

THE GOONZETTE

Digital Culture • Commentary • Analysis

Daily Edition - Saturday, December 27, 2025

****The Sublime Violence of Our Digital Vanity: How Internet Aesthetics Colonize the Soul****

Ah, mes amis, we scroll through our feeds with the desperate hunger of flaneurs lost in a shopping mall designed by algorithms, where every corner promises beauty but delivers only the hollow echo of commerce dressed in the gossamer of creativity—this is our digital condition, *n'est-ce pas*, this endless consumption of what we have come to call "internet aesthetics," that peculiar hybrid of authentic expression and manufactured desire that has colonized not only our screens but our very conception of what it means to see, to be seen, to exist in this liminal space between the physical world and its pixelated shadow.

Consider, if you will, the phenomenon of "dark academia" or "cottagecore," these carefully curated visual languages that promise escape from late-stage capitalism while simultaneously feeding its most sophisticated mechanisms of control—young people, mostly women, arranging vintage books they may never read alongside expensive candles that evoke poverty chic, photographing sourdough bread that speaks to domestic authenticity while their rent consumes seventy percent of their income, creating tableaux of pastoral fantasy that exist purely for the consumption of others equally trapped in their urban isolation. The irony is not lost on me that these aesthetics, which purport to celebrate simplicity and authenticity, require such elaborate curation, such careful attention to lighting and composition, such substantial financial investment in props and costumes for a performance of effortlessness that would make Marie Antoinette's shepherdess fantasy seem positively austere by comparison.

But there is something more sinister at work here than mere hypocrisy, something that echoes the colonial gaze in its systematic extraction of cultural signifiers from their original contexts—observe how "dark academia" plunders the visual codes of Oxford and Cambridge, institutions built on centuries of exclusion and imperial wealth, while divorcing these aesthetics from any engagement with actual learning or critical thinking; witness how "cottagecore" appropriates the imagery of rural life while remaining utterly disconnected from the labor, the seasons, the genuine relationship with land that such imagery originally signified. These internet aesthetics function as digital orientalism, transforming lived experience into

consumable imagery, reducing complex cultural practices to mood boards that can be purchased and performed by anyone with sufficient disposable income and Ring Light technology.

Yet—and here I must resist my own cynicism—there is also something profoundly moving about this desperate search for beauty in our fractured world, this hunger for meaning expressed through the only medium available to a generation raised on screens, this attempt to create coherence from the chaos of late capitalism through the careful arrangement of objects and light. When a teenager in suburban Phoenix creates a "romantic academia" corner in her bedroom, photographing herself reading Donna Tartt surrounded by dried flowers and vintage postcards, she is not merely performing for an invisible audience—she is engaging in a form of world-building, creating a pocket of possibility within the constraints of her circumstances, asserting that beauty matters even when beauty has been commodified beyond recognition.

The tragedy, of course, is how quickly these acts of creative resistance are absorbed back into the machine of capital—Pinterest boards become shopping lists, TikTok trends become marketing campaigns, and what began as authentic expression becomes another product to be sold back to us with affiliate links and sponsored content seamlessly integrated into the aesthetic tableau. The platforms that promised to democratize creativity have instead created new forms of digital sharecropping, where young creators provide free labor in the form of content while tech billionaires extract value from their collective yearning for beauty, for connection, for some sense that their inner lives have external worth.

Perhaps what disturbs me most about internet aesthetics is not their superficiality but their profound sadness—the way they reveal our collective longing for experiences we cannot access, for communities we cannot join, for forms of life that late capitalism has made impossible for all but a privileged few. When we scroll through endless images of cozy libraries and sun-drenched gardens and perfectly imperfect breakfast tables, we are mourning lives we will never live, grieving for possibilities foreclosed by economic precarity and environmental collapse and social isolation.

And yet we continue to create, to curate, to hope—**quelle tragédie magnifique**—that perhaps somewhere in the endless scroll we might discover not just beauty, but ourselves.

