

Hashtag Land Back

I'm guessing you've probably had this experience at least once. You went to see a play at a local theater or attended a lecture on a university campus and before the event started somebody got up and made a land acknowledgement. You've even heard this podcast's land acknowledgement at the end of every episode- a list of the original people of the area. It's a popular way that the American public is attempting to reckon with its history of genocide. But maybe you're like me and you sat in the audience wondering, okay, interesting, but what do Indigenous leaders and history keepers really think about these? Well, I decided to ask. As I've been traveling around the American West doing interviews, I've collected a bunch of feedback on that question. What I've discovered is there's a lot of diverging thoughts about them. But there's also a lot of consensus. Especially if these acknowledgements lead to conversations about how to get the land back for real. Like, for real for real.

Land Acknowledgements Are Not Enough

"Land acknowledgments are... complicated," says University of Denver professor Ramona Beltrán. Documentary filmmaker Jordan Dresser says, "You know, I think the value of land acknowledgments is the fact that they're just saying, like, hey, you know what, this don't belong to us. You know, and I think that's a very powerful thing." "They help us to understand this is the reality, this is where the first people in the land lived, we're going to acknowledge that because that's something that isn't done. We have to encourage people to take these baby steps so to speak, so we can get to where we got to get to," says Crazy Horse Monument CEO Whitney Rencountre. Lynnette GreyBull, director of Not Our Native Daughters, says, "I think it's

powerful, because I think it says, we understand the true history of this land, we understand that we are foreigners, we're immigrants of some sort. And I think that land acknowledgement is the essence of honor. And I think that the more we're able to do that moving forward, the more people are going to tear down those false images of who we are, and maybe something will hit here in their heart to say, I want to learn more."

Wyoming Outdoor Council's tribal conservation advocate Yufna Soldier Wolf says, "Land acknowledgments are great when you can acknowledge that the land used to belong to so many other ancestral tribes. It does show that people went beyond to look into that research. But that shouldn't be the stopping point, it should be the fact that we should all be doing something to accept and acknowledge indigenous people back to the land that they once belonged to." "A statement about acknowledging the Native Americans is great if it's sincere, and if it's historically accurate," says University of Wyoming professor Jeff Means. Playwright Marty Strenzewilk says, "As someone who's been a big environmentalist for most of my life, I thought a bit about greenwashing and greenwashing is something that like really, to my core of my soul is like a real problem, because there are people who really care and do active things. And there are people who use it as a virtue signal, right? Like, look, look at the green things our company is doing or whatever and like, they just shape the words to look like something better." "It's a nice idea. It's a nice thought, I think there's a point where they're just words, and it becomes performative," says artist Gregg Deal.

"Especially at the universities, when you hear a land acknowledgement, I'm like, that's great. And I'm like, but what are you doing for those tribes and those students that come from there

from here in Wyoming, I would love for the Arapaho and Shoshones and also the Crows and other people, the Utes, other people who have ties to this land to be able to like, 'Hey, you know what, you get free tuition.' That would be a powerful step. And you see that what's happening with Colorado, what they're doing in state tuition for all those tribes who identify in those areas. That's powerful, and that's something that's long overdue," says Jordan. Ramona says, "Folks will open a meeting at a colonial institution with a land acknowledgement, but do nothing to support the Native or Indigenous students in the institution. And that does not, that does not correspond. You know, that, to me, is an appropriation of the practice."

MMIW advocate and artist Danielle SeeWalker says, "There was this whole time of a rising land acknowledgement movement, where it seemed like everybody in every entity in every organization was like, we need to have a land acknowledgement. And in many cases, as crazy as it sounds – for me, anyway, it's crazy – is that they would ask Native people to do these land acknowledgments. And they would reach out and say, 'Hey, I have this event, would you be able to do you know somebody? Or would you be able to come and do a land acknowledgement?' And to me, that was like such a lightbulb moment that these organizations and people don't even realize what a land acknowledgement means or what it signifies or symbolizes? A Native person should not be doing that and should never be asked to do that. Because we already acknowledged the land. We already know where we come from. We're already, we know, so it's really people that are not Native to acknowledge that these are lands that they work, play and live on are lands that were stolen. And in some cases, Natives were forcefully removed." Jeff says, "There should also be an implied recognition that the land that you're on legally shouldn't be yours. Almost universally, most of the treaties that were signed, were broken by the United States – all of them

were actually. And so, to sit there and say, 'oh, you know, thanks for letting us steal all your land.' *Arg*, it's sometimes, it is disingenuous for one thing, but then it's just condescending, and just a little bit that act of colonization and hegemony where we're saying, 'oh, we still control you, we still dominate you.' So therefore, we have the freedom to say, 'Gosh, thanks for what you've given us, we're not giving it back.'"

