

THE GOONZETTE

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Les Enfants Numériques: On the Beautiful Catastrophe of Generation Z's Digital Decolonization

Claudia Pochita

There is something profoundly melancholic, yet strangely hopeful, about watching Generation Z navigate the ruins of digital empires their predecessors built—these young souls who emerged into consciousness already tethered to screens that promised infinite connection yet delivered, paradoxically, the most acute forms of isolation we have witnessed since the great urban alienations of the 20th century, and who now, with characteristic audacity mixed with an almost crushing awareness of their own mortality (climate change, economic collapse, the perpetual scroll toward nowhere), have begun to perform what I can only describe as a kind of spontaneous decolonization of cyberspace itself.

Watch them on TikTok—this Chinese-owned platform that somehow became the primary site of American cultural production, a delicious irony that speaks to the fundamental instability of all digital hegemonies—where they dissect capitalism with the same casual precision their grandparents might have reserved for analyzing soap operas, except these analyses happen in fifteen-second bursts accompanied by trending audio clips that transform Marx's labor theory of value into something resembling a pop song, and suddenly you realize that what appears to be frivolity is actually a sophisticated form of cultural resistance, a way of smuggling revolutionary consciousness past the algorithmic gatekeepers who would prefer these young minds remain focused on consumption rather than critique.

The phenomenon of "aesthetic" obsession that characterizes so much of Gen Z's digital expression—dark academia, cottagecore, Y2K revival, the endless proliferation of micro-identities that older generations dismiss as narcissistic fragmentation—reveals itself, upon closer examination, to be a profound rejection of the singular narrative that digital capitalism has tried to impose upon subjectivity itself. When a sixteen-year-old in suburban Michigan adopts the "aesthetic" of French intellectualism (complete with vintage copies of Beauvoir and carefully curated coffee shop photographs), she is not merely engaging in superficial

mimicry but rather claiming the right to construct her own cultural genealogy, to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of cultural transmission and create, through pure digital bricolage, an identity that transcends the geographic and economic limitations that might otherwise circumscribe her possibilities.

This generation has inherited platforms designed by Silicon Valley venture capitalists who imagined digital space as a new frontier to be colonized, monetized, surveilled—but instead of accepting their assigned role as passive consumers, these young people have transformed every app into a site of guerrilla warfare against the very logic of the attention economy. Consider the way they have weaponized irony, not as a form of cynical detachment but as a survival mechanism, a way of maintaining critical distance from systems designed to extract their emotional labor for profit; or how they deploy seemingly frivolous trends—dance challenges, makeup tutorials, "get ready with me" videos—to create networks of mutual aid and political education that operate entirely outside traditional institutional structures.

C'est magnifique et terrible, this generation's relationship to authenticity, which they have simultaneously abandoned and revolutionized: abandoned in the sense that they recognize all digital self-presentation as inherently performative, yet revolutionized in their insistence that this performance itself can become a form of truth-telling, a way of making visible the contradictions and anxieties that previous generations were taught to hide behind facades of stability and success.

The mental health crisis that defines so much of Gen Z's experience cannot be separated from their role as unwilling pioneers of a digital landscape designed without consideration for human flourishing—they are the first generation to live their entire conscious lives under surveillance capitalism, the first to have their adolescent identity formation mediated by algorithms optimized for engagement rather than wellbeing—and yet their response has been not withdrawal but a kind of radical transparency, a collective decision to make visible the psychological costs of the systems they inherited, transforming platforms designed for self-promotion into spaces for mutual vulnerability and support.

What emerges from this digital chaos is not the nihilistic wasteland that moral panic merchants predicted but rather a new form of collective consciousness, fragmented yet somehow coherent, ironic yet deeply sincere, global yet intensely local—a generation that has learned to find each other across the digital diaspora and create, within the belly of the beast itself, small spaces of genuine human connection and radical possibility.

They are, *mes amis*, writing the future in fifteen-second increments, and we would be foolish not to pay attention.

