



LOUIS ESME CRUZ

Medicine Bundle of Contradictions Female-man, Mi'kmaq/Acadian/ Irish Diasporas, Invisible disAbilities, masculine-Feminist

English is neither of my Mother-tongues, nor is it the language of my Father. Neither is the land upon which I type this out, from Anishinaabekwe/Three Fires Territory. I hope this reaches you in ways useful and compassionate, as words that might assist you (and me) to comprehend the world of complexities we live in. Sometimes life confuses me and I've found that re-writing what I see and experience in life gives me the chance to respond to the indignities of life, creating beauty from chaos. This bundle of words is to “deconstruct the academic industrial complex of feminism” smudging this machine that attempts to re-colonize Indigenous gender roles.

What I experience through this empathic heart and tough flesh, in these sturdy bones wrapped in the tendons of memory, is not always visible in daily life. This body, a bundle of contradictions strung together to carry me between worlds, carrying knowledge, food, passion and stories — all as medicines to tend the complexities of life, with all my relations. My life is a continual cycle of learning/unlearning and loving/unloving. Like many people affected by invasion, I have learned to survive above living. Bringing myself back to life is a process, not a destination. When I'm surviving, it can feel as though simple things

are out of reach, like enjoyment or pleasure. In these moments, I find it difficult to relax and grow from the sweat of my love/work. I write this to you, making something beautiful in this shared space between us, making it is difficult for invasion to take root here. When we recognize each other, it is easier for both of us to relax. We build what Lee Maracle, recognized Sto:lo author, describes as the golden rainbow between us. Maracle says that when we build this arch, we are actively resisting invasion because no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time.

One of the books I look to for guidance in helping me grow golden rainbows between the past and present, to undo how colonization has invaded my thoughts, is Mi'kmaq *Hieroglyphic Prayers*, a wicked book edited by Murdena Marshall and David Schmidt. In it, the authors heal an old relationship between Christian missionary, Chrestien LeClerc and the first identified Indigenous language in North America. Christianity invaded Mi'kmaq life/land and removed us from how we described ourselves, lived in our bodies and related to our home. This was how we knew ourselves. Now we know ourselves as something else because this is the way it is. LeClerc organized Mi'kmaq written language so he could replace our spiritual ways with his Christian ones. In *Morning Prayer*, LeClerc takes the Mi'kmaq word for shaman/mediciner/healer, *puo'in*, translates it and steals it from us. LeClerc pushed love away from the importance of *puo'in* to our families and our bodies, replacing it with hate. Here is where this happens:

iknmul ntelue'wuti'l oqoj aqq msit koqoe'l winjikl tpuk pewayapn
mntue'l puo'winue'l aqq msit koqoe'l winjikl masklteman ntinin.

Let me hate all my sins and all the wicked things I dreamt of this morning, the things of the devil, of the shaman, and all evilness that is in my body.

This line has me asking: What are my sins — sleeping orgasms? What is wicked about all the things I dreamt of this morning — my friend's sexy dance moves? How is the devil the same thing as the shaman — because s/he has medicines that help me sleep and be awake through the trauma of invasion? What is evil in my body — how it feels when I watch my friend's

sexy dance moves while taking medicines from the shaman? An even bigger question, perhaps the most important one is: What does God have to do with hating myself, my dreams, my medicine and my body?

This line feels gross in my flesh and bones. It is the thick sludge of self-hate. While I understand that nothing in the universe is without “positive” and “negative” forces, things are way off balance when humans are telling each other that *Kisulk* (Creator) wants us to hate who we are. What LeClerc did not anticipate is that while there would be many generations where gender relations would be imbalanced in our families, clans and nations — we have pulled through. We look different now, from our wide range of skin tones to the style of clothes we wear. We still know where we’re from and who our families are. The balance comes in the form of acknowledging and accepting that things are different now, that this is okay and we can find words to describe ourselves in new and old ways. Two-Spirit people will always be Two-Spirit people. It is who we are. What the arrogance of invasion could not have known is the strength within us that is more complex than hate, gifted to us by *Kisulk*, which would see us through to the other side of violence. Whether LeClerc intended to be an invasive person I do not know, and it is not important anyway. It is important that we gently undo the effects of violence and follow through with this undoing.

Maliseet artist and herbalist, Shirley Bear, points out the actions/minds of the invaders in her poem, *History Resource Material*:

Arrogant men in long black robes,
baptizing and renaming...
You should be
Saved. You will be renamed!

Bear is telling us where to look for examples of this violence and gives us the opportunity to heal the parts of ourselves affected by this misnaming. She also mocks Catholicism’s own “teachings” of not-taking-the-lord’s-name-in-vain when she pleads, “For God’s sake,” in the poem’s last line. Arrogance and renaming are creepy colonial friends, keeping power among male-men.

