the very methods of knowledge transmission, contrasting sharply with the often solitary nature of academic study, which largely entails reading. The narrator's experience of inhabiting his body "differently" during the Indigenous-centered class demonstrates how these relational knowledge systems can foster a sense of embodied connection that is largely absent from Western academic spaces.

Compared to *Johnny Appleseed*, where the protagonist's bodily experiences are often more explicitly sexual or visceral, *A Minor Chorus* presents a more nuanced exploration of how academic and cultural spaces shape bodily experiences. Both novels, however, demonstrate the importance of embodied knowledge in forming and expressing queer Indigenous identities.

This analysis contributes to our understanding of how colonial structures in academia can create physical and emotional disconnection for Indigenous students, while Indigenous knowledge systems offer the potential for embodied reconnection. It addresses our research question on how queer Indigenous authors use narrative to challenge dominant discourses, showing how Belcourt's novel critiques Western academic structures through the lens of embodied experience.

6.3.2 The Body as a Carrier of Personal and Collective Stories

Building on the contrast between academic isolation and community connection, this section explores how the body itself becomes a vessel for both personal and collective narratives in *A Minor Chorus*. The relational nature of identity within Indigenous epistemologies is embodied in the narrator's physical experiences, demonstrating how individual bodies carry not only personal histories but also the collective memory and trauma of Indigenous communities. Thus, this exploration will contribute to our understanding of how embodiment contributes to the formation and expression of queer Indigenous identities.

In the following passage, the narrator reflects on his writing process and elaborates, how his body becomes intertwined with the process:

"I was near the end of my third year in the program and had produced only about ninety double-spaced pages of misshapen paragraphs and fragments that included sentences like 'the body riots and I'm inside it, bearing witness, interpreting, translating, emoting.'" (13)

This metaphor of the body "rioting" encapsulates the physical and emotional turmoil the narrator experiences as he grapples with academic expectations and his personal identity. The body becomes a site of interpretation and translation, where the narrator "bears witness" to both personal and collective stories. This notion of the body as a translator of affect aligns with Indigenous understandings of the body as a carrier of memory, cultural experience, and historical trauma, as discussed by scholars like Dian Million. In this sense, the body becomes a relational entity, connected to larger networks of community and history, rather than merely an individual vessel.

The relational aspect of embodied experience is further illustrated when the narrator physically reacts to stories of colonial violence:

"But, of course, Jack was. He was the fourth or fifth. I was familiar with this genre of story, in the way that all Indigenous people were familiar with it, but my body reacted as if I were hearing it for the first time. The hairs on my arms rose, as if to say 'enough.' To whom or what does the body plead?" (45)

Despite the narrator's intellectual familiarity with stories of oppression, his body responds viscerally, as though encountering the trauma anew. The rising of the hairs on his arms reflects the embodied knowledge of intergenerational trauma, highlighting how colonial violence is not only remembered cognitively but also felt physically, with affects physically adhering to bodies and being transmitted across generations and communities. The narrator's question—"To whom or what does the body plead?"—emphasizes the body's role as a site of both resistance and vulnerability, where affective responses to trauma are carried forward through generations.

While the narrator's body carries the weight of collective trauma, it also serves as a site of agency and self-affirmation, particularly in intimate context where the narrator not only asserts his presence as an indigenous person, but also as a queer person. This act of reclamation then opposes the multi-level marginalization that the narrator, as a queer indigenous person faces. The shift from involuntary bodily responses to intentional physical acts highlights the narrator's journey towards embracing his multifaceted identity as both queer and Indigenous. In these intimate moments, the body becomes not just a bearer of trauma, but a vehicle for expressing desire, agency, and cultural continuity. Poignantly,

the context of following passage happens during an intimate moment between the narrator and a white man called, Graham:

"Once we made a rhythm we settled into, I couldn't help but hum; either Graham didn't notice or didn't care, because it went unremarked upon, but I wanted his memories of me to be sonic as much as they would be fleshy; it was how I said: I'm a person, I have agency." (75)

This moment encapsulates the complex interplay of queer desire, Indigenous identity, and embodied resistance. The narrator's humming becomes a multifaceted act of self-expression and defiance against erasure. By creating a "sonic" presence alongside the "fleshy" one, the narrator asserts his queer Indigenous identity in a way that transcends the visual and tactile, challenging colonial and heteronormative expectations of how bodies should occupy space and express desire.