Playwright Marty Strenzewilk says, "It's a shitty step. But it's a necessary step to get us to the next one, the next, next one to where you don't have to force it, right, where it becomes like, we have to go through these steps to get there. They're just really awkward. They're really uncomfortable in a lot of ways. And I just hope that they really lead to action and not just people stopping there." "I am of the opinion that we live in a capitalist society. And the best way to show support to something is to put your money where your mouth is. So I will frequently tell people to donate to Native organizations, even if it's just a little bit. You know, if you're doing a land acknowledgement in front of 200 people, and then everybody puts two bucks towards an organization, that can turn into a sizable amount of money pretty fast. And so, yeah, they're nice. I think it's time to put something else behind it besides the words," says Gregg. Yufna says, "So land acknowledgments are great, but there's so much more work that has to go beyond that to start showing and inviting people back into public lands, federal tribal lands and say, 'You know what, this is yours, we still need your input to take care of it. We can't just do it ourselves. And we don't have the funding or people to put boots on the ground to maintain it.' I think incorporating tribes back into their ancestral land is that actual movement to acknowledge they were a part of the land.

Ramona says, “That commitment has to be followed by action. And if it is not, it is doing nothing. It's actually causing more harm. Because then Native and Indigenous people see an institution acknowledging them but continuing to harm them through acts of aggression. At its best use, it is truth telling. It is a commitment that should be followed by action.” Most everyone agrees that land acknowledgements are all well and good. But they aren't enough, in and of themselves. They need to be a starting place. And many Indigenous activists say one of the best ways is to get creative about giving back the land itself and that it could really mean in today's world.

Crazy Horse Monument

“When you're talking about Native issues that really matter today, it's land, land, and sovereignty. I mean, these are the kinds of things that they need help with, right? All nations are looking for this,” says Jeff Means. You'll recognize Jeff Means from our bonus episodes this season. He's the University of Wyoming Native American history professor who's been my behind-the-scenes guide through this season. But now I want to bring him more fully into the conversation. Because Jeff is Oglala Lakota of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, one of the tribes that reveres the Black Hills. This mountain range is extra sorely missed. Jeff calls them by their Lakota name, Paha Sapa. “We want the land back. This is the loss of Paha Sapa or the Black Hills is literally the loss of your spiritual core, okay? This is a very sacred place, very important in a lot of ceremonies, etc. and to be able to reunite with that and be able to occupy that land again, we'd be able to do nothing but good things for the Lakota. So, give us our land back,” he says.

Whitney Rencountre agrees with this demand. I meet up with Whitney on Zoom, his big office behind him. He's a member of the Crow Creek Hunkpati Dakota tribe and also happens to be the CEO of the Crazy Horse Monument. That's the stone sculpture of the famous warrior located close to Mount Rushmore. And if you don't know, Mount Rushmore is considered by the Lakota tribes to be a desecration of the Black Hills. Here's part of the reason why. "There's a place in the Black Hills called Wind Cave. And it's an underground cave that goes for miles and miles and the National Park Service has only mapped out about 5% of it after all these years. And we believe, our ancestors tell us that we emerged from the Black Hills from Wind Cave. And we began to starve. Iktomi, who was a trickster in our culture, he's the one that lured our ancestors out as they were in a spirit form. And when they came out to Earth, they became a human form. And as they were unique, he told our ancestors that it was like paradise was most beautiful. And everything is great. The Black Hills then became a sacred place to us, because it was our birthplace," says Whitney.

Before European contact, the Black Hills were so sacred that they weren't really used as a place to dwell. "What is told to us from our ancestors and our leaders, we would not live in the Black Hills. We would come here maybe throughout the year and gather to pray, to tell stories, to trade and other tribes would come here as well," says Whitney. At first, the Europeans didn't care one way or another if the tribes kept the Black Hills. In the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 it was part of the land granted them – from the Cannonball River in the north, along the Missouri river through South Dakota and over to Nebraska along the North Platte and into the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming. "So it was a huge area of land. And the United States government said

we will protect and preserve this land for you. You know, as long as you allow the safe passage of the settlers,” says Whitney.

As huge as it was, it was still a tiny piece of their original homeland. But they signed the treaty. And then, “General George Armstrong Custer came through the Black Hills and discovered gold in the Black Hills and all these times, more and more settlers were coming through. So the government renegotiated and more or less reinstated what we call the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. And they said, these are the new stipulations, we cannot protect this large land base anymore. Now, we are reducing it to basically just half of South Dakota. So the Black Hills were still included in the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. That's when Custer arrived and found gold in the Black Hills in the early 1870s, which led to the Black Hills Act, which took away the Black Hills from our ancestors,” says Whitney.