This is important for me to share with you when we are talking about unhinging the vice grip of feminism from Two-Spirit people's lives. I've noticed in many ways how white feminists think it's doing a good thing in spreading reproductive rights to

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“other” cultures that have also experienced European invasion, and like Native people of Turtle Island, are also dealing with the consequences. One of the ways I have experienced feminism re-settling (or re-invading) Turtle Island is

through “women-only” spaces. They claim that being a woman means being born female and that all who live as women and female are capital “F” feminists needing space without males and men.

“Women-only” spaces say that only people who experience misogyny and sexism are people born female and that this means being a woman. This is a gender binary that says that there are only two genders (man and woman), two sexes (male and female) and that they exist as opposites to each other. Women who were born biologically male are sometimes included in these spaces, though from what I've seen so far this doesn't happen very often; and Trans-women are asserting their dignity to be seen and treated as the women they are. I have also been invited into these spaces as a female-man before I medically transitioned and even now — if I disclose that I was born female and still have my ovaries and uterus. I need to say that I don't think there is anything offensive about people needing space to identify similar experiences, grow languages and relationships, and to celebrate life. I am greatly uncomfortable with how I have seen settler feminists claim space and each others' bodies: it seems a lot like how land is manhandled as a resource that only some get to benefit from.

It is a loving commitment to live in a way that does not oppress other people. All of the values we have inherited, whether from our parents or the Canadian over-culture, need to be looked at honestly. Once we look at these values we can decide which ones we are going to feed and which ones we will starve.

“Safety” is a value worth looking at. Being a “safe place” implies that harm will not happen while people are sharing that space. Popular sexual health education talks about how we can never be entirely safe from sexually transmitted infections while having sex, though we can reduce harm by using condoms, lube, communicating our limits, etc. If people cannot keep themselves “safe” during sex, it is usually because they — usually the person being penetrated or receiving — are in a position where someone else has the power. Therefore, safe sex is limited to the amount of choice the person being penetrated has over their surroundings. It is never appropriate to blame someone for not using a condom if they are the receptive sexual partner.

Similarly, Two-Spirit people are not allowed to participate in societies as our full selves and then we are shamed and blamed for the ways we are hurt by this. When people say that a space is “women-only” they are assuming that women are always sensitive to each others’ needs, are always able to understand each others’ experiences, these experiences are always the same and women are not violent. Explicitly, this says that all women are safe; all men are unsafe. The inclusion of Two-Spirit people in women-only space is arbitrary, shifting with who has the power to define this space. This person in power is rarely Native. From what I have seen, women who parade feminist ideals are the ones who decide who experiences gender oppression. Two-Spirit people can talk about our oppression only when it parallels women’s experiences. When our lives get too complicated we are judged, ignored, punished, humiliated. Whether it’s women-only or men-only space, the naming of a space as only one gender encourages invasion and conquest because they don’t allow people to be the complex creatures we are. This pushes Two-Spirit people to the margins simply because we are not one thing or another. We need liberation from the confines of gender baggage, too. This parallels the larger call from Indigenous sovereignty movements asking for our Native Nations to be recognized as distinct, sovereign entities. We are necessarily unique and complex for a reason.

These thoughts of separateness affect the minds of Two-Spirit people in profound ways. I’ve found myself in circumstances where we are policing each other’s genders just like how we ourselves are treated by Christianity and colonial Canada. This

started with Christian missionaries like Chrestian LeClerc and carries on today in how our families act like we are somehow not an essential part of them. As a way to heal this, I'm thinking about how Maracle describes what's between us as a golden rainbow where we can grow understanding. I know it is not as momentarily satisfying as holding a rally at city hall, but taking the time to get to know each other, gently, is one way that we can build that golden rainbow between us. This is trust building.

Two-Spirit people are as diverse as the lands we come from and the languages that describe our unique role/abilities. If you are interested in the origin of this term, I suggest reading Gregory Scofield (Metis Cree) or Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee) as they have done some great work that talks about these issues of language, nation, land and her/histories. A few things Two-Spirit people

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from all Native Nations have in common are that we can embody, literally, masculinity and femininity roles with strength; we can play with our genders, sexes and sexualities to point out how serious all of us can be; we're sexy, hot and fierce; and, unfortunately, we have had our

experiences appropriated, misunderstood, categorized, diagnosed, institutionalized, neglected and hated simple because we exist. The things that bind us are not separate from each other. Of course we have always been fabulous, but we've become ultra-fierce since having to deal with being hated by our families and living in cities with our new families.

