

Understanding the Indian Condition

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My story became the hustle.¹

These opening lines resonate deep within my inner being.

This line represents a bigger theme; which has endlessly been reoccurring, it seems, in my own life. As a young Mi'kmaq hailing from Natoaganeg First Nation, I have ancestral connections to the land of Wabanaki. Therefore, living away from my community in an urban city, I face many challenges while pursuing new opportunities. The contrast between my home community and the urban setting provides the basis for understanding my adversity; my overall journey constantly being discredited as no more than a “hustle” to the system. The reality is far more unique and subjective making it difficult for most to understand; for my “hustle” goes far beyond cheap smokes, tax breaks or funded post-secondary education. These beneficial things are viewed by most Canadians as a “easy break” for me and my Indigenous peers. This has always left me feeling ostracized in society; in the words of Mailhot, “I would arrive with a deficit.”² Even with an education or societal accepting paperwork, I was still told by my non-Indigenous peers, employers, and teachers in one passive-aggressive form or another that I had “cheated” or took a short cut to get where I was. This has made me question if I was ever to be accepted as an equal in the eyes of the non-Indigenous populous of Canadian society.

To truly explain myself you must know who raised me. My mother Ann Larry is a strong Mi'kmaq woman born and raised in her community Natoaganeg by her mother Clara Larry. My grandmother Clara was raised in Shubenacadie Indian Residential School. After surviving her childhood, she married young to my grandfather and they had 14 kids, which lead to my whole families' known lineage on my mothers' side. If there is one quality they share, is the power of

¹ Mailhot, 2018, p. 3

² Mailhot, 2018, p. 6

their connection to our Mi'kmaq culture. For our Mi'kmaq women are truly a form of medicine; their resilience is unmatched. Their resilience is evident by the unconditional love they have instilled into me and all their children. Some only cling to the term generational trauma. I, on the other hand, prefer the term generational resilience. Therefore, no matter what life threw at my Nkij (mother) and my Nukumij (grandmother), they never broke. They never looked for pity or to blame others. They would always love with all their hearts and did all they could to provide for their kin with what they had. Their overall kind selfless demeanor makes me think back to the colonial paradox. The fact that residential schools forced religion on Indigenous children with the intent to assimilate, when in my grandmothers' case, it evoked her resilience and self-determination. She read the bible and through her own perspective, determined she was like Mary Magdalene. The church only added fuel to the fire of my grandmother's Mi'kmaq spirit.

Generationally, the traumas may change but the teachings of resilience from my grandmother are here to guide me too. This generational trauma is the systemic breeding ground for the mental state that ails many Indigenous people since contact. The term in which Mailhot uses to describe this mind set is the "Indian Condition"; my personal take on this almost unavoidable condition is Indigenous resilience, in response to shame as a result of colonial oppression. The two stand in direct opposition, yet surrounded by systemic injustices that are uncontrollable for Indigenous individuals, resulting in internal turmoil. The shame of colonial oppression suffocates resilience.

Take education for example; I am the first in my family to pursue post-secondary education. On the one hand I feel pride in my resilience to follow my dreams and keep moving forward in spaces that were not intended for Indigenous peoples. Alternatively, I have now left

my community, friends, and family to enter a new foreign establishment. In my grandmother's and mother's experiences, school was a tool used to eliminate Mi'kmaq culture, to assimilate my family into European culture. Reflecting on where I stand as a young Mi'kmaq man enrolled in post-secondary, it would seem as if I am making the conscious choice to self-assimilate into Western society. This perspective is shown by Mailhot's mother: "my mother told me school was *a choice*."³ In conclusion, I cannot truly say I have broken this "Indian Condition" in my own mind. Nevertheless, I have generational resilience, and not generational trauma, passed down from Mi'kmaq matriarchs. This is a legacy imprinted in myself and for the future generations yet to come.

³ Mailhot, 2018, p. 4

Reference

Mailhot, T. M. (2017). *Heart berries: A memoir*. Toronto, ON: Doubleday Canada.