The Black Hills Act of 1877 abrogated all the protections granted in the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. Not so coincidentally, Congress passed it just one year after the army lost the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Congress attached what tribes call the “sell or starve” rider- it cut off all rations until they gave up the Black Hills. But the tribes refused to sell. “One does not sell the Earth upon which the people walk,” Crazy Horse said about it at the time. “Our ancestors did not want to sign. So to this day, the Lakota people have never signed that agreement to officially sell the Black Hills. However, we were then pushed onto reservations. And so that was the big change for us. So now we have nine reservations in South Dakota for our people,” says Whitney.

As early as the 1920's, the Lakota started suing to get the Black Hills back. It stayed in litigation for decades. Then in the 1980's, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the tribes' favor...saying that the U.S. took control of the Black Hills illegally under the 5th amendment. It said the U.S. now owed the tribes \$17 and a half million dollars plus 5 percent interest accrued since 1877 – that added up to \$105 million dollars. But the Lakota still refused to take the money. Here's Jeff again, "All this money is sitting there waiting for us to sign off on. And it's over a billion dollars now, sitting there waiting for the Lakota to say, 'Okay, give us the money.' But what that would mean would be that we'd give up every future claim to any of that land. And so we've said no, and that's because we want the land back now." And so that \$105 million dollars has been sitting in a BIA account accruing interest since the 80's. It's now worth about \$1 and a half billion dollars.



CAPTION: Mount Rushmore is located on a site considered sacred by the Lakota

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A constant reminder to tribes of this injustice is Mount Rushmore, the rock sculpture on the face of the sacred Black Hills of presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. "Because the presidents were in power when a lot of horrific things happened to Indigenous people and it's not acknowledged, there is a disdain there. Mount Rushmore is a reminder of the horrific past that Indigenous people have endured. So it's hard for Indigenous people to honor that. Matter of fact, when Indigenous people look at Mount Rushmore, it's a reminder that even though the Black Hills legally belong to Indigenous people, it's a reminder

that it's not by law. The government is not upholding their agreement and giving it back to Indigenous people, or at least providing some negotiations on how we can come to an agreement so to speak. It's just kind of a dead issue in that regard. So Indigenous people have to organize and find mechanisms to try to educate and to that effect, in essence, it just becomes an outpouring of sometimes protests and other things,” says Whitney.

One of those protests is the Crazy Horse Monument, another rock sculpture in the Black Hills. But this one is of the renowned Oglala leader. The whole idea for it came from a Brule Lakota elder. “Chief Henry Standing Bear, one of our chiefs, historical leaders, he was attending Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, basically, on the east coast. And as you know, he took a negative and turned it into a positive in terms of his own education. And he began to take the war, so to speak, instead of fighting, he figured, take the good of the new culture and leave the bad. So he took the good of education. And when he saw Mount Rushmore happening, he wanted a monument in the Black Hills to kind of happen and match that so that people would not forget about the Native American culture. We would not be erased,” says Whitney. So in the 1940’s, Chief Henry Standing Bear reached out to a well-known, award-winning sculptor, the Polish-American Korczak Ziolkowski. Standing Bear commissioned Korczak to create a monument of Crazy Horse. Korczak agreed. The only thing was, Crazy Horse refused his whole life to ever have his photograph taken. So the design had to be based on drawings of him. “But it doesn't just represent Crazy Horse. The monument represents the North American tribes. Crazy Horse just stands as a strong, one of the greatest war heroes in mankind’s history. And he represents the people in that bravery. So we try to honor all tribes and history and the beautiful cultures that we have throughout the nation,” says Whitney.

CAPTION: The stone sculpture of Oglala leader Crazy Horse is based on drawings since he was never photographed in his lifetime.

CREDIT: Creative Commons

Construction began in 1948 and it's still ongoing today. Whitney says there's a good reason for that. "We've been blessed to be able to utilize just private donors and supporters. And so we have been blessed not to rely on taxpayer funds. It would just not be right to use taxpayer funds



and government funds so to speak, to pay for a monument that is dedicated to Indigenous people," Whitney says. Koczak's daughter Ruth and now his grandson Caleb have continued his work. But they choose to use less destructive methods than those that were used to create Mount Rushmore. No explosives because they want to protect the integrity of the mountain. Instead they use a carving technique with diamond cable rope. "But in the next three to five years, to ten years, we're going to see a lot of progress. So obviously, the face is complete. And he's finishing up on the hand with Crazy Horse pointing the direction of his ancestors, his people, and then when in the next three, five, ten years, there's gonna be a lot of progress. You know, so we're really excited about that," Whitney says.

Whitney says, even only partially complete, people come in droves to see the monument. But when they get there, they find so much more- a tribal university and a museum among them. The Crazy Horse monument is just one way that the Lakota are laying claim to the Black Hills.