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colonial Canada doesn't really fly for many of us, especially if we aren't recognized as the gender(s) we know ourselves to be because society has strict ideas about what makes a man a man, and a woman a woman. Because of this, we create work by our own definition, even though this may not pay all the bills, or falls outside the arbitrary laws of colonial Canada, or reinforces a relationship of dependence on this system, or puts

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extra stress on our lives. Whether our work is illegal or legit, we are often paid less than our settler co-workers or peers, given fewer opportunities for raises and promotions, scrutinized for no reason, expected to educate people who have higher wages than us about an assumed, singular Native way, are not supposed to expect more from life than what we are given, are kept in our place through use of force, criticism or ignorance. Two-Spirit people experience racism, miscegenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, classism, fatphobia, and ableism — just like other people do — but add to that the fact that we are treated as if we are the problem because we can't or don't want to fit in with settler societies, including the feminist academic industrial complex.

Gender is not a culture, it is a role within culture. It can be difficult for us to remember, as Two-Spirit people, that we are sacred and to treat each other with sacredity with our complex lives inside and outside ourselves. I want for us to have the space to be all the beautiful things we are because this simple act of being ourselves defies invasion in two ways: by refusing to be erased as a Indigenous Peoples and refusing erasure as multi-gendered, sexual people. Our ability to be both these things and move between distinct yet connected worlds is our medicine. Whether these roles are human-made or given to us by *Kisulak*, I do not know enough to say, as I only know my own way, though I have a feeling that it is both. I am who I am and this is not just an identity or a set of beliefs. I am, literally, a continuation of my ancestors who resisted invasion in whatever ways they could to get me here.

Sanctuary, rather than safety, gives us places to rest and gather our internal resources to go back out again to a world needing radical transformation, at best. I thoroughly enjoy time with my

Two-Spirit family for these reasons, though I need this space to be open to anyone who needs to be there, regardless of appearance or identity. Undoing invasion in my own life has called me to question how appearance and identity are tricksters, *ki'kwaju* (wolverine), the illusion of safety. *Ki'kwaju* plays with my expectations, desires and assumptions. Always this trick is on me.

Sanctuary asks me to look into the heart/behaviours of people while simultaneously addressing the relationship of her/histories to the present moment. This bundle of complexity is medicine in a world bent on spiritual destruction through material obsession. Invaders go around forcibly renaming things and bundling up our relatives (trees, grasses, rocks, plants, fish, crustaceans, mammals, insects, minerals and more) to sell off for full profit, while keeping us busy arguing over blood quantum, morality, "tradition", band offices and shopping malls. It is easy in this new way of doing things to forget to look after each other and ourselves, to provide sanctuary with our bodies and spirits in the midst of this colonial havoc. We get distracted by *ki'kwaju* who keeps us tangled in cycles of coping with invasion rather than using our humungous creative forces to transform landscapes, inside and out.

Respected and recently passed Mohawk thinker, Patricia Monture, shared in her writing how feminism is an innately Indigenous philosophy, intricately connected to her Mohawkness (my interpretation). My own Mother recently shared with me how her feminist friends chided her for not using birth control when she could have, and instead having six children and being a housewife. She laughs when she tells me this now, as we discuss how she only ever wanted to be a Mother and how she did work from home, using her creative and bartering skills to make ends meet. There is no feminist theory that could make me feel more loved than knowing how my Mother's work cared for our family.

What we also talk about, my Mama and I, is how obnoxious men can be when they do not know who they are or their responsibilities. Over 10 years ago when I told my Mother I wanted to medically transition and live as a man, one of her many responses was simply, "Are you sure? Do you know what men are like?" We laugh about this now, how in my stubbornness I took this to mean that she was unsupportive of my decision. Really, she was

calling out the indignities men have created, expressing her fear of how men use their roles in family and culture without looking at the whole picture.

I haven't ever taken it lightly, these indignities. Being a female-man is simply who I am. Accessing hormones and surgery have helped me in ways to be grounded in shifting sanctuaries, affording me the space to carve out more space for others. Being a Two-Spirit man is my role and holding space for others to come undone, putting themselves back together again in their own ways, is part of my responsibilities. I take it seriously and am learning to laugh at how serious I can be with this. Whenever possible, I redirect the gaze that unquestioningly falls on my masculine-looking, light-skinned self by the dominant culture back to the place it needs residence: Two-Spirit people and women who take responsibility for themselves and all people, all-too-often ignored and disrespected.