This scene again echoes the concept of sovereign erotics, where queer Indigenous bodies become sites of resistance and cultural reclamation. The narrator's desire for Graham to remember him both sonically and physically speaks to a yearning for recognition that encompasses his full, complex identity. It's a rejection of the fragmenting gaze often imposed on queer Indigenous bodies, which are frequently fetishized or erased in mainstream discourses.

The act of humming during an intimate moment can be read as a reclamation of Indigenous practices of vocalization, often suppressed or pathologized in colonial contexts. By integrating this form of expression into a queer encounter, the narrator bridges his cultural heritage with his sexual identity. In this regard, while the text doesn't specify the nature of the narrator's humming, one might wonder if this instinctive vocalization could carry echoes of Indigenous song traditions. If so, it would add another dimension to the scene's exploration of embodied identity, suggesting that the narrator's cultural heritage is expressed even in intimate moments not explicitly focused on his Indigeneity. However, this interpretation, while intriguing, remains speculative.

The phrase "I'm a person, I have agency" is particularly powerful in this context. It asserts the narrator's humanity and autonomy in the face of systems that often deny both to queer Indigenous individuals. Comparing this scene to *Johnny Appleseed* reveals complementary approaches to expressing queer Indigenous identity. While Johnny's experiences are often more explicitly sexual, Belcourt's narrator finds agency in subtler, yet equally profound, physical acts. Both novels emphasize the body's capacity to carry and communicate personal and collective narratives of queerness and Indigeneity.

Ultimately, this passage illustrates how *A Minor Chorus* portrays the body as a site where queer desire, Indigenous identity, and resistance intersect. By emphasizing the narrator's embodied expression of agency, Belcourt contributes to a deeper understanding of how queer Indigenous identities are formed, expressed, and affirmed through physical and sensory experiences, challenging both colonial and heteronormative narratives.

6.3.3 Conclusion: Embodiment and the Relational Nature of Voice

In *A Minor Chorus*, the physicality of voice and silence is inextricably linked to the narrator's experiences of isolation, marginalization, and connection. The body emerges as a site of tension between oppression and expression, shaped by the intersecting forces of colonialism, academia, and systemic racism. As the narrator navigates these complex dynamics, his body becomes a repository for both personal and collective narratives, reflecting the relational and communal dimensions of Indigenous identity.

The novel's portrayal of embodiment aligns with Indigenous epistemologies that understand the body as part of a larger network of relations, interconnected with land, community, and history as articulated by scholars like Justice or Archibald. For the narrator, reclaiming his voice and reconnecting with his body transcends individual healing, becoming a communal process that mirrors the broader struggle of Indigenous communities to assert their presence in the face of colonial erasure. This is particularly evident in the intimate scene where the narrator's humming becomes an act of embodied resistance, asserting his queer Indigenous identity through sonic and physical means.

As the narrator transitions from isolation to connection, his journey embodies the ongoing process of decolonization. Voice, identity, and body become deeply intertwined in the struggle for survival, resilience, and resurgence. This embodied reclamation of identity and voice serves as a powerful form of resistance against colonial narratives and structures, challenging both heteronormative and colonial expectations of how queer Indigenous bodies should exist and express themselves.

As we move into the next chapter on cultural resurgence through collective narratives, we will explore how these embodied experiences of voice and identity contribute to broader movements of Indigenous cultural revitalization and resistance. The personal acts of reclamation and resistance examined in this

chapter set the stage for understanding how individual stories coalesce into collective narratives of resilience and resurgence.

6.4. Weaving the Web of Relationships: Indigenous Resurgence Through Living Stories

Building on our examination of embodied experiences and the physicality of voice in *A Minor Chorus*, we now turn to explore how these individual expressions coalesce into broader movements of cultural resurgence through collective narratives. This chapter investigates how Belcourt's novel portrays the power of shared stories in fostering Indigenous resilience, resistance, and cultural revitalization.

By analyzing the novel's representation of collective storytelling, we address our research questions on how queer Indigenous authors challenge dominant narratives and contribute to cultural resurgence. We will explore how Belcourt's narrative techniques, including the use of multiple voices and perspectives, reflect Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing.

6.4.1 Storytelling as Resistance and Resilience

In contrast to the motif of silence explored earlier, storytelling emerges as a powerful form of resistance and resilience. It offers Indigenous communities a means to confront and challenge the legacies of colonial oppression while reclaiming their voices. This act of voice-giving serves as a direct response to the systemic silencing previously discussed.

Where the narrator once grappled with the limitations of academic discourse and the erasure of marginalized experiences, he now engages in creating spaces for collective expression. This shift from silence to voice-giving mirrors the transition from individual struggle to communal resilience, echoing themes of transformation explored in *Johnny Appleseed*.