Recently, 1,900 acres came up for sale in the Black Hills near a sacred site known as Pe' Sla, a traditional place for Sundances and prayer circles. "And so the tribes kind of came in and said,

‘Hey, we would like to purchase this.’ And then the owners were receptive to that. So they worked together and purchased this land in the Black Hills, and utilize it for gatherings, for camps for the youth, and so on and so forth. And some people say, ‘Well, we shouldn't have to buy back the land.’ Other people say, ‘Well, that's the kind of legalities of what we're living in today.’ So we're going to take advantage of that,” says Whitney.

Jeff is one of the naysayers. He says sure, it's great that the Lakota own that property. But it doesn't count as reparations for broken treaties. “Because that was not federally-recognized tribal land, okay? In other words, it's still going to be taxed. All the things that go with owning any chunk of land is going to relate to that certain situation. So, in other words, there's no real sovereignty over it. Okay. I mean, I own a home here. I'm Lakota, but it's not Lakota territory. So it's the same kind of situation, it's really not land back,” Jeff says.

It's for all these reasons that a movement sprang up calling itself #LandBack. A leader of the Blackfoot Arnett Tailfeathers coined the term in 2018 on social media in an effort to get lands returned in Canada. The group [NDN Collective](#) picked it up in the U.S. and used it when former President Donald Trump visited Mount Rushmore. During the pandemic, he expressed a desire to get his face added to the mountain. “Now here's what I do, I'd ask whether or not I'll someday be on Mt. Rushmore. But here's the problem, if I did it – joking, totally joking, having fun – the fake news media will say he believes he should be on Mt. Rushmore. So I won't say it,” Trump said. Indigenous protestors turned out and were arrested but it got a national conversation rolling. Since then, ideas for how to return land have spread across the American West.

#LandBack

Let me introduce you to someone I met recently. “My name is Rick Williams. I’m an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota tribe. And I’m part Cheyenne. And my Indian name is Tall Bull,” says Rick. When it comes to the Land Back movement in Colorado, Rick is the guy to keep your eye on, and he has the background to pull stuff off. For instance, he was CEO and President of the American Indian College Fund for over 20 years, a professor of Indian Studies at CU Boulder, and a consultant for the Discovery Channel’s series How The West Was Won. Not long ago, he started poking around in his ancestry. “So what really got me started on this was I decided to research my great-great grandfather. His name was White Horse. He was a leader of the Council of 44, and also a Dog Soldier leader. And when I got into that, I discovered these proclamations that Governor Evans, a territorial governor, had issued in Colorado, and as I looked at them, both of them were illegal and clearly illegal and very, very destructive to Indian people.”

You might recall these laws from our story of Sand Creek. “The first proclamation called for tribes to go to a certain place in the state and stay there. And if you didn’t go there, you were deemed hostile and the state of Colorado was at war with you. The second proclamation, which was even more destructive, when the first one didn’t do the job that he wanted it to, the territorial governor Evans said okay, I’m now going to authorize all Colorado citizens to kill hostile Indians and take them in for your reward, you can take their property,” Rick says. These laws led directly to the mutilation and murder of over 160 Cheyenne and Arapaho at Sand Creek. “Just by chance, I raised the question, were these laws still valid in Colorado today? And it turns out, they were. And I spent a year and a half trying to get Governor Polis’ attention, to do an executive order to rescind those proclamations,” Rick says.

Did Rick get those proclamations rescinded? Yes, yes, in fact he did. And that got him thinking there was more he could accomplish. “Immediately after that, a group of us formed what was called [the People of the Sacred Land](#). And we decided we needed to do more, as we were learning about the history of what happened to American Indians in Colorado. So we started this Truth, Restoration and Education Commission,” Rick says. The commission, also known as TREC, has since hired a consultant to help them investigate the economic losses to Colorado’s tribes left behind by the history of the Plains Indian Wars. “So we're doing an analysis of illegal occupation, we're doing an analysis of the loss of an economy because of the buffalo. We're looking at water rights and oil and gas production. And we're doing a comprehensive loss assessment. What's it look like, right now is \$3 trillion. You know, it today's values, if we use the calculations at the time of the taking, and are able and would add 5% compounding interest, which is almost always done in a tort case. It's pretty substantial. It's billions and billions of dollars. And I think that's important for people, both in the state of Colorado and beyond, to recognize how much we really did give up, how much did we lose. What a difference that would have made in our lives – we wouldn't be living in poverty, we wouldn't have 80% unemployment rates on our reservations,” Rick says.

The TREC commission is also investigating how Colorado fraudulently took possession of land that legally belonged to tribes by treaty. They’ve focused on the Fort Wise Treaty of 1861. “It should have never been ratified. We have evidence to that effect,” Rick says. That’s because two sections of it were bungled. A new Indian agent was assigned to bring in ten tribal leaders to sign the treaty that would give up most of their land. “Only one person signed it, and he was

reportedly drunk. So they were never able to bring any of the tribes in to validate the second half of the treaty. And the second half of the treaty would be all of the land north of the South Platte, along the Continental Divide up to Casper, and then back down along the South Platte River encompassing Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas and the eastern part of Colorado,” Rick says.