Here is some of the knowledge of my body, my experience: My family is from at least three distinct places I know of: Springfield, New Brunswick; Swords, Co. Dublin, Ireland; Southern France. I have dark hair with flecks of gold, red and white; my skin is a pale olive tone though my cheeks flush red easily; my eyes are sparkle hazel. I am built sturdy, thick, furry and tall-ish. Among my blood relatives, I am the "dark one" who is "not fat, just big-boned". My chest is flat through the use of surgical enhancement. Like my Aunt Mona, I have been able to grow a beard since puberty, though as an adult I have decided to use synthetic androgenic hormones to enhance my "secondary-male sex traits" and am thoroughly covered in dark hair. My Mama birthed my female body 32 years ago when she was 32, and has supported me to live my adult life as a man. I can be sharp-tongued and sticky sweet and ambivalent. I do not yet fluently speak or write Mi'kmaq, nor Gaelic, nor Acadian French. I was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition — the religion of a single male prophet who appropriated our heroines and dubbed them saints. My parents encouraged us kids to question the Church but we were still required to attend weekly mass. We went where the work was, if there was any, so my younger sister and I grew up on Coast Salish, Cree and Blackfoot territories while my older siblings remember Mi'kmaq and Haudenosaunee territories as home. I have yet to visit our

homes and families in Springfield, New Brunswick; Swords, Co. Dublin, Ireland; Southern France. I feel most at home by the water and mountains. I was raised on Welfare cheques, food bank lines, debt-management and sex trade. I went to state-funded Catholic public schools in “Alberta”, then state-funded secular public schools in the “Fraser Valley” of “British Columbia”. I ran away from home when I was 18 to work in the youth-driven, non-profit job market, restaurant/food service sectors, the Arts/Academia and barely survived off disability welfare. My body appears able and my mind clear, though I live with chronic pain and brain fog. My scars are, for the most part, invisible. I graduated from Emily Carr University with a BFA, the second in my immediate and extended family on Turtle Island to obtain a degree. It was one of the best things I have ever done for my self-esteem. My Mom is proud to call me her son and this means everything to me. Telling you these things are liberating.

Two pieces of information helped me move away from my family of origin and find sanctuary in an urban, multi-racial community: my older sister returning with gay dance music after her first year at university; the other, my Mom’s friend sharing feminist principles with me about choice and agency. Both these women showed me another way where Two-Spirit people and women love and struggle with each other to make something new. The music of the gay pop band, Erasure, ironically taught me that men have high voices and make beautiful things. My Mom’s feminist friend taught me that though life is difficult, I must never let myself be victimized. Shirley Bear writes, “I think Aboriginal people in this generation are changing the ideas of the world.” I think she is right. Gay music and feminist thought helped me escape from home, but it is Native youth who brought me back with dignity, love and honesty. I am not white and I am not red. I am both. I am not gay and I am not straight. I am both. I am not a woman and I am not a man — you get the idea. I am unique.

I think that because I am able to balance my selves, I can give love to a world coping with the binary effects of invasion and the current reality of new colonialisms. I see how Native women are hurting so badly, tired of the same old things that keep them oppressed. When I take time to grieve our missing and murdered Sisters I just cry and cry and sing out these sad songs. Given

everything that happened in my family, I say *wela'lin* to *Kisulk* that my own sisters and cousins found sanctuary. I also see how Native men are numb, unable to publicly express their feelings about what is going on and afraid of the consequence when they do, suffering in silence. Their hurts are so big. I see that men would like to be able to express their love for each other, showing their sensitivity, without others calling into question their sexualities or genders, nor relying on homo/transphobia to deflect their uncomfotability. When I want to be close to another man, it isn't because we are "gay", it is because we see in each other something beautiful, fresh and, at the same time, old. Sometimes this is sexual; other times it is just warmth. These hurts and divisions are not the big picture but close observations of a person who is actively working to heal these wounds in our communities and I know there is much more to who we are. We are radiant, powerful beings who remember. We are tender hearts with fierce fists fighting back at how our lives have been controlled and manipulated by invasion. We are lovers who sway like sweetgrass in the wind and cleanse when lit with the fires of longing.

The conditions of my training as a Two-Spirit person are certainly different than they were four or seven generations ago, but the knowledge within me is the same and interpretation is partially of my own choice. I understand that my ancestors made the best decisions they could, given the circumstances of their lives. I have learned that our/my ancestors lived through horrendous violence. It isn't our fault.

My family thinks me "crazy" for asking questions about the gaps in our stories. What they don't realize is that effects of these omissions are still alive within me; I am nothing without this knowledge. These legacies of historical trauma, doled out by the invading system will not go unnoticed or untransformed in this body. I work them every day, finding ways to soothe the immense losses stuck in these bones. Forgiveness is still a ways off. Acceptance, however, is wrapped up in this medicine bundle of contradictions. I am learning to enjoy how I am free to move and breathe. My medicine is bound with this knowledge, being many things all at once, assisting me to grieve what I and we have lost in getting here, while we grow something new together. I am hopeful for this process of un-settling we have begun.

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Louis Esme Cruz (Mi'kmaq/Acadian + Irish) BFA, is currently living on Three Fires Territory as a free agent. He happily collaborates and supports the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, the Aboriginal Youth Harm Reduction Project at YouthCO AIDS Society and Redwire Native Youth Media Project. His writing will appear in the upcoming *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literatures*.