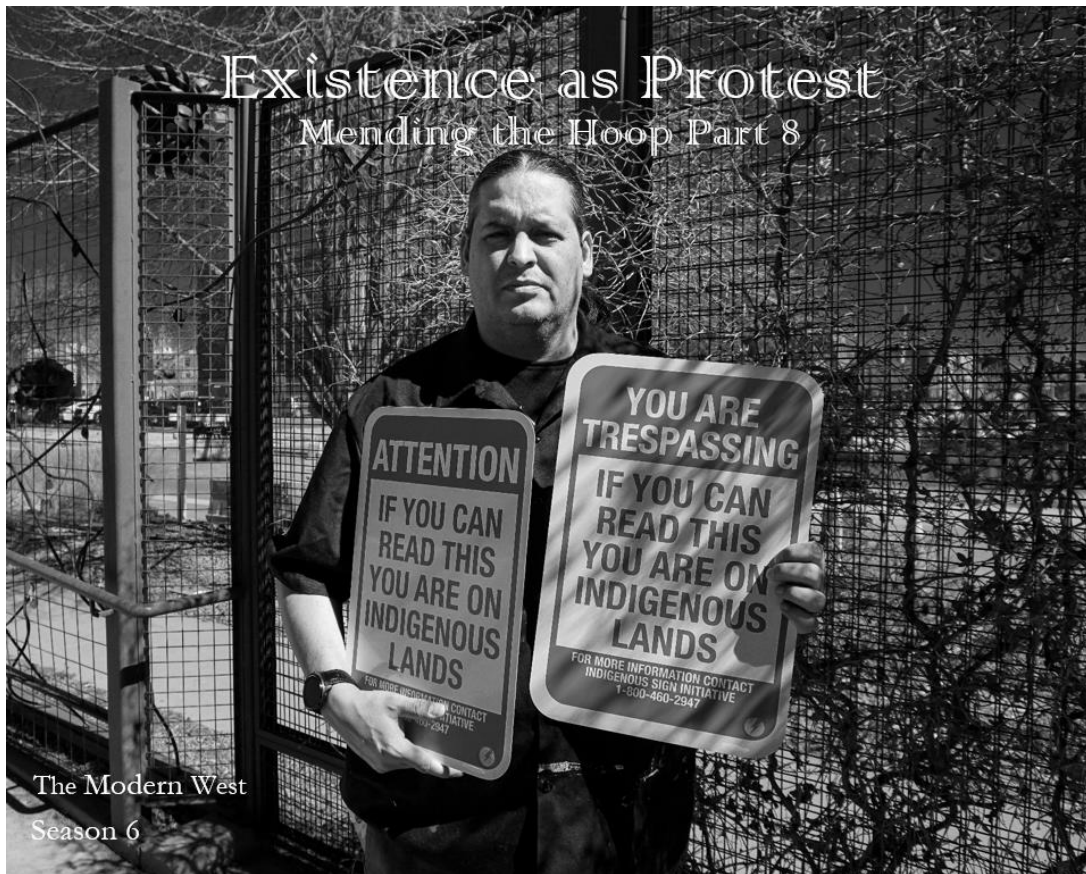


## Existence As Protest



## Grounding

On one of the first really nice days of spring, I find myself on the campus of the University of Denver in a classroom filled with PhD students. Their social work professor Dr. Ramona Beltrán walks in and the class quiets down. Ramona wears a camo shirt with the sleeves rolled up, bright red lipstick, big earrings and sneakers, but instead of lecturing at the front of the class, she gathers everyone together and leads us down three flights of stairs and out into the sunshine. We all gather in a circle, then Ramona guides us in some relaxation techniques. “So coming into the here and now. I’m going to do two things to get us present, or invite you into two things. So the

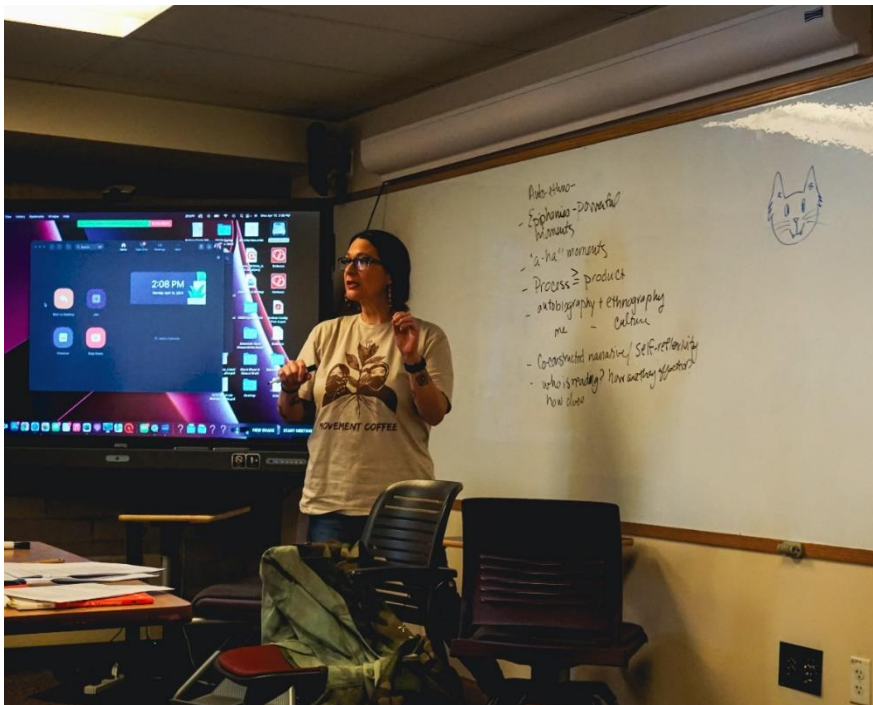
first one we'll do some box breathing, just counts of four to calm our nervous system. And then after that, we'll just take a little bit of walking around here and be really present with walking and feeling the Earth," she says. She starts with some deep breathing. "We'll just exhale all our breath on the count of three. One, two, three and exhale, and a count of four, inhale two, three, four. Hold two, three, four. Exhale two, three, four. Inhale two, three, four," she says. We breathe with the sound of birds singing for a moment, the sun on our skin.

