



Kwezens, Gizaagi'in

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Abstract

This creative non-fiction text offers a critique and self-reflection about imposed gender identities and roles, and their impacts on Indigenous ways of being and becoming.

There are so many things in this world, dictating the likelihood of our being loved. Measures and messages sown into intricate, intimate moments, inform how we live because, in the end, doesn't everyone want to be loved?

The reality is there is no one truth, there is only life and all I know is my own. So, I will share a small piece of my story with you. This story is not about having the ability to describe theoretical frameworks, methodologies and other exclusionary constructs that slam the door on so many people I care about. My story is about creating pathways to Mino-Bimaadiziwin (Anishinaabe understanding of a good life) by looking to my ancestors' knowledge and to the knowledge we, as Indigenous peoples, have created, and continue to create, throughout, because of, and despite our experiences with heteropatriarchy and colonial violence. It's about becoming the best embodied spirit I can be, coming to a deeper understanding of how to live in alignment with Zaagi'idiwin, one of the Seven Grandfather Teachings representing Anishinaabe conceptions of Love, and doing all I can to foster that way of being in the world around me.

Zaagi'idiwin, ever-flowing compassion and unconditional love for Creation and for one another; a natural, sacred law, of giving and living from the heart. Our laws lead us along Mino Bimaadiziwin. Without them, love can be lost among colonial impositions of beauty, gender and desirability.

I've never really felt like a woman. I never really felt like a girl. I knew what *they* thought though, and their thoughts became what I felt, and what I felt became what I believed. I knew they thought I was ugly, pushing me out of the girl's bathroom, laughing. I knew that if I looked like a girl *should*, they might not think I was ugly anymore. I didn't know how wrong it was when a kid

on a class trip clapped his hand over his mouth spitting a war cry at me. I didn't know it, but my little body felt it.

I remember burning as much evidence of myself as I could find; photos of gentle moments, birthdays and vacations had by the kwezens ("little girl" in English, given its limitations for proper translation). I didn't want anyone to see. I don't know the moment I abandoned her, but I did. I left her with dirt under her nails and calloused hands from climbing trees and swinging bats. I left her because the violence she called on my body was too much. I couldn't conceive of the hostage-taking that had occurred when young eyes gazed at me, possessed by conceptions of gender and beauty beyond the reaches of the little minds performing that violence. I could only conceive of what had infiltrated me, and so I conceived a girl, thin, physically delicate but emotionally fierce, smart but not too smart, "vulnerable" but never vulnerable. I conceived of her and I abandoned that kwezens that loved being strong enough to climb trees and do tricks on the monkey bars that left the grown-ups watching with anxious, upside down stomachs.

By my late teens I had forgotten that I was a girl I had conceived. She had become so naturalized. It never occurred to me that my incapacity to live up to her standard was because I was never meant to. I spent a lot of time with two young, thin, beautiful blonde girls at that stage of my youth. My friends. I remember a hot July afternoon quietly listening, "beauty is the highest form of intelligence," "blue eyes," "blonde hair," "white." My friends. Victims of the rhetoric they sliced me open with. This memory, like a tear in an ocean, blended with the substance of the world that surrounded it and infused itself into my conceptions of love, beauty, gender and sex.

Over two decades have passed since that July afternoon, and three decades since the monkey bars. Only as an adult have I begun to see that outside the confines of colonial mentalities and behind the masks we construct to shield ourselves from pain, outside of the confines of static conceptions of tradition, there is Zaagi'idiwin. A love that needs no decolonization. Unconditional and unwavering love. A way of being in the world that embraces all of who we are and who we have been. An embrace, not only of our life paths, but of the branches we create when we lose our way. Love that invites us to imagine a future in which no little ones are forced to abandon themselves in order to feel they belong. Zaagi'idiwin, a love that knows spirit, calls us into ourselves and ensures we know we belong.

How would life change for little ones, like that kwezens I abandoned, if the roots of this system of judgement and isolation were exposed? If all the grown ups new that these constructs of love and gender were created to mold us into cogs in a machine that will never know how to love us? Imagine if we all knew our stories and our worth and saw them reflected back at us in our families and communities? This is the work I take up now in order to make peace with that kwezens.

I will do all I can to liberate that little one and the ones yet to come, from the pain of their confinement by modelling that we are still strong and by offering them Zaagi'idiwin and the time and space they need for their becoming; the time and space to be.