

# The Last Generation to Carry the Land

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This photograph was taken on my mobile device in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood during the Wet'suwet'en Nation anti-pipeline protests in February 2020. It portrays a young Indigenous Land Defender among the scenery of the infamous neighborhood- the Downtown Eastside is one of the lowest-income neighborhoods in Canada. The Eastside also has a disproportionately high Indigenous population, and has been a hotspot for disappearances of Indigenous women for decades. As a young Indigenous woman, you know the meaning the land carries when you walk through the Downtown Eastside.

Many blockades and rallies during the anti-pipeline protests were scattered across the Eastside; we gathered around and stood on the land for hours, with only hand warmers and jackets to brace ourselves from the damp February cold. Within intersections, we built a safe haven inside the white lines that marked the crosswalk, a small but vibrant community, fuelled by warm and passionate human instinct. Many stayed through the night, passing out coffee and tea, while the elders tended to a sacred fire which we heated our drums over, playing to keep our spirits high.

I became close with an elder named V who taught me about the land; she showed me that the poverty-stricken streets are sacred. She patiently picked cigarette butts off the sidewalk in ceremony, honoring the land once walked so lightly upon, the tragedies that occurred, the beauty and the ugliness of the place we stood. The Downtown Eastside's histories spill out onto every street corner- the rigid triangular roofs of Victorian houses, Japanese letters and red dresses, neon lights which have been flickering through the rainy nights ever since the 50's. We discovered a sense of power in occupying the land with such persistence; we slept on the cold ground with fires in our hearts, we wept sitting on sidewalk curbs, we pressed our hands to the earth when we extinguished our cigarettes. V gave us the awareness that underneath all this concrete, there is something sacred. The earth cradled us as we lay sleepless, waiting for an injunction to be served, an attempt to silence the revolution just in time for morning traffic.

During the long and still hours after midnight, I began to think back to Lake Kississing, Manitoba, where my grandmother grew up. I have never gone home to my grandmother's small community in Northern Manitoba, or stood on the flat, grassy plains of the Canadian Northwest, the birthplace of my culture, but among the chaos of street signs and protest songs, a memory stirred inside me. My grandmother passed down the history of our Métis heritage by telling me stories of her childhood; folk legends of the Northern Lights, the sled dogs and the trappers, and Sunday afternoons, when everyone gathered 'round and danced to the fiddle. Her stories provoke deep and visceral memories inside me, as if I was in a vivid dream; a light summer breeze that stirs the surface of the

lake, the chirping of insects and the rustling of grass in the wind, the smell of the dry, hot earth and the wide-open prairie sky.

It broke my heart when she told me that Lake Kississing had been poisoned by mining. Humanity has scarred the land, and we can no longer return to it in the same way. The land is a living, breathing history, but there is nothing left for the next generation; the earth can't sustain us the way it did before. My grandmother grew up on the shores of Lake Kississing, where the water lapped at the land like a song; my ancestors fished from that lake and trapped the animals that drank the water, they picked the Saskatoon berries that grew from the summer earth. On the damp late-winter streets of Chinatown, Vancouver, I dreamt of a place that no longer exists, a painful reminder of why it is my responsibility to fight to preserve what is left.

Coming of age as a young Métis in today's world has been a difficult and often lonely journey. In the modern age, Métis identity has changed, and its definition has become blurry- we are still 'half-breeds', always somewhere in between, but now in the modern age of blood quantum politics and globalization. The Métis once primarily lived in small communities across the Northwest, making their living as trappers and fur traders- but in modern times, such communities have become obsolete. It seems the Métis were left behind by the modern age; it has been centuries since the voyageurs paddled their canoes across the lakes of the Northwest, filling the desolate wilderness with song. And all those years, the wilderness from Montreal to Rainy Lake has been eerily silent, no sweet and sorrowful *chansons* to fill the stillness.

The Métis go by many names - we were once Katipâmsôchik, "The People Who Own Themselves". The Métis were a fierce political force of warriors, intellectuals, and storytellers; the Old Wolves dedicated their lives to establishing the legitimacy of the Métis Nation, and the men fought and died for our recognition as a people. The Métis, through my perspective, have been mostly forgotten as a distinct ethnic group, although we had our own culture, language, music, lifestyle, laws, and values; our people fought hard in the hopes that our culture would have survived in all its strength. Métis has become a term today which sometimes refers to all mixed Indigenous people in Canada, silencing other mixed Indigenous identities and diminishing the legitimacy of the Métis Nation as a distinct culture. The Canadian government did not officially recognize the Métis as an independent Indigenous identity until 2016 with the Daniels Decision, when we received government status; it was only then that I, and many other Métis, were first given the opportunity to reconnect with a culture we grew up believing had died. Half-Breeds and mixed Indigenous ethnicities have never fit into the colonial agenda, and so with the progression of colonialism and the rise of Western society in the modern age, the Métis have become known as "the Forgotten People", a hollowed-out version of a culture, with only vague reference to Louis Riel to attest to what happened to us.