Afterwards, we do another exercise. "And I'll just put one minute on my phone and just take a moment, walk around, feel your feet, take off your shoes if you like, feel your feet on the ground. Yeah, so I'll set that timer. Be present, feel your body, connect to the Earth," Ramona says. We walk slowly, meditatively around in the grass that still hasn't turned green. After a long, hard winter, the warm weather feels luxurious. Ramona's timer goes off and we circle back together. "So hopefully that was helpful to get you into your body. Just really quickly, what did you hear that came up for you? What did you see? What did you feel as you were just kind of walking?" she asks.

"I think the birds just because I feel like they've been absent for some time. So finally hearing the birds it feels good. Like I know spring is coming," one student says. The students share how good it feels to take off your shoes and feel the breeze, hear the leaves crunch.

"So as we go back up into our classroom, the last exercise is just gratitude. So if you can, as we're walking mindfully back to the classroom, think about three things that you're grateful for and we'll write them down when they get there," Ramona says.

Going up the stairs this time, the group is much quieter. When we get to the classroom, everyone jots down what they're grateful for. Ramona asks if they want to share. Students raise their hands and list things they realized they were grateful for. Like this one, "My partner Emily who has really stepped up in the past few weeks to help me survive this last quarter of classes and is the chef in our relationship so keeps me alive with food."



CREDIT: Melodie Edwards  
Ramona teaching her Indigi-Qualitative  
Research Methods class at the  
University of Denver.

Then Ramona puts the activity into the context of this course. The title of it is Indigi-Qualitative Research Methods. Which, okay, is hard to wrap your head around. But it's all about teaching future researchers how to use storytelling as part of an appropriate method of researching Indigenous issues, how stories themselves can be healing. "To come back to gratitude, not only as a mindfulness activity, but it's also really good for healing trauma, because it's part of building neural pathways. So interrupting some of the kind of negative neural pathways that we have

constructed if we've been impacted by trauma. And gratitude helps us to recall positive things, bring that sensation into our body and interrupt some of those other patterns that we inherit," she says.

Catch that? Interrupting patterns that we've inherited. It's something we could all use a dose of no matter what our family stories might be. American history needs healing. And that's at the heart of all Ramona's work – healing Indigenous intergenerational trauma. But Ramona isn't alone in this project. This time on the show, we look at the creative approaches Indigenous healers and activists are employing to make peace with a deeply painful history.

### **Historical Trauma and Healing**

Chatting in her office later, I ask Ramona how she ended up drawn to this kind of work. "I think a lot of it has to do with how I grew up. So in a low income, single parent household. And my mom was very sick most of my life. In fact, my childhood is really informed by a lot of memories of her being in the hospital or being sick with some chronic preventable diseases and mental health issues. And I didn't understand it, of course, at the time, I just thought, oh, there must be something wrong with her. And then as a kid, you think it's also something wrong with you, your family, your community. So, but she was also incredibly proud. And she raised us to be very committed to social justice," Ramona says.

Ramona's earliest memories are growing up in California where she mostly took her identity for granted. "My family is on my mother's side, originally from northern Mexico, and are descendants of Indigenous peoples of Mexico, particularly of northern Mexico and Sonora. So I

am a mixed race, Indigenous Chicana,” she says. But then, one day, something happened that forced her family to move away. “When I was about four years old, we were living in the Bay Area in San Jose, California, and somebody shot into our home. And my mom was like, that’s it. We’re leaving here. It’s not safe for you,” she says. She packed up Ramona and her sister and brought them to a small Oregon town where a good friend lived. “A small town in southern Oregon, and predominantly white. It definitely felt like it was clear that we were not from there. There were many instances of people asking, ‘Where are you from? And what are you?’ So I grew up with that. So there’s all these ways that we felt what it was like to be othered,” Ramona says.