The narrator's reflection on Indigenous history provides a poignant context for understanding storytelling as resistance:

"At the close of one century and the start of another, those from whom I descend signed a treaty near the shores of the lake around which many reserves are now located, including my own. They signed in the spirit of communality and peace and in the name of future generations, though what followed was an era defined by a systematic assault on Indigenous livability: death schools,

open-air prisons, child abductions. Many sick experiments were carried out by the federal government and its henchmen from which we're still recovering, though recovery isn't always an option. All the while people resisted, loudly and quietly, but always creatively." (34)

This passage reflects the deep historical trauma inflicted upon Indigenous communities by colonial powers, particularly in the form of treaties that were supposed to represent peace and cooperation but ultimately led to oppression and violence. The phrase "systematic assault on Indigenous livability" encapsulates the many forms of colonial violence, from residential schools to child abductions, that have shaped the lived experiences of Indigenous people in Canada. The narrator's acknowledgment that "recovery isn't always an option" highlights the enduring impact of these historical traumas, which continue to affect Indigenous communities today.

However, even in the face of such overwhelming violence, the passage emphasizes the creative and persistent resistance of Indigenous people. The reference to people resisting "loudly and quietly, but always creatively" underscores the diversity of resistance strategies employed by Indigenous communities, from overt acts of protest to more subtle forms of defiance. Storytelling emerges as a powerful form of creative resistance, providing a way for Indigenous people to preserve their histories, challenge colonial narratives, and maintain their cultural identities.

As Daniel Heath Justice eloquently states, "Our lives are incarnations of the stories we tell, the stories told about us, and the stories we inherit. They are both the process and the consequence of the transformations into the fullness of our humanity." (Justice 2018, 34) This quote underscores the profound significance of storytelling in Indigenous cultures, where narratives are not merely accounts of past events, but living, dynamic forces that shape identity and relationships. Through storytelling, Indigenous communities actively resist erasure, transforming historical trauma into a source of resilience and cultural continuity. These stories become vehicles for preserving traditional knowledge, asserting Indigenous presence, and imagining decolonial futures, demonstrating the enduring power of narrative in the face of colonial oppression.

The narrator establishes this sense of written storytelling as a form of collective protest in the following passage:

"What if I wrote something that sounded like dozens of people in protest?... I could write in a way that didn't hold the country as an anthropological given." (19)

This passage reflects the narrator's desire to use his writing as a form of protest against the colonial structures that have historically objectified and marginalized Indigenous peoples. This reflects what Linda Tuhiwai Smith call for the integration of Indigenous methodologies in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, sustaining decolonial efforts to equip Indigenous peoples to reclaim their right to tell their own stories as valid academic practices.

By imagining his writing as the voice of "dozens of people in protest," the narrator envisions storytelling as a collective act of resistance, one that gives voice to the silenced and challenges the systemic forces that have shaped Indigenous life, and establishes lived realities as valid forms of knowledge expression deserving of recognition (cf. Million 2009).

This underscores what Audra Simpson describes as 'ethnographic refusal' where Indigenous people resist being objects of study and assert their right to opacity²⁰. Storytelling, in this context, becomes a practice of Indigenous solidarity and knowledge production.

Moreover, storytelling in *A Minor Chorus* serves not only as resistance but also as a source of resilience, allowing Indigenous individuals and communities to endure colonial trauma while maintaining cultural identity and connections. The narrator's reflections on storytelling's role in Indigenous life underscore its importance in fostering cultural resilience:

"What seems to be resonant with everyone I interview is the belief that we have to tell our stories, that storytelling will redeem us somehow, make us less lonely." (144)

This passage highlights storytelling's power to create connection and community, combating the isolation often accompanying marginalization. The belief that "storytelling will redeem us somehow" suggests its potential for healing, both individually and collectively. According to Archibald, stories are not just entertainment but powerful vehicles for transmitting knowledge, values, and cultural resilience (cf. Archibald 2008). For Indigenous communities, they are way to process trauma, maintain cultural continuity, and resist erasure of their histories and identities. Through storytelling, Indigenous

²⁰ Audra Simpson's concept of ethnographic refusal is introduced in her book titled *"Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States"* (2014). In this work, Simpson critiques the conventional ethnographic practice that tends to extract knowledge from Indigenous communities in ways that reinforce colonial power dynamics. Ethnographic refusal is the strategic withholding of certain forms of knowledge or narratives by Indigenous peoples as a form of resistance against the settler-colonial gaze and the commodification of their experiences.

people reclaim agency, assert their right to exist, and build resilience in the face of ongoing colonial violence.