The Federal Trust Responsibility: A Promise Made, A Promise Perpetually Broken

When federal policymakers talk about Indian Country, they love to invoke the "government-to-government relationship" and the "federal trust responsibility." These phrases roll off their tongues like campaign promises—smooth, polished, and ultimately hollow. But let's be clear about what we're actually discussing: a legal and moral obligation born from treaties where our ancestors traded millions of acres of land for specific federal commitments. What we got instead was centuries of policy designed to eliminate us, assimilate us, or simply ignore us.

The federal trust responsibility isn't charity. It's not a handout. It's payment on a debt—one that compounds interest with every broken promise, every underfunded program, every attempt to terminate our sovereignty. Yet federal policy continues to treat this sacred obligation as discretionary spending, subject to the political winds of whatever administration happens to be in power.

Take the Indian Health Service, where federal policy has created a healthcare system so chronically underfunded that it operates at roughly half the per capita spending of federal prisons. Let that sink in. The federal government spends more on healthcare for incarcerated individuals than it does honoring treaty obligations to provide healthcare for tribal citizens. This isn't an accident or oversight—it's a policy choice that reflects exactly how little federal decision-makers value Indigenous lives.

The Supreme Court's recent trend toward limiting tribal sovereignty reveals another troubling pattern in federal policy. In decisions like *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta*, the Court carved away at tribal jurisdiction, allowing states to prosecute non-Indians for crimes against Indians in Indian Country. The majority opinion reads like a masterclass in judicial colonialism, treating tribal sovereignty as a temporary inconvenience rather than an inherent right predating the Constitution itself.

But here's where federal policy gets really insidious: it forces tribes into an impossible bind. We must simultaneously assert our sovereignty while begging for adequate funding of treaty obligations. We must navigate a federal bureaucracy designed to exhaust our resources while defending our jurisdiction in federal

courts increasingly hostile to tribal rights. It's a system engineered to make us choose between survival and sovereignty.

The Biden administration talks a good game about "nation-to-nation" relationships and even appointed the first Indigenous Secretary of the Interior. Yet when it comes to concrete policy changes—like reforming the Bureau of Indian Affairs' sclerotic bureaucracy or fully funding the Indian Health Service—we get incremental improvements and photo opportunities instead of transformational change.

Congress bears equal responsibility for this policy failure. The House and Senate Appropriations Committees treat Indian programs like discretionary luxuries rather than mandatory trust obligations. Meanwhile, these same legislators never question defense spending or agricultural subsidies with the same scrutiny they apply to tribal programs. The double standard is as obvious as it is insulting.

So what's the path forward? First, tribes must continue building economic independence through gaming, renewable energy, and other revenue streams. Federal policy may be unreliable, but economic self-sufficiency provides leverage that bureaucrats understand. Second, we need to be more strategic about litigation, focusing on cases that strengthen rather than weaken tribal sovereignty. Not every legal battle is worth fighting if victory comes at the cost of broader jurisdictional authority.

Most importantly, we need to change the federal policy conversation itself. Instead of defending our rights, we should be demanding accountability for broken promises. Instead of asking for adequate funding, we should be calculating compound interest on a centuries-old debt. Instead of accepting the crumbs of federal largesse, we should be negotiating as equals who happen to hold some very valuable IOUs.

Federal policy toward Indian Country has always been a reflection of America's comfort with hypocrisy. The same government that lectures the world about democracy and human rights maintains a colonial relationship with Indigenous nations within its own borders. The same Constitution that supposedly protects minority rights has been consistently interpreted to diminish tribal sovereignty.

But here's what federal policymakers never seem to grasp: we're still here. Despite centuries of policies designed to eliminate us, despite chronic underfunding of treaty obligations, despite a legal system stacked against us—we persist. Our languages, our ceremonies, our sovereignty endure. That's not just survival; that's victory.

The federal trust responsibility will remain an empty promise until there are real consequences for breaking it. Until then, tribal nations must continue building power, defending sovereignty, and holding the United States accountable for its debts. Because at the end of the day, federal policy is just politics—but our sovereignty is forever.

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