Ramona’s mom raised her to be conscious of civil rights, women’s rights, social injustices happening all around her. So that was her headset when she got into grad school. “And I really noticed that a lot of the evidence-based practices and treatments that were being targeted towards people like my community didn’t seem to be centered in that community. They seem to be practices that were taken from mainstream approaches, but with some like cultural additives. One of my mentors calls it, ‘add culture and stir.’ And I remember thinking to myself,



CREDIT: Melodie Edwards

Ramona says her mother, “was also incredibly proud. And she raised us to be very committed to social justice.”

we really need to be focusing on our cultures and who we are. We need to be at the center of it,” she says.

Then one day, she attended a lecture by the prominent Choctaw scholar Karina Walters- it changed the direction of her career. “And it was the first time that I heard about the term “historical trauma and healing.” And it was like, learning this definition, gave me words for an experience that I had seen and observed with my family over time. And there's something about that moment when you can name something that is so liberating, because it takes that responsibility off of the individuals within a family and community, and places them more where they should be, which is on structures and systems and history,” Ramona says.

There's a lot of research going on right now to understand the science of how trauma can stay in our DNA for generations. This science even has a name. “There is a body of research called epigenetics, that is really looking at the ways that our social environments impact genetic material surrounding our DNA, and that those can cause things like higher risk of mental health issues or chronic health conditions, and that those things can be passed down through generations.” So, for instance, there's data showing how generations of Jewish descendants are still recovering from the Holocaust. And families who endured the 9/11 Twin Towers attack, the Rwandan genocide, descendants of African slaves, the effects of these events are still written on their genes, the research shows.

For Ramona, discovering all this science felt incredibly important. “I wanted to study that. I wanted to be part of contributing to identify healing interventions for our community. And also sharing with people that knowledge, like, it's not all your fault. Much of the world makes us

think it's all our fault, because we make bad decisions. We make poor choices about what we eat, or what we drink, or what we do or don't do. But it's not that those are part of it. But largely, the structure and system has been built to contain us in this particular way. And that has led to health disparities, poor health outcomes," she says.

People throw around that term "historical trauma" – this idea that we can continue to suffer from terrible events in the past – but for me it's never been clear, is that an incurable condition?

Ramona says, new research shows no, it's not. "Some of what the research is finding is that those changes to that genetic material are not necessarily permanent, that they can be changed through behavior change, environmental change. And so when we think about that, it could be as simple as changes to diet and exercise or reducing stress, those are kind of accessible ways to think about, okay, some of these conditions can be changed behaviorally," she says. But Ramona says, the cure doesn't only rest on the shoulders of individuals suffering from such trauma. "It also implies that our social conditions need to and can change, though, right? So the levels of stress that we're under, that are directly connected to racial profiling, for example, or chronic exposure to pollution from industries in neighborhoods that are predominantly brown and black. If there were changes to the structural systems, perhaps those outcomes can be changed for the better. So it's a multi-level sort of approach when it comes to healing historical trauma from a cultural standpoint," she says.

One major way that historical trauma manifests itself in Indigenous communities is high rates of diabetes, a disease that Ramona's mother struggled with and that ultimately took her life.

“I was in Denver when I got the call. My mom was in the hospital with pneumonia.” In her classroom, Ramona plays a documentary film, her voice narrating, for her students that she produced about her mom’s death. “Helpless and terrified, I got a plane to San Jose. Doctors said she hadn't been taking care of her diabetes. I spent the last several hours of her life by her side as machines gave her breath. Along with her in the sterile room, under the neon lights, I sang her spirit out of her body,” she says.

Her mother’s death plunged Ramona into despair. She reached out to some Choctaw friends to see if she could still join them as they made a journey to retrace part of the Trail of Tears, the route where the U.S. army force marched some 60,000 people from five southeastern tribes to Indian Territory in what’s now Oklahoma in 1830 after the passage of the Indian Removal Act. Thousands of people died on the 5,000 mile march. “I was just broken. And I remember one woman saying, if anything, this is the place you should be. Use this space to heal your heart, cry all your tears that you need. And I did, lots,” Ramona says. Even though she wasn’t a member of the Choctaw tribe, they welcomed her as an ally. She carried her mother’s ashes in her backpack as she walked. Ramona tells her students how grueling the walk was for her. “Oh my word. I met so many bugs I never knew: chiggers, horse flies. Did you know they chase you? They chase you! My mentor likes to tell the story of how I was screaming running away from a horse fly. They hurt! But every single one of my journal entries ends like this somehow with some future looking, something optimistic. And I was really wounded at that time, I was really grieving. And so what I've come to learn over the last 10 years as I've really been marinating on this story is that this is Indigenous Futurism. This is part of how we survive,” she says.



Indigenous Futurism: an idea that imagines a flourishing future for Indigenous communities once they've found true healing from their history. As hard as the Trail of Tears was, Ramona credits it for helping her through her grieving process. But how likely is it that a doctor or a therapist would actually prescribe walking the Trail of Tears as a form of healing? Not very. Which Ramona says, goes to show how crucial it is to center Indigenous knowledge within Indigenous communities. And that's exactly why, several years ago, she started a project called Our Stories Our Medicine Archive ([OSOMA](#)). It's built on the idea that storytelling heals.