As youth, we have adamantly stepped into the role of creating new culture in an era when so many of the old ways are lost. Métis culture no longer consists of small, robust communities held together by the social glue of the fur trade, and many Métis I have met, at least on Coast Salish land, seem to be lost as to where to search for cultural identity. I have never met such a soulful and ambitious community as the young Indigenous land defenders at the blockades; they gave me hope when I had previously felt isolated in my search to reconnect with my Métis identity. We are a generation that has grown up feeling like we are hanging onto the edge of humanity- we were born into a 'golden age' of consumerist society that has spurred from a need to fill the emptiness that the modern age imposes, and we are the first generation to pay the price. We grew up learning about climate change in elementary school classrooms, turning off the lights for Earth Day and filling out colouring books about recycling; we woke up trembling from nightmares about melting ice caps and starving polar bears, the threat of the apocalypse. And we grew up with the Internet; we argued with our parents over computer games, we made Instagram accounts as pre-teens and posted over-filtered selfies, we stirred up trouble and controversy online with a blissful naïvete which horrified the older generations. But as we come of age, we are proving to be a powerful generation.

Growing up with the Internet, our lives have become entangled with an unfiltered, unbiased source of media; it has not corrupted us the way our parents and grandparents feared it would- but it has exposed us to a harsh, uncensored portrait of Western society in the modern age. Injustice and corporate corruption are on display, and political tensions have reached a boiling point in 2020 amidst a global pandemic. Socio-economic fault lines have been clearly exposed as American society, the poster child of the Western world, crumbles and burns under the stress of its failing economy and social structure. The failure of American society has uprooted more disturbing and deep-rooted issues of systemic racism and oppression, jolting Western society out of its ignorance. Minneapolis burns as more Black lives are taken by police, and shockwaves are felt throughout the world. It is 2020, and a new era of change and social unrest is being born. I am a high school graduate of 2020; we are taking our first steps towards independence into a chaotic and uncertain world. Some of us are paralyzed by fear, and others are buzzing with anticipation.

Social media feeds are currently awash with political outrage and cries for justice. Young people are mobilizing and starting to organize constructive action, even during a pandemic, with the help of social media; Google Documents of political essays on Black history and information about protest conduct are shared freely, as are links to campaigns and petitions, email addresses and phone numbers of government officials. We put our regular posting on pause to make room for Black and Indigenous narratives, we hold others and ourselves accountable, we educate ourselves and we listen intently to

the voices that have gone unheard. Perhaps for the first time in American history, there is a widespread dialogue being had about racial privilege and the corruption and injustice systemic racism has, and still is, causing. There is a shock culture surrounding the radicalism of the actions taken since George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery's deaths were publicized, as well as the radicalism of the opinions that young people are presenting. The youth have been listening, though- we know it has been a long time coming.

2020 has been a year which has taught me much about what it means to be Métis in the modern age. It has not been an easy identity to carry; I hold White privilege in one hand and an ancestral history of trauma and oppression in the other. The Métis are one of the most visible mixed Indigenous identities on all of Turtle Island, and yet, my cultural identity as a mixed Indigenous person feels invisible.

It is clear to me, however, that space in the narrative for Black and Indigenous voices is increasing at a rapid and radical rate, through political movements such as Land Back and Black Lives Matter. As a Métis person, I, too, am intertwined in the cultural narrative that is exploding into Western culture in the present moment. My place in the narrative currently, as a Métis and White Native, is one of exploring my relationship to White privilege. The Métis may have always been in a state of 'in-between-ness' between two ethnicities, but by being in that role, we have acted as a bridge between cultures. The Métis play a valuable role in the discussion about White Native privilege, as we have always been a culture which has avidly fought the colonial constructs which have silenced us in recent times. For now, I listen to the voices which need to be heard the most, and I examine myself over and over; the work can be tiring, but now that my Métis identity has become unburied, it is a voice that cannot be silenced. White privilege has always been an uncomfortable subject for White Natives, in my experience, due to a fear that acknowledging privilege will undermine our Indigeneity, or the right to access our culture. With the intersectionality between Black and Indigenous oppression, it is clearly time to acknowledge privilege, and to educate ourselves on how we can use our privilege as a weapon against the system, rather than staying complacent and continuing to benefit from the oppression of People of Colour. My reactions to the injustices that occur contribute to the narrative of Métis history in 2020; the choice between taking ownership of White privilege and choosing to remain silent is a decision to commit to the survival of my culture, or choosing to assimilate into Anglo-Canadian culture, because I am too comfortable in my privilege.

I am part of Generation Z, named after the last letter of the alphabet; we are the last generation to carry the land, the last generation to stop the seemingly inevitable destruction of the earth and the histories that live within it. We are a generation that holds an incredible amount of power through our

proficiency with technology- we are living in an outdated system, and we know it- but we are also a generation with both the tools and the passion to create systemic changes. I believe that 2020 marks the beginning of an era of rebirth for Métis culture and other ethnicities of colour across Turtle Island- but the revolution that us youth so avidly speak of comes at the cost of our own ability to take action. As a Métis person, I know I must take responsibility for my culture, simply because nobody is going to do it for me. The Métis are a small ethnic minority in the much larger tapestry that is the culture of Turtle Island in the modern age, and we need our collective voices in order to reconcile for the culture that has been lost. When I think of what it means to be a Generation Z Métis, there is a Louis Riel quote which instantly comes to mind, in which he says, "My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back." Here we are, a generation of activists, artists, and untamable voices which have been dreaming of a different world since childhood. It is 2020, and the revolution has come. And it's about damn time.