The belief that "storytelling will redeem us somehow" further suggests that storytelling has the power to heal, both individually and collectively. The idea that storytelling can combat isolation and create community connections echoes Sara Ahmed's work on affect theory. Ahmed's concept of affective economies, as discussed earlier, thereby helps us understand how emotions circulate through stories, creating bonds and shared experiences that resist colonial fragmentation of Indigenous communities. By interweaving these passages, we see how Belcourt's novel portrays storytelling as both a collective act of protest and a means of communal healing and resilience. This dual function of storytelling addresses our research questions about the power of narrative in shaping queer Indigenous identities and resisting colonial structures, while also demonstrating how Indigenous authors challenge dominant narratives through their writing.

6.5 Affective Dimensions of Reconnecting with Community

While storytelling serves as a powerful tool for resistance and resilience, its impact is deeply rooted in the affective experiences of individuals and communities. In *A Minor Chorus*, the narrator's journey of reconnection with his community is marked by intense emotional engagement, highlighting the crucial role of affect in cultural resurgence. This section explores how the affective dimensions of community relationships—ranging from joy and love to grief and historical trauma—shape the narrator's understanding of identity, resilience, and the resurgence of Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

As the narrator moves to actively engaging with his community for his storytelling project, we see how affect becomes a central force in personal and communal healing. These experiences transform the narrator's sense of self as he reengages with Indigenous life, demonstrating the inseparable nature of storytelling, affect, and cultural resurgence. Through his reconnection with his people, land, and traditions, the narrator reflects on the emotional and physical relationships that underlie cultural revitalization, offering insight into how affective bonds necessitate the broader project of Indigenous resurgence through collective stories.

6.5.1 Reconnecting with a Sense of Belonging

The narrator's reflection on his ancestors signing a treaty and the subsequent systemic assaults on Indigenous life, analysed in the previous section, provided a poignant context for understanding the affective dimensions of historical trauma and resilience and the creative ways of how this is resisted. In the following passage, the narrator reflects on the possibility of other ways of documenting reality:

This was one way to tell a story about northern Alberta. There was another way, one that was embodied and consequential for the living, one that zoomed in on emotion and intimacy. It was this more corporeal mode of storytelling that enticed me." (34)

The narrator's attraction to an "embodied" and "corporeal mode of storytelling" emphasizes the importance of emotion and intimacy in recounting communal histories. This emphasis on emotional storytelling puts emphasis on the affective dimension of reconnecting with one's community, where personal and communal histories are not only recounted but also felt and lived through. The act of narrating these histories thus becomes an affective process, allowing the narrator to reclaim a sense of belonging that is deeply emotional and embodied.

The following passage further emphasizes the narrator's desire to reconnect emotionally with others:

"I write because I've read and been moved into a position of wonder. I write because I've loved and been loved. I want to find out what 'we' or 'us' I can walk into or build a roof over. To hold hands with others, really. To be less alone." (19)

Here, the narrator articulates the affective motivations behind his writing: a need to love, be loved, and belong. His yearning for a collective "we" or "us" reveals a desire to reconnect with community in a way that transcends academic isolation. These affective bonds serve as both a response to personal loneliness and an attempt to rebuild relational identity. For the narrator, storytelling and writing become pathways toward reestablishing these connections, transforming the act of writing into a form of communal healing. Moreover, it is the affective element of love that even enables him to write impactfully, as his previous identity crisis caused by the perceived insignificance and inconsequentiality of his academic work attests to.

This articulation of the narrator's motivations reveals a profound sense of loneliness and alienation, particularly within the academic world - a predominantly white, urban space. This experience of isolation strongly parallels Johnny's feelings in *Johnny Appleseed*, despite the novels' different focuses. While Belcourt's novel emphasizes the intellectual and academic realm, and Whitehead's work

concentrates more on Johnny's everyday life and survival as a queer Indigenous person, both protagonists grapple with similar feelings of disconnection in urban, settler-dominated spaces.

Crucially, both characters ultimately find solace and connection within their Indigenous communities. For Belcourt's narrator, writing becomes a pathway to reestablish these connections, transforming the act into a form of communal healing. Similarly, Johnny finds comfort and identity affirmation through his relationships and cultural practices within his community. In both novels, stories play a vital role in this process of reconnection and healing.