## **Storytelling Heals**

“What people have said to us on multiple projects through multiple years, that our stories are our medicine. Through our stories, we learn how to be in what people call ‘right relation’ to ourselves, to each other, to the planet, to all of creation, really,” Ramona says.

One of the OSOMA participants, Olga Gonzalez of the Yaqui and Otomí nations, puts it this way: “When I’m feeling my worst, I go into sweat lodge or ask for a ceremony. And then I see my community and show up in a circle and that space around the fire. And I know I am safe and I know I am cared for and loved. And I feel the presence of my ancestors there,” says Olga. The project started out as an oral history collection with Indigenous people about their experience of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. But it immediately became much broader. Because health isn’t just a physical thing. It’s emotional, it’s spiritual.

“So, for example, people will have talked about different teas that they were given as children when they were having an upset stomach, or if they were having anxiety, there were very specific plants and herbs that their parents would give to them,” Ramona says.

Bonifacio Sanchez Flores is a citizen of the Ñuu Savi tribe. “My grandma used to tell me, no, you should drink this tea because it’s going to help you calm your stomach,” says Bonifacio.

“Growing up in the American way, I said I’m going to get some Pepto Bismol to calm down my stomach but I realized it wasn’t working and she said, no, you should drink this. I think she had it somewhere in her kitchen, it was like a dry herb and I think it’s called *iguara*. It’s bitter. It’s very strong, you can’t drink it unless you’re really sick and you want to get better. But it helped me. I left when I was a baby in the village but I think there’s a lot that’s still being used because we’re very connected to Mother Earth still,” Bonifacio says.

“And what’s been beautiful to see is that folks don’t articulate them as their traditional cultural knowledge. But then after they have shared that, they’ll reflect about how, ‘Gosh, if I look back at it, I guess that is traditional cultural knowledge,’” says Ramona.

Olga says, “As a child my grandmother, who is Otomí, I remember her visiting us and going to the garden and just picking things. And to me it was just grass, I didn’t know the difference. And she’d say, this is good for this and this is good for that. And then she’d turn it into lotion or shampoo or some kind of tincture for whatever.”

But Ramona didn’t maintain an objective scholarly distance the way most scientists would. She shared her story for the project too. “Technically, I fit the inclusion criteria for this particular

study. And so it made sense. But I think part of it is also then that becomes an invitation, that becomes an invitation to other community members who can see that I'm also going to, I'm also giving of myself like I am contributing to this, because I believe in it. And because I'm not willing to ask them to be so vulnerable, and not give something of myself as well," Ramona says. She tells her students about how OSOMA does something else that's revolutionary. "What an act of resistance, what an act of transcendence when we ask questions about joy, when we ask people to bring in something that represents something beautiful or positive about them," she says.

"I think that for me, medicine is anything that heals not just our body, but our spirit. That centers us, that reminds us of our power and our potential," says Olga.

Ramona says one of the biggest hurts for Indigenous people is displacement from their original homelands. Recording stories, she's learned how people have found methods to soothe that pain. "But what we've also heard from people is that there are aspects of place that are transportable, that they bring with them. So either through the relationship they have to plants that they grow, or plants that they use, or when they meet other people from the same area, or they're able to find cultural practices that emanate from their original land. But practice them here, that those are ways that they can maintain that relationship to their original place and heal that relationship to their original place, even if they can't get back to it on a regular basis," she says. And Ramona says, it helps to learn more about the Indigenous history of their new home. For Ramona, transplanted to Denver, that meant working to address the horror left behind by the Sand Creek Massacre. She got involved with a faculty committee to write a report about Gov. John Evans who approved the massacre and she now serves on the board of the Sand Creek Massacre

Foundation. “I asked an elder from the Northern Cheyenne – we did a little bit of a presentation together in 2014 – and I said, ‘I’m not from here. But I hope you’ll consider me as an Indigenous ally, and I want to be of service. What can I do to be of support to you in this place?’ And he said, ‘tell the story, tell our story,’” Ramona says.

So she does. Every year, she takes her historical trauma and healing students downtown to visit the last few memorial sites from the annual Sand Creek Massacre healing run and walk. “Many of the students who maybe have lived in Colorado much of their lives, they don’t know about it. And they don’t learn about it until graduate school in my class. And what I see from them, first is anger, and sadness, and guilt, and then commitment. Once they see it, and they have put their feet on the soil in these places, it changes them. And I think that it’s not only telling that story, but it’s illuminating it as a truth,” she says. And in that way, Ramona is not only working to heal historical trauma from within Indigenous communities but also from the outside by educating the next generation of social workers. When we come back, we meet a Chippewa Cree activist using a novel approach to address the trauma of Native women in prison.

