The past is a mysterious place for Indigenous people to dwell, especially if lineage has been broken. The coming of Christianity dispersed some Mi’kmaq ancestors and held others close to our homeland. Knowing what I do about my own family’s histories, it seems that I come from a line of people who dispersed, surviving and resisting in differing ways. What has shown up in my own body and within my own life attests to this. I am unraveling this mystery in a relatively short amount of time, making tangible and grounded what once seemed magical and ethereal.

As a visual essay, “Puo’winue’l Prayers” explores some of the issues related to “coming home” to ourselves, our land, and our people, referencing academic texts in surrogacy of my extended family and cultural teachings. In Mi’kmaq Hieroglyphic Prayers: Readings in North America’s First Indigenous Script, I came upon “Morning Prayer,” a Roman Catholic supplication taught by Christian missionaries to Mi’kmaq people as part of their conversion project. Murdena Marshall and David Schmidt translate the Mi’kmaq term puoin as shaman or religious specialist. “Morning Prayer” reads, “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.” With their repudiation of Indigenous knowledges, these words leave me grieving for the loss of traditional teachings about Mi’kmaq queers, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans people. Even with the loss of that knowledge, however, I am not giving up on reclamation.

Also in “Morning Prayer” is a line that reads, “I give You my heart, my soul, my flesh and I give You all my possessions and my being. . . . Today is the day that offensive things will be said.” From my contemporary perspective,
I read this as a prophecy within the poison that we give to each other in order to ensure our survival into the present and future by living and loving as we are. Just as Ralph T. Pastore argues that “today’s Mi’kmaq are no less Indian [sic] simply because they wear the same clothes as other Canadians, drive cars, and watch television,” so I know that we are no less Mi’kmaq because we were raised with an absence of overt knowledge of who we are. As we heal the evil injected through Christianity into our body-spirits, we remember who we are. No longer silent, we are moving toward balancing ourselves and our families in ways that are both covert and overt. At once, our transformed selves encapsulate our looking forward while providing testimony to where we have come from. Nothing is the same as it used to be. Thank god.

— Louis Esme Cruz

Creating New Ceremonies with Remembered Ones:
A Commentary on “Puo’winue’l Prayers”

A few months ago, Louis Esme Cruz e-mailed me the drawings from “Puo’winue’l Prayers,” and I immediately printed them out and taped them to my office wall. They help me to remember the kind of artistic, activist, and scholarly work that I think is necessary for Indigenous queer/Two-Spirit resistance, the work that I label as Two-Spirit critiques in my essay for this issue. I think Cruz’s art and theory speak for themselves and certainly don’t need my mediation. My intention here, then, is not to guide an interpretation, but to comment briefly about what is most important to me when thinking about Cruz’s work.

Cruz’s art is itself a Two-Spirit critique, and—specifically—a Mi’kmaq Two-Spirit critique that remembers the trauma of colonization but moves through and beyond that trauma to insist on a return that unites Mi’kmaq Two-Spirit people to homelands, history, language, memory, children, and future. While there are thriving Mi’kmaq communities on the East Coast of the United States and Canada, Cruz speaks from a place of displacement and—most important—of a “coming back” to Mi’kma’ki (the Mi’kmaq homelands) both literally and through active engagement with Mi’kmaq history, language, and cultural practices. As a rhetoric scholar by training, I can’t help but notice the way Cruz represents Mi’kmaq modes of transmitting Two-Spirit/queer memory and identity in these drawings: the wampum belts bordering the pages, the use of the Mi’kmaq writing system, and the images of Mi’kmaq pottery all ask us to pay attention to Mi’kmaq-specific traditions for recording and transmitting knowledge. These images (and images
While the constraints of a bound volume impose a particular linear reading of these images, there are numerous points of entry into these visual texts. While alphabetic writing systems require a linear reading that represents one sound at a time, the Mi'kmaq systems Cruz references and employs enable entire phrases and ideas to be transmitted simultaneously and nonlinearly. The images here require an engagement with Mi'kmaq history (including the history of diaspora) and rhetoric in order to understand the Mi'kmaq queer and Two-Spirit imaginings that Cruz is arguing for: a prayer that “offensive things will be said” to disrupt colonial and heterosexist gender regimes and decolonize Indigenous bodies, minds, spirits, and homelands.

Elsewhere, Cruz writes:

“Basically, our oppression is about being punished on a daily basis for not being able to conform to colonial/christian expectations of gender and sexuality. We are pushed out of our families, ceremonies, languages, histories. Maybe the thinking goes that if we are ignored and made fun of that we’ll just go away, or at the very least we’ll hate our true selves into non-existence. Well, we didn’t and we can’t. And though we are often scared, we are also fierce in refusing to go anywhere except back to the Earth we came from. We continue to make love, transition our genders, create new ceremonies with remembered ones. We create. We love.”

—Qwo-Li Driskill

“Puo’winue’l Prayers” asks us to remember, to create, to love, to refuse erasure of our lives at the hands of both colonial and Indigenous communities, “looking forward while providing testimony to where we have come from.”
Notes


we have come back for our tongues

(1) PRINDE
(2) SCHMIDT
MARSHALL
we have come for each other
WE HAVE COME BACK FOR OUR BODIES
we have come for our children
we have come for our dead
WE HAVE COME HOME