That was article six. Then there’s the problem of article eleven. It called for negotiating with the tribes to sell the tracts of land where many of Colorado’s cities along the Front Range were booming after the discovery of gold. But those cities didn’t bother with those negotiations. That didn’t make the U.S. Senate happy at all. “Well, the treaty goes to the Senate. The Senate looks at article 11 and says, ‘We don’t like this.’ So they take it out and they ratify the treaty. Six days after the Treaty was ratified, the State Department sent a letter to the Indian commissioners saying, ‘Article 11 was modified, you need to get the signatures of these Indian people on this contract because it’s absolutely necessary. It’s probably not valid if it doesn’t have the signatures.’ Well, they never did that. It never happened. So all of the land in this treaty should have been deemed unceded by any stretch of the imagination. If you want to do something honorable and honest, that’s what needed to happen. And it never did,” says Rick.

In fact, the city of Denver muddled article eleven even more. They passed a resolution saying the city had been so kind and welcoming to the Cheyenne and Arapaho people that they were going to require the tribes sell their land for a dollar and a quarter an acre. But Denver wasn’t kind or welcoming- an Arapaho woman was even raped in Denver while visiting. But remember that Congress had ripped that article out of the treaty before it was ratified. “So this left this land up in the air. Was the title transferred some other way or? And when they realized that they didn’t

have legal title to it, Congress passes what was called the Congressional Act of 1864. And they basically give the title of the land to whoever was on it in Denver at that time, at no cost. And the Indian people were never compensated for that. They never transferred the title. And they never were compensated for any of the titles. So I would say that Denver is probably one of those areas, it's really clear that the land was taken illegally. And, you know, we need to think about what's going to happen to honestly deal with something that happened in the past,” says Rick.

Land Grant Universities

That means that the land that was supposedly given up in the Fort Wise Treaty – over 50 million acres stretching across four states – TREC has found that all that land was not legally ceded. Then in 1862 – just a year after the Fort Wise Treaty debacle – Congress passed the Morrill Act. “The ink wasn't even dried on the treaty when they transferred large portions of the land to educational institutions across the United States, about 10 million acres of land,” says Rick. [Land grant institutions](#) they're called now. The University of Wyoming, where this podcast is produced, received over 90,000 acres valued at over \$17 and a half million dollars adjusted for inflation. Colorado State University got 89,000 acres now worth over \$10 million dollars.

“And again, this was all illegal land. And they got it from the Utes, and they got it from the Cheyenne and the Arapaho to create the institution. So Colorado State University was created on the backs of Indian people. There's no doubt about that. If I was an honorable person and I had some authority at Colorado State University, I would be seriously looking into this to see what could be done, what kind of remediation, what kind of restitution can you do to help create

educational opportunities for American Indian students,” says Rick. Rick says Colorado State University is in a position to make amends for history. “Interestingly enough, they still own 19,000 acres of that land that they should give back to Indian people. That 19,000 acres of land is generating oil and gas revenues. The interest off of this endowment should be enough to accommodate to give every American Indian who wants to go to college there free tuition. You know, we have a wonderful vet school at CSU – I think they should have a special program for veterinarians, for American Indian students. Admit a cohort every year, that would help our communities,” Rick says.



CAPTION: Rick says, “If I had some authority at Colorado State University, I would be seriously looking into this to see what could be done, what kind of remediation, what kind of restitution can you do to help create educational opportunities for American Indian students.”

CREDIT: Creative Commons

Rick says some colleges and universities are beginning to step up. “Yes, South Dakota State University who’s, by the way, got an American Indian president, and they began initiatives to really support American Indians. And I think you're starting to see it happening across the United States. Ohio State University is doing some investigations, and they're trying to figure out how do they make amends to what happened and support American Indian higher education. And so I think it's starting to happen. There's some other places, like Cornell and MIT, that really need to be looking at it doing more,” he says. Cornell University was one of the biggest beneficiaries of tribal lands. They received almost a million acres now worth \$92 million dollars. In total, 52 universities across the U.S

benefited from the Morrill Act. Rick says the time has come to right such wrongs. He's set his sights on a specific goal – to make Colorado a welcoming place where its original people feel safe returning to their homeland.