## **Gentle Action**

“My name is Dr. Carma Corcoran, I’m an enrolled member of the Chippewa Cree Nation. My great great grandfather is Big Bear. Little Bear is my grandmother,” says Carma. Dr. Carma Corcoran also happens to be the author of a brand new book called [The Incarceration of Native American Women: Creating Pathways to Wellness and Recovery through Gentle Action Theory](#). Carma’s path in life brought her to a very specific strategy of making real change in her

community. And that life path, well, it wasn't an easy one. "My story really is not dissimilar from many Native American people. I was born into a large family, my mother had many children but with a few different fathers. And predominantly boys, there were just two of us that were girls. And my mother was an alcoholic. And my father of the fathers was an alcoholic, I think the other of the fathers were too. And they were not able to take care of us," she says.

As the oldest girl in the family, Carma was often left alone to take care of her younger siblings. "And I loved my brothers so much. And my older brothers would sometimes disappear. And maybe they would be on the work farms of Montana, which were juvenile justice facilities," she says. But she didn't know where they went until years later. They were just gone. Only later did she learn her brothers ended up in prison. "Then finally, our family just imploded. And we were taken away from my mother. So I went into a foster home," Carma says. Foster homes often create another whole other layer of trauma for Indigenous children. But Carma with a C, well, she had really good karma with a K. "I was so fortunate, I probably had the best foster home in the history of foster homes. I had such a safe and happy place to be. And then I was adopted by a white family. And so I grew up in this white family and I always had some connection to home. For one thing, I was a little bit older child, so I knew who I was, which was really good. And then my foster parents and I have a lifelong relationship. So I would go and stay with them for like a week in the summertime. They would give me news about my family, which unfortunately, usually was sad news, you know, another brother dying in a car accident and so I didn't lose any sense of identity," says Carma. One time, she went home for the funeral of her brother closest in age. There, she saw her biological mother and sister again. Since then, she's stayed reconnected.

Carma grew up, got married and had children but in the back of her mind, she dreamed of going to college. At the age of 40, she made it happen. “I knew that I wanted to do something about incarceration, because by that time, I had been volunteering with a local group that went into the women's prison. They went into the men's prisons too and did ceremony. So with the women talking circle, sweats, first food feasts with the men. We did some historical trauma, parenting, things like that,” says Carma. For Carma, working to stop recidivism on reservations seemed like the most important work she could be doing. “When I was researching the amount in proportion of the Native population, versus per capita, and how many people are locked up, it’s outrageous. It's something like, I think that it's something like the Native population is around three or four percent in Montana. And you know, the lockup rate is 11 percent. Also, when it comes to the juvenile justice system, throughout the country, we are the most over-represented as an ethnic minority. And it's just shocking,” says Carma.

She witnessed just how pervasive the problem was one time while visiting the prison. “So we were sitting there and across from me was a young, beautiful Indian woman, and she was pregnant. And so we were talking and she was sharing, we were known to be going into one of the men's prisons pretty soon. And so she was talking about, ‘well, if you see Uncle La-da-da.’ Her grandfather was in prison. And it was just like these generations, and here she is in prison about ready to have a baby. And, I just thought this is what concerns me is this generational incarceration that I had experienced my whole life and that it was just increasing,” Carma says. So she went off to do her doctorate with a mission. Yet again, Carma got lucky. She just happened to be the student of Dr. F. David Peat, the inventor of something called Gentle Action Theory. Dr. Peat had also worked extensively in tribal communities. “And so he was a

real advocate for me. And he just was so strong and wise. And I'm just humbled and proud that I was actually his last PhD student. He passed away not long after I defended. And so part of this too, has morphed into carrying on Dr. David Peat's work about Gentle Action Theory," says Carma.

Carma already had an in at the women's prison from her years volunteering there, so it wasn't hard to get permission to do her research there. "And so I was able to use the Gentle Action Theory, in not only the way that I designed the workshop, which was called Healing the Sacred Hoop, but it was also about how I presented and how those who came in and were special speakers presented. And it was a different experience for the women, they really responded to it. And I ended up spending like 18 months out there. It was supposed to be like, six months, you know, but it was good," says Carma.

You might be wondering, but what exactly is [Gentle Action Theory](#) and how can it help people heal historical trauma? Well, I will admit, it's a pretty brainy concept. It's a method of fostering social change based on what physicists have learned about how real change in the universe is always arising from within systems, not from outside. From small, incremental forces, not from big powerful external forces. The idea applies to making change in our daily lives too. "What makes Gentle Action Theory different is a number of things. The first one, which is what drew it to me, is that it comes from within a community that's affected. So as a Native American woman coming from the reservation, there's been many times where outsiders have come in and said things like, well, you people have a problem with child abuse, you people have a problem with

alcohol, you have people problem with this and so, here's what you have to do, here's the hoops you have to jump through,” says Carma.