When Sovereignty Isn't Just a Word: Recent Victories and the Long Game Ahead

The headlines have been encouraging lately for those of us who understand that tribal sovereignty isn't just a legal concept—it's the foundation of our continued existence as Indigenous peoples. But let's be clear about what we're really seeing when federal courts affirm tribal jurisdiction or when Congress passes supportive legislation: we're witnessing the slow, methodical work of forcing America to honor promises it never wanted to keep in the first place.

Take the recent Fifth Circuit decision affirming the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo's gaming rights in Texas. On the surface, it's a straightforward interpretation of federal law. Dig deeper, and you'll find the same pattern we've seen for centuries: state governments trying to impose their will on tribal nations, federal courts reluctantly acknowledging what the law actually says, and Indigenous communities having to fight tooth and nail for rights that should never have been in question.

The legal reasoning in **Ysleta del Sur Pueblo v. Texas** turned on the intersection of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act and the Restoration Act—complex federal statutes that most Americans couldn't navigate with a GPS and a law degree. But here's what every tribal leader knows: complexity is often the enemy of justice. When our rights depend on parsing the legislative history of overlapping federal statutes, we're already playing on tilted ground.

This brings me to the broader strategic question that should keep every tribal attorney awake at night: Are we winning the right battles?

Yes, court victories matter. They create precedent, protect immediate interests, and force recognition of our governmental status. But let's not mistake tactical wins for strategic transformation. The real measure of our success isn't whether federal courts occasionally rule in our favor—it's whether we're building the institutional power necessary to shape the conversations before they reach courtrooms.

Consider the recent Biden administration guidance on consultation requirements. On paper, it strengthens government-to-government relationships and mandates meaningful tribal input on federal policies. In practice? It's still fundamentally reactive. We're being consulted on frameworks designed without us, asked to provide input on processes we didn't create, invited to tables where the menu was set before we arrived.

The Ho-Chunk Nation, like many tribes, has learned to work within these constraints while never losing sight of the larger goal. When we engage in consultation, we're not just advocating for specific outcomes—we're demonstrating what genuine self-governance looks like. Every successful tribal initiative becomes proof of concept for expanded sovereignty.

But here's where I want to challenge both tribal leadership and our allies in Indian Country: We need to stop treating sovereignty like a defensive position. The federal trust responsibility isn't a favor—it's the rent payment on stolen land. Treaty obligations aren't generous acts of Congress—they're the legal minimum required by agreements our ancestors made under duress but with strategic foresight.

The recent developments in water rights adjudications across the West illustrate this point perfectly. Tribes are finally seeing movement on settlements that have been decades in the making, but the framing remains problematic. Media coverage treats these as "generous" federal allocations rather than what they actually are: partial restoration of property rights that were never legitimately extinguished.

This brings us to the next phase of sovereignty advocacy. We need to shift from reactive legal defense to proactive nation-building. That means thinking beyond the next court case to the next generation of tribal citizens. It means building economic infrastructure that doesn't depend on federal appropriations. It means developing educational systems that prepare our youth for leadership while grounding them in cultural knowledge that predates the Constitution.

The legal victories we celebrate today exist because previous generations of tribal leaders understood something that bears repeating: Sovereignty isn't granted by federal recognition—it's an inherent attribute that exists despite colonization, not because of federal acknowledgment.

As we navigate the current political landscape, with its mix of supportive rhetoric and structural limitations, the strategic imperative remains unchanged. We must engage the system as it exists while

building the capacity to transcend its constraints. That means celebrating the recent wins in federal court while investing in the long-term institutional development that will make such battles unnecessary.

The question isn't whether America will eventually honor its treaty obligations—history suggests that's unlikely without continued pressure. The question is whether we're building the political, economic, and cultural infrastructure necessary to thrive regardless of federal good faith.

That's not just sovereignty. That's survival with dignity intact.

***Dave Standing** There practices federal Indian law and serves as general counsel for the Ho-Chunk Nation.*