“We need some long term structural kinds of opportunities to guarantee a future for the people who were alienated from their home and homelands, to be able to come back in ways that they want to. And so one of the proposals is to create an embassy in Denver to bring back the tribes and have them have a say-so in what's happening in our land, in our homeland,” Rick says. But Rick and the TREC Commission don't plan to stop there. “How do we help the tribes begin entering into co-management agreements with places like Pawnee National Grasslands or Comanche National Grasslands, or some of the other national land properties, federal properties in the state. We believe that that might be an opportunity for jobs and developing new economies for Indian nations. And we have one tribe that is determined to recreate a reservation here. They're going to come here and they're going to purchase land and they're going to call themselves the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribe of Colorado and reclaim their territory,” Rick says.

Rick says they want to create a reservation even if they have to buy the land instead of get it returned to them by the state of Colorado. He thinks such progress is possible with help from communities that come forward as allies. The city of Boulder is working with the Northern Arapaho tribe to give back the property known as Fort Chambers where Col. Chivington once trained his soldiers before marching them over to Sand Creek. And it's in Boulder where there's another interesting example of what the Land Back movement can look like on a smaller scale.

Sacred Space

I make a trip to the Dairy Arts Center in the heart of the city's downtown where I meet up with the center's executive director, Melissa Fathman. "And so I know it's kind of busy today," she says. "Anything special going on?" Melodie asks. "Often people come here, just because they're just so inspired by the artwork around them. And then at night, when all the theaters are teeming with activity, there can be up to 400 people in the lobby," Melissa says. "Wow. That's amazing," Melodie says.

Right at the front of the arts center is a sign over a door into another wing. Sacred Space, the sign reads. And it's here that some very unusual things are happening. "Yeah. So then, in terms of the Sacred Space, which is prominently located right as you walk in the door, which is kind of nice. I don't know if we want to describe what it says here?" Melissa says. "Yeah, that would be great.



Do you mind? In big red letters here," Melodie says. "In big red letters, it says, 'this is Native land.' Just to be clear that this space is completely dedicated to Indigenous artists and their work," says Melissa.

CAPTION: Artist and activist Danielle SeeWalker and The Dairy's Director Melissa Fathman stand inside the Sacred Space gallery.

CREDIT: Melodie Edwards

Melissa and I walk in across those words into the Sacred Space gallery. Waiting for us are two people you've met elsewhere in this podcast, both members of [Creative Nations](#), an Indigenous artist collective- Marty Strenczewilk is our podcast story editor. He was the Managing Director of Creative Nations when the Sacred Space first opened and his plays have been performed in the center's theater. Danielle SeeWalker is also here today- she's the activist we met last episode who just helped get a bill passed to address the MMIW crisis in Colorado. She also happens to be a visual artist using a mix of traditional and contemporary art styles and is an original founder of Creative Nations. Danielle and I wander around looking at the art show hanging in the gallery. One of my favorites is a painting on cloth of three women with the MMIW red hand painting on their mouths. One wall is filled with portraits of superheroes like Black Panther and the Indigenous heroine from the film Prey.



CAPTION: Artwork by Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand hangs on the Sacred Space gallery wall.

CREDIT: Melodie Edwards

“So this is Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand. She's a Lakota artist based in Denver. She works a lot in digital

mediums and arts. And so she I think many of these are digitally drawn and then reproduced via print. And so yeah, she does a lot of portraiture work, and then she overlays a lot of it on kind of a ledger art,” says Danielle. Afterward, we all pull up chairs in the middle of the gallery and I ask Melissa, as a non-Native gallery director, what initiated the idea for giving Indigenous artists a

gallery space. “I had always wanted to have some sort of land recognition. You know, and at the time it was curtain speeches and plaques. And you know, I thought we're an Art Center, we could do better than that. And then I thought maybe it should be a sculpture. And the more I leaned into it, it started to feel, that like after mass shootings, and when people say thoughts and prayers, thoughts and prayers, it's like, okay, well, we need something more, we need some sort of action,” she says.

So Melissa was puzzling over this question when the art center happened to host a mural dedication on the back of their building for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis. In the middle of the mural was the face of Sarah Ortegon. Long time listeners might remember Sarah. We interviewed her in season one about her life and she was also a history re-enactor in Shall Furnish Medicine, our podcast about pandemics in Indian Country. “So we invited her to come to the dedication and say some words and did a smudging ceremony. And it was a very simple sentence. And it gets me emotional each time. But that she said, she was standing out in the parking lot, looking up at the Flat Irons, this beautiful place that everyone comes to, and there's multimillion dollar homes now and corporate headquarters, and everyone wants to live here and take up real estate. And she basically just said, this is where my family used to live. And I just burst into tears. And I was like, Oh, my God, you know, and that was the click in my heart. In my head, I was like, we need to, like I can't give the land back as a single person. But as someone who runs an art center, I can absolutely carve out space in our center that's completely dedicated to Indigenous artists. So that was the thought,” Melissa says.



CAPTION: The mural of Sarah Ortegon on the back wall of the Dairy Arts Center that inspired the idea for giving Indigenous artists a gallery space.