Carma gives me an example of how Gentle Action Theory would solve a social problem instead. “Like, let's say, fetal alcohol syndrome. We would do a little check in about how people's week went. And then we would talk about last week and fetal alcohol syndrome. And some of these women had had time to process and there were tears, there was shame, there was guilt, but we would not move on from that topic, until they were ready. So there was none of this, ‘Well, we’re at the end of our time today, let's jump on over to... whatever.’ It's about how they want to process the information, what they see as possible solutions,” she says. While other social strategies come from outside the community and assign solutions, Gentle Action Theory takes its time and creates the space for people to process their trauma and let the solutions naturally arise out of that healing. “Gentle Action Theory really is about people. It's about communication. It's about respect. And it is about addressing societal issues in a way that we can actually get something done,” says Carma.

For one thing, Carma says, the U.S. system of justice was never a good fit for Indigenous communities that dealt with crime much differently before European contact. “Until the first foreigner stepped foot on our lands, we had no jails, we had no prisons. Instead, we dealt with societal issues and harm in a different way. And they were dealt with, but we didn't lock people up. And I think most people are aware, certainly one of the most difficult things that one might experience is being sent away from one’s own people, and it was difficult for one thing. How are you going to survive unless some other tribe takes you in. And then the loss of connection to



family and community and culture is hugely dramatic and painful. But with colonialism came really the very first efforts to punish Indian people. And they had no respect for traditional ways of restorative justice,” Carma says.

Now Carma is mentoring women as they leave prison, helping them to reintegrate. In her book, Carma tells the stories of numerous women who benefitted from the program. Like Myrna...she killed someone in a drunk driving accident and then evaded arrest. When it happened, Myrna was already in her forties, a grandmother, and grieving the death of her husband. She never thought she'd end up in prison. “In prison, she was very much a leader of the spiritual group, such a help to those leading the workshops. And when Myrna came out, she was active in community, active with the nonprofit that sent people in and I just admired her strength. And she had a hard story. And as I got to know her and she would tell me her story,” says Carma. -

Carma says the reason her program worked for women like Myrna is that Gentle Action Theory paired perfectly with traditional healing and ceremony. “Talking Circle is wonderful. Because like at the beginning of the workshop, we would have a short Talking Circle, just this check in about your week. And some of them would be like, ‘Oh, you know, I made it through another week,’ others would be, ‘Oh, I miss my children so much,’ or maybe something happened out there. And so that was really good because with Talking Circle, you don't argue with the person, they don't need your validation, because you've just listened to them, you have given them no feedback unless they want it,” says Carma. The women can join in sweat lodges and help prepare First Foods Feasts. “And the elder women would teach the women, ‘this is how we put it out, because there's a way to do it. These are the songs that we are singing, this is the order that we

eat things in and why.’ They would then share words with the women that women would get to use. Shawls for dances. And the fact that these elders came in and spent time with them meant so much to these women, it was so validating. It also connected them in a spiritual way to community,” says Carma.

Carma spent time with elders to learn these traditional healing methods. One woman passed along an especially important caregiving tool. “She talked to me about things that I could do. And one of them was this Wiping of Tears, where they can cry it out, and their grief, their shame. And then, through prayer with me, we could wipe her tears. In fact, I just reached out to somebody last week who's going through a hard time and said, come on up here. This is something we can do. And it's very meaningful. Because shame and guilt are huge burdens, and certainly ones that I've carried as a woman, a wife, a mother, and it's very cleansing to be able to do that,” says Carma.

Wiping of Tears. Such a soothing act yet not one you could expect to receive in any other group therapy setting. It’s a public act that allows these women to be seen – no judgements, all their scars included.

### **You’re on Indigenous Lands**

That kind of empathy – that willingness to say the hard stuff, to crack jokes, to make you weep – it’s something Denver-based artist and Pyramid Lake Paiute citizen [Gregg Deal](#) strives for in his work. I meet up with Gregg in the foyer of Redline Gallery in downtown Denver. On the wall of their building is a huge colorful mural Gregg painted of a young Indigenous woman looking up

toward the word RISE. When I meet him for the first time, he's carrying what looks exactly like no trespassing signs. They're red and white on metal, but these say something different than the ones we're all used to. "So do you mind just reading one of them?" asks Melodie. "Sure. It just says, 'Attention, if you can read this you're on Indigenous lands. And for more information, contact the Indigenous Sign Initiative,' and there's a phone number," says Gregg.



CREDIT: Melodie Edwards

Gregg gets ready to marine super glue  
some of his signs to the wall outside

Redline Gallery.

"So what have you been doing with these signs?" I ask.

"I have a graphic design background. Right out of college, I worked in the sign industry. And so I worked in fabrication, and with vinyl, and all these different things. And so, I love the sort of existing-in-plain-sight like aspect of this. It looks like a parking sign," says Gregg.

"It looks exactly like a real parking sign," I say.

"Yeah, the colors are the same. But it's essentially making a statement of being on Native land.

To be able to adhere something to a wall permanently, it's sort of a street art piece, just like

putting things out in plain sight and allowing them to be where they are is kind of funny and exciting,” says Gregg.