The narrator's yearning for a collective "we" or "us" mirrors Johnny's search for belonging, even if expressed differently. Both characters seek to rebuild a relational identity that has been fragmented by colonial structures and urban alienation. Through storytelling - whether in the form of academic writing, personal narratives, or community engagement - both protagonists work to bridge the gap between their individual experiences and their broader cultural heritage.

This shared journey from isolation to community connection underscores a central theme in both novels: the power of Indigenous storytelling and community bonds in resisting colonial alienation and reclaiming identity. Despite their different narrative approaches, both "A Minor Chorus" and "Johnny Appleseed" ultimately affirm the healing potential of reconnecting with Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

The narrator's personal journey of reconnection and belonging also extends to reconnecting with broader traditions and practices. After not having been to the annual powwow on his reservation, the following passage illustrates his growing appreciation for his community practices and their affective dimensions:

"I couldn't help but watch Lena, how affected she was by her daughter's gentle movements, by this scene of cultural expression. A whole history of freedom was unfolding before me. It was so magnificent I hoped I'd see it again and again." (147)

Here, the narrator witnesses the affective power of cultural practices in real time, recognizing how emotional and embodied expressions of tradition carry historical significance, further exemplifying that emotional and physical experiences are inextricably linked in the process of cultural resurgence and healing, as advocated for by Million. Lena's emotional reaction to her daughter's movements highlights how traditions like the jingle dress dance here connects individuals across generations. As a result, the

narrator himself is deeply moved and affected by this expression, connecting back to Ahme'd concept of sticky emotions in emotional economies The narrator's desire to witness this scene repeatedly reflects his growing recognition of the importance of such practices in maintaining collective identity and ensuring cultural survival.

The description of "a whole history of freedom" unfolding emphasizes how Indigenous traditions act as carriers of both memory and identity, Indigenous survivance - the active presence, continuance and rebuilding of Indigenous peoples as a posttraumatic society.

This scene offers an interesting parallel to Johnny's experiences in *Johnny Appleseed*. While the narrator in *A Minor Chorus* observes, i.e witnesses and appreciates traditional practices, Johnny and his friends create their own cultural expressions ("As we grew drunker, we slapped on A Tribe Called Red and had our own stadium pow wow. None of us knew the words but we sang along anyways, (123)).

Both passages illustrate how cultural practices, whether traditional or reimagined, serve as powerful tools for connection and identity formation. While the narrator finds meaning in observing established traditions, Johnny and his friends adapt and recreate cultural expressions in a contemporary context. Both approaches demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous cultures, highlighting how traditions can be both preserved and reinvented to maintain relevance and foster belonging in the face of ongoing colonial pressures.

6.6 Conclusion: Reclaiming the Collective "We"

As we conclude our analysis of *A Minor Chorus*, we return to a central theme that encapsulates the novel's core: the reclamation of a collective Indigenous identity in the face of colonial individualism. This theme not only summarizes the narrator's journey but also reflects the novel's structure and purpose.

The narrator's reflection on storytelling reveals a profound critique of Western academic structures and their emphasis on the isolated "I":

"To evoke an 'I' was an elegiac act; it was to kick-start a losing game. Perhaps there's a kind of freedom in this, to be rid of the demands of personality and subjectivity and give over to a grammar of intimacy that's plural, undeniably worldly, against loneliness." (42)

In this passage, the narrator critiques the Western academic notion of the isolated, individual self as the foundation of knowledge. He argues that focusing on the "I" is inherently limiting, an act of loss, because it disconnects individuals from the broader web of relationships that sustain Indigenous epistemologies. As we have established, in Indigenous contexts, knowledge is often communal, relational, and deeply rooted in affective connections with others and the land.

This shift from individual to collective narrative echoes themes in *Johnny Appleseed*. Although Johnny's journey is more personally focused, both novels ultimately emphasize the importance of community in shaping and affirming queer Indigenous identities. Johnny finds belonging through personal relationships and cultural practices, while Belcourt's narrator seeks it through a broader, more intellectualized engagement with communal storytelling.

The "grammar of intimacy" described here rejects the solitary mode of academic knowledge production and instead embraces a collective, relational mode of being that resists loneliness and isolation. Both novels demonstrate how this intimate, affective knowledge serves as a form of resistance against colonial structures that prioritize detached, individualistic modes of understanding.