CREDIT: The Dairy Arts Center

So Melissa started reaching out to some of the Indigenous artists she knew – a poet, a fashion designer, a graphic designer, and two visual artists. “So I was

totally open to what it could be. And that's when I met Danielle. And who else? Kelly? Yeah, and Walt was there, we'll see JC. Yeah, so it was sort of the initial core group of people. And it was really, I should maybe hand it over to your experience. But it felt really special because it was during COVID. And so people had a lot more time to spend with one another and to sort of dream and think about what it could be,” says Melissa. “And we came and we ended up coming in person and we were all so excited about it. But at the same time, being Native, there's always that hesitation of, what's the catch? There's always that hesitation when anything good comes our way which is quite sad. But we ended up coming to the Dairy and meeting regularly in person

and just spilling out all our dreams and like hopes and like what we envision and some of them were such grand ideas,” says Danielle.

Marty got involved a little later when he noticed a call for Native artists in the Dairy’s newsletter. He showed up in person. “So I hung around awkwardly for a little while, didn’t talk to anybody. But eventually, Danielle, whoever’s at the front spoke for a bit. And afterwards kind of the ice broke in the room, I guess we’ll say. And I end up talking to JC and I’m like, ‘Hey, I’m interested.’ JC’s always like ‘Cool, you’re in.’ Like that’s JC’s kind of way, is like if you’re not interested, maybe he’ll still tell you you’re in. You know, he was doing that all the time with Native artists,” he says. And because Marty is Marty, he soon made himself indispensable. “I quickly started filling out like meeting agendas and how we put together documents and I was like, ‘Oh, no one’s done this kind of organizational stuff. I guess I’ll do it.’ And then I was like, ‘Here, you do all that. you can since you know how to do that.’ I was like, ‘Yeah, sure, no problem.’ And so eventually Melissa said, this might be a good opportunity for you to lead this program,” says Marty.

So Marty took it on. Their first exhibit happened during the pandemic before the gallery was even built. One of the founders, the poet Tanaya Winder, had a box of earrings she’d collected from the families of missing and murdered women. “And we ended up creating this huge missing and murdered Indigenous women exhibition that included 1000s of earrings that people donated from all over the country. And those earrings are one sided. So it’s just one earring. And it sort of symbolizes like that, that idea of when you lose the other piece of something, you kind of cling to that one that you have, and you in hopes that you’ll eventually find the other piece to make

everything whole. And that sort of symbolizes missing and murdered Indigenous relatives that the crisis that's currently going on these days,” Danielle says.



CAPTION: A display of earrings belonging to missing or murdered Indigenous women were part of the very first show at the Dairy.

CREDIT: The Dairy Arts Center

They all tell me that installing that show was intensely moving, handling each of those earrings and thinking of the person who once wore it, a person who was taken too soon from this world. The show was a huge success – Danielle says people still talk about it. It took some time to raise the money to build an actual gallery though. But they made it happen. “This space was built like a year and a half into the program last September,” says Marty. “Oh, really? It’s brand spanking new,” says Melodie. “Yeah. And this is the first time I’m actually stepping foot in it. So it’s kind

of like full circle,” says Danielle. “This is only the third exhibit in this space, says Marty. “I think that's right, yeah,” says Melissa. “So how did it feel coming across those words?” says Melodie. “You know, it was so good. I was just like, oh, this is really fantastic. And it was really special,” says Danielle.

But you might be wondering – because I did – does this really count as a Land Back project? The way Jeff and Rick visualize land back? Marty says, the Sacred Space gallery is about more than just land. When he started putting up exhibits, he found out just how serious the Dairy was about it. “When that was working with the front staff, from the house staff, because we're going to have an opening event. I was thinking like, ‘What do we have to pay for this?’ And he'd be like, ‘Well, nothing.’ I'm like, ‘No, no, I mean, like, what would I have to write in this? The cost that we're gonna have to do to run this event.’ He's like, ‘Well, no, that's that's the whole point, right, is that we're going to support this venue, right? So this is your space, do what you want with it within these four walls, you guys can do what you want.’ And then you've all these people are here to help support the efforts, you know. And so we did, right, like we put art on the wall. And we sold real pieces of art. I think we sold 30% of the initial exhibit or something like that, it was substantial. So artists made real money, and 100% of that went back in the pocket to the artists,” he says.

And Marty says it went even farther than just covering costs and giving artists the money.