Gregg is particularly psyched because he found a marine-grade super glue that he can use to put up these signs all over the Front Range of Colorado and beyond. “It's a marine adhesive sealant. So if it can, if it can be used under something as deteriorating as saltwater, I'm sure it'll do just fine on the street,” he says. And that phone number on the signs? It actually works. When you dial it up, “It's just a voice message saying you've reached the Indigenous Sign Initiative. And with the ability for people to leave a message. As I put these into certain places, yeah, people have strong feelings about the signs and so they are leaving colorful messages about how they feel about it. And so I'm collecting voicemails,” says Gregg.

“Can you tell me what some of these people are saying?” I ask.

“Oh, ‘You lost. We won. You know, get over it. This is not Indian land, Native land. We conquered you,’ things of that nature,” says Gregg.

So you can see what he's going for here. A strong dose of very serious mixed with seriously funny. Gregg says using humor is a big part of the healing power of Indigenous art, just like humor is a huge part of Indigenous identity. Gregg says art of all forms can change hearts and minds. Reclaiming bad media depictions of Native people is one of Gregg's specialties, come to find out. He says growing up, Looney Tunes cartoons and Spaghetti westerns were some of the only Native representations he saw. It got him thinking about how to turn those on their head. He started blowing up pulp fiction comics of cowboys and Indians onto large canvases. But he

replaced the often insensitive wording of those. “The dialogue I took down and replaced with lyrics from punk rock songs that I grew up with that use a language that sounds like the Indigenous fight or Indigenous struggle, but obviously, that's not what they're for. They're mildly taken out of context, but I think it really speaks to the intersection of being a Native person, but then also having an American experience and having access to these things, the same as everyone else, but looking at it, obviously through Indigenous eyes,” says Gregg.

Like, here's an example: an old comic strip of a Native fighter on horseback, tomahawk raised over a cowering Revolutionary War era soldier. The fighter is saying, “You're evicted! Time to leave! Don't matter if your family's been here 30 years.” Remember, these are lyrics Gregg borrowed from a punk song. So that's how Gregg's art takes all these old racists tropes and twists them, repurposes them. It's an incredibly powerful example of how Indigenous artists are contributing to the reckoning of our dark past. “As an adult, being able to take images that were recognizable to me, when I was young, and to change, adjust, reappropriate wasn't just taking control of these things that have been in existence since the 40s, and 50s, but also reimagining it to something that makes more sense in terms of self-identifying, self-determining a set of ideas and representation,” says Gregg.

But Gregg's art isn't always playful. One of his most impactful paintings seems so simple; it's of a little boy, nude from behind, standing in a shadowy corner. He says the painting was inspired by a story his grandparents told him from their time at Indian boarding schools. “The story was about a kid that came in, and the way that children are prepared in those spaces, the idea that these, these children are dirty, and, and so they scrub them down, and they put powder on them

for lice. And it's all just foreign and uncomfortable, and, and it's sometimes painful. And the woman who's prepping this child, recognizing that his knees and his elbows look darker than the rest of his skin, which is pretty normal. When you have a little bit of melanin in your skin, when those parts of your body wrinkle up, they're just darker. And she just assumed he was dirty. And she took a wire brush and just scrubbed his knees and his elbows until they bled. And the story goes that she had done all that and put a garment on him and apparently was towards the end of the day and put him in bed. And he wept. And as he was crying, creating a ruckus or creating sound, somebody came in and was angry. And once they illuminated the space, found that he had bled over his sheets and over his garments, because of the scrubbing. And then they punished him. The story goes that nobody really knows what happened to him. They heard him being beaten, and punished until it went silent. And then nobody ever saw him again. And so I'd created a painting about that," Gregg says.

The name of the painting is "Bloody Elbows and Bloody Knees." Yes, it hurts to look at this painting but Gregg says, Indigenous artists are helping us as Americans look at – and not look away – from that brutal history. "Native people are in a unique position I think creatively too, because we are tied to history. And that's just a part of, I think, our makeup and our overall sense of storytelling. But we're also in place right now, where even history is being attacked. We're being told that something is not real simply because somebody doesn't like it. And that I think is the scary place to be in because we can't and should not dismiss history, no matter how difficult it is," Gregg says.

Gregg says when your heart hurts looking at that boy's bloody elbows, that's not a bad thing. Something positive is happening inside you, he says. "The pain that you feel when you hear

something or you learn something that makes you uncomfortable, that's you growing and learning. And if you lean into that, I think you become a better person and have a better sense of understanding and not just your place in the world, but the place that other people have in the world," says Gregg.

I ask Gregg about the argument we're hearing from some corners of the political spectrum that America's darkest history shouldn't be taught because it makes white children feel guilty. As the father of five, that question hits home. "It's interesting, because they're worried about some kids feeling bad, but they're not worried about Native kids feeling bad for their entire lives, over the course of generations and generations and generations. You can't have it both ways. And so yeah, no, I get it. But, you know, I think it's important to figure out how to traverse that in a way that's healthy, not just for non-Native kids, but also for Native kids," says Gregg.