The idea of a collective "we", present in both novels, also acts as a form of epistemic disobedience, rejecting the colonial frameworks that seek to fragment Indigenous identities and cultures. In reconnecting with his community and their stories, the narrator engages in an act of cultural resurgence, where the collective stories of his people become a powerful tool for resisting the erasure of Indigenous histories and experiences. By embracing the plural over the singular, the narrator challenges the colonial structures that impose individualism as a mode of knowledge production, advocating for a more inclusive and relational understanding of identity and history.

Furthermore, Belcourt's approach to storytelling itself becomes an act of epistemic disobedience. By structuring the novel as a collection of voices and stories, rather than a linear, individual narrative, Belcourt challenges Western literary norms and reflects Indigenous storytelling traditions.

In conclusion, "A Minor Chorus" offers a powerful exploration of how reclaiming collective identity through storytelling can serve as a form of cultural resurgence. By rejecting colonial notions of individualism and embracing a relational, communal approach to knowledge and identity, the novel not only tells a story but enacts a form of decolonial resistance. This aligns with the broader themes we've

explored in both novels, demonstrating how queer Indigenous literature serves as a vital tool for challenging dominant narratives and asserting the ongoing presence and importance of Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

7. Final Reflections: Reframing Indigenous Presence Through Queer Narratives

This thesis has explored the complex interplay of queer Indigenous identity, affect and embodiment, and storytelling in Joshua Whitehead's *Johnny Appleseed* and Billy-Ray Belcourt's *A Minor Chorus*. Through a decolonial lens informed by affect theory, felt theory, and Indigenous epistemologies, we have examined how these novels challenge dominant narratives and contribute to the ongoing project of Indigenous resurgence.

Our analysis has revealed several key findings:

1. Both novels demonstrate the power of storytelling as a means of resistance and cultural preservation. Whitehead and Belcourt employ narrative techniques that reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, challenging Western literary conventions and academic discourse.
2. The protagonists' journeys in both novels highlight the importance of affective embodied experiences in shaping queer Indigenous identities. From Johnny's visceral encounters to the narrator's reflections on corporeality, the body emerges as a site of both trauma and resilience.
3. Affect and emotion play crucial roles in these narratives, serving as conduits for cultural memory and as tools for healing and resistance. The concept of felt theory is particularly evident in how characters process historical trauma and contemporary challenges.
4. Both novels grapple with the tension between individual and collective identities, ultimately emphasizing the relational nature of Indigenous selfhood. This is reflected in the narrative structures, which weave together personal stories with broader community experiences.

These findings contribute to our understanding of how contemporary queer Indigenous literature serves as a vital tool for cultural resurgence and decolonial resistance. By centering Indigenous voices and ways of knowing, Whitehead and Belcourt's works challenge the colonial gaze and assert the ongoing presence and vitality of Indigenous peoples.

Moreover, this research highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in analyzing Indigenous literatures. By integrating perspectives from queer theory, affect studies, and decolonial

thought, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex realities navigated by queer Indigenous individuals.

The relational aspect of identity in queer Indigenous literature is powerfully captured in *A Minor Chorus* when the narrator reflects, "I was reminded that not even my puny life with its puny preoccupations and miseries was mine alone to shoulder" (38). This acknowledgment of shared experience speaks to the power of relational identity, where personal narratives become part of a larger, collective story. Both Belcourt and Whitehead resist the notion that identity is isolated or individual; instead, they emphasize the interconnectedness of personal and communal histories, creating a space where Indigenous voices, bodies, and stories are recognized as part of a continuous and evolving tradition.

Future research could further explore the role of language and translation in queer Indigenous literature, examining how authors navigate the complexities of writing in colonial languages while preserving Indigenous concepts and worldviews. Additionally, comparative studies with queer Indigenous literatures from other global contexts, such as German Jewish narratives, could provide valuable insights into shared struggles and diverse strategies of resilience.

In conclusion, *Johnny Appleseed* and *A Minor Chorus* stand as powerful testaments to the resilience and creativity of queer Indigenous voices. Through their innovative narrative strategies and unflinching exploration of identity, trauma, and belonging, these novels not only contribute to the field of Indigenous literature but also play a crucial role in the broader project of decolonization and cultural revitalization.

As the narrator in *A Minor Chorus* asserts, "I have to exist in the world so as to refuse it" (10). This statement, echoed in Johnny's defiance of heteronormative and colonial expectations, encapsulates the central contribution of these novels to queer Indigenous literature. By asserting the presence of queer Indigenous bodies in spaces that have historically denied them visibility, Whitehead and Belcourt offer a holistic, affective, and embodied form of resistance that challenges colonial frameworks and paves the way for new understandings of Indigenous life and experience.

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