Melissa and the other Dairy staff were careful not to steer the vision for the gallery. “I remember very specifically Drew, who's the curator for the Dairy, I was asking him to make a decision for something that wasn't his to decide, because I defaulted to him because he's a curator, and I'm

not and he said, 'You're the Native person, not me. So I'm not making this decision for you.' He's like, 'I don't feel comfortable, nor should I.' And I was like, 'Oh, he's right,'" says Marty. Marty says the gallery counts as a land back effort for another reason too. "So what we didn't mention is in the space, we're sitting right now, were paying renters, so people who rented the space and gave revenue to the Dairy. And this may come as a surprise, but arts organizations aren't exactly loaded with cash that they can just throw away, like, it's no big deal. So it's a real sacrifice. So to make that sacrifice is even bigger than the give right? To say that we're willing to give something up in order to give back and I think that's an important part of land back is this allyship of showing sacrifice," he says.

"And to add to that, it was people that were also running an arts organization, so they had a really good deal, really low rent for their office space, and I had to kick them out. So it was kind of a reverse displacement situation. And they were not happy. And they went out into the community and were bad mouthing me and what's this, you know, this is like tokenism. What are you doing and it was crazy the things that I got back. But I just sort of stayed the course. And you know, like, we have a vision, we're gonna see it through," says Melissa. Part of that vision was pushing back on expectations of what Native American art is supposed to be.

As Westerners, we've seen lots of stereotypical paintings- a warrior in a war bonnet on horseback and very few paintings of who Native Americans are today. "Native art is Native art, because a Native artist is making it, not what it's supposed to look like from an outsider's perspective. And that's really disappointing. So I love that this space exists so that we can challenge that and showcase what Native art looks like and what Native artists are creating, and

performing and writing and speaking about in so many different ways and formats,” says Danielle. “We had the first exhibit, it was curated by Robert Martinez and Bruce Cook. And we had a lot of conversations about who and what we're putting here. First of all, it was going to be all Arapaho and Cheyenne artists, because this is their land. I remember very distinctly this saying, he said, If I have to paint another fucking buffalo...And because that idea of like, that's what Native art is. And what was interesting is we said to the artists, whatever you want to put up, there's no theme to the show. It's called homelands, because it's your home. And that's it,” says Marty.



CAPTION: A ceremony preceded the opening of the Sacred Space gallery

CREDIT: The Dairy Arts Center

At the Sacred Space gallery, Native artists aren't sitting down at the Diary's table. They own their own table. Danielle says the Land Back movement will gain momentum as more communities make space for Indigenous leaders to build their own table and invite people to sit down. "The land back movement is, it's more than giving pieces of land back to Native or Indigenous people that were here before the time of colonization. Obviously, we'd love that. And we'd love for that to happen. And in some cases, it actually is happening. But it's also about engaging with the local Native people in your own communities. If there's already things going on, Native-led communities. I always tell people to join in on that reach out, see how they can support and be an ally. And we need that because even if every single Native person stands up, and we all shout at the same time, we're still not loud enough. And so we definitely need that support and allyship. I think some people often feel timid, or they're like, I'm not really sure if I'm gonna be welcomed, or, am I able to come to a powwow? Or am I able to, like, do this or that? And it's like, yes, absolutely," says Danielle.

But Danielle says the Land Back movement is also still very much about welcoming original peoples back to their homelands. She's been working with Colorado lawmakers on a way to do just that. "I want to, in the next session, hopefully introduce a bill that allows Native people to access state parks without having to be charged, so that we can harvest our medicines, we can pray in sacred spaces. This state has a lot of sacred land spaces that are inaccessible to many Native people because of those fees. And so that's one way of Land Back that I'm trying to sort of introduce," she says. She says one of the most important things that the Land Back movement is doing is making people aware of the need to address the injustice of stolen land. "I run into it all constantly that people think Native people are a homogenized group of people. You know,

I've been asked a couple times, 'How do you say goodbye in Native American?' or something like that. And I'm like, 'Okay,' Or they're like, 'Oh, I love the Native American culture.' Which one? When I'm having these conversations, whether it's with an organization or an individual, I always say, 'Do you know where you live? Like, what the tribes are that are from that area?' Most times, it's 'No, I don't.' And there's resources out there where you can look it up and say, okay, I live in Alabama, what tribe was here historically? And you can find that out and so I think that's the starting point. I always tell people, research where you're coming, where you live, and who was here before you. And then from there, that's where you can pursue land back engagement and opportunities," says Danielle.

After my trip to visit the Sacred Space gallery, I ask my friend Jeff Means what he thinks. As our resident hardliner on the question of Land Back, I want his take. Was it enough for an art center to give control to Native artists of an art gallery – even if it was legally forever? His answer was, mmmm...not quite. "It's about land. Because land eventually means control, power, etc, you know, the power to maybe be able to be self-sufficient and not need the Bureau of Indian Affairs anymore. The land is absolutely vital space, whichever you're meaning by that is, this social space, or this intellectual space, or these kinds of things can be ephemeral and go away after somebody leaves, right? And so land is permanent. And the resources that, that brings to a Native nation are then therefore permanent. So the land is the key," he says.

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