### **Healing the Sacred Hoop**

Talking about children gets me wondering something. I ask Gregg to help me define the term Indigenous Futurism, the term that Ramona used in her classroom. He says it's a hard one for him because it means imagining how Native people can exist outside the purview of settler colonialism. "Because I think Native people are just frozen in the space of relic. And it seems like to the rest of the world, that that's the only place that we can exist, that we are essentially being framed in a place that's just one step away from being a caveman without considering the complexities of our communities, and the progressiveness of our communities," he says. Like

Ramona, he sees this Indigenous Futurism as an act of imagination and creativity. A job for artists.

“There are these incredible things happening within art and within writing, and films that are all pointing to not just self-determination, but a purview of Indigenous existence outside of colonial informing, and that's really incredible and really exciting, because it means that we do exist, we can exist. I mean, what would Native communities look like 100 years from now? Can they still exist? Are they going to still exist? What does language look like? What does tradition look like? How does that look, in terms of technology in the way that technology also informs the way we communicate? There's a lot of really exciting ideas. But the most exciting idea to me is the fact that we can still exist, that there is not just space to still exist, but the longevity of that existence can be here, it can be back then. And it can be also in the future. It can be all of those things,” says Gregg.

It reminds me of one of his paintings: the profile of a traditional Native leader in full regalia, these words across the top, “Existence as protest.” And what he’s saying is that existing is an act of imagination, of manifestation. Ramona would really appreciate Gregg’s answer, this idea that Indigenous Futurism means existing in the past, present and future, all at once. That imagining existence, telling the stories of existence, are crucial for healing. Ramona says, “There's so much creativity, there's so much innovation, though, that has always been a part of our communities, and has always transcended those historical, stereotypical captures of those images of who Indigenous peoples are. And so I think, for me, very simply put, that's what it's about. It's about the imagination, the ingenuity, and the forward thinking that has always been a part of Original peoples.”



Existing in the past, present and future also returns us to the idea of the hoop, such a central image for Plains tribes. That's why it's no coincidence that Carma named her therapy group Healing the Sacred Hoop, a title so similar to the name of this podcast. Carma says hoops are a reminder of Mother Nature's promise that what comes around goes around. "It presents an opportunity to have balance. And it's also the seasons of our lives, from when we're born and a youth and then we move to here, and we think of the teenage years as well, that needs its own section on the hoop. And then, we come into young adulthood. And then of course, we become elders. And then our life we go on to this next world, and how accessing the lessons to be learned in the hoop is what is going to heal us. And it's what is going to give us balance. Because we need to have balance physically, emotionally, spiritually, within community," says Carma.

Shortly before his death, Hunkpapa Lakota leader Crazy Horse foresaw the healing of the hoop. "I see a time of seven generations when all the colors of mankind will gather under the sacred tree of life and the whole Earth will become one circle again," he says.

For many people I talked to, healing starts in yourself so you'll have the strength to do the work of mending the world. Carma says her path had a lot to do with something her grandfather told her. "My grandfather, I remember talking to him, and I had gone through something difficult or was going through something difficult at the time. And he said to me, 'You know, Carma, every night when you go to sleep, you need to ask yourself, have I helped the world today or have you harmed it? And if you've harmed the world, you need to think about what you need to do. And if

you've helped the world, you know, you get to get a good night's sleep.' And it's something I practice to this day," says Carma.

There's this one painting of Gregg's that really seems to symbolize just how the cycle of time links around together. It's of a traditional Plains Tribe Indigenous leader in his headdress with the words: You are your grandparents' greatest dream come true.



"The UN has defined genocide by some very specific tenants following World War II, where that word became part of the vernacular of eliminating an entire group of

people. The United States has done every single one of those things towards Native people, which means that there has been an effort to eliminate an entire continent of people in a systemic effort. And because I'm still here, because I know who I am, because I'm still connected to my tribal community and because I'm able to pass it on to my children means that those efforts didn't work. And so that means that I am part of a dream that was never supposed to be realized," says Gregg.

CREDIT: Melodie Edwards

"I am part of a dream that was never supposed to be realized," Gregg tells me.

You are your grandparents' greatest dream come true. The grandparents of seven generations past, at the same time as it's a message for grandchildren seven generations into the future. It speaks to all the above, linked together in a circle by one dream. A dream that was never supposed to be realized. And yet somehow, by the sheer will and imagination of Indigenous

communities everywhere, it has been realized and fully. In his memoir, Oglala Lakota leader Black Elk said that the sacred hoop was broken after the massacre at Wounded Knee. But as I've talked to Indigenous artists and activists and leaders and history keepers, over and over, I hear people echoing what Donovan told me at the very beginning of this journey. "Most of my life is collecting the history and mending the hoop. The hoop dancer represents all that's good in life and your hoops are spinning. Everything's good. It's a good day, you're in sync and you've got your values, Lakota values: bravery, generosity, respect, wisdom. You've got the circle of life in there and spring, summer, fall, winter and four races and the good road of life. Bottom line is, a hoop can be mended," says Donovan.



CREDIT: Melodie Edwards  
Lakota historian Donovan Sprague in the office on the campus of Sheridan College.