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Paint cans rattle on the bed of a black RAM 1500 pick-up truck. The sun is blazing hot, and the green clock numbers on the dashboard read just past noon. It's mid-December and the winter's chill is approaching, but for one more day, it's another hot day in sandy Tucson, Arizona. The truck cruises at 35 mph, crushing the pebbles on the dirt road. Its speakers pulse to electric guitar strums, and James Hetfield's vocals break into "One," Metallica's electric riff: "Now the world is gone, I'm just one. Oh God, help me..." The tires reach a stop and 33-year-old Dwayne Manuel clicks off his V8 monster engine. Manuel has reached the job of the day: a rock wall.

His concrete canvas extends some 50 feet long, bleeding colorful letters and images. The wall he is about to paint belongs to Walter Moreno, the owner of a small tire shop. Under this midday yellow light, a wooden sign swings back and forth. In red letters, the sign reads: "Walter's Tire and Wheel." The sign hangs from a wood post, above the little one-story shop, which sits in the corner of Benson Highway and South Country Club Road. The shop is located a few miles west of the San Xavier Reservation and about 30 miles west from Tohono O'odham Nation—both homes to the Tohono O'odham People. In less than a day, Manuel will transform this tagged rock wall into a giant mural. He calls it "[The Trickster Mastermind.](#)" It's an image of an indigenous graffiti writer wearing a coyote skull mask and a "war bonnet." Walter's shop offers one of the few walls in Tucson where Manuel can legally paint, as other businesses perceive his work as graffiti or vandalism. But Manuel is an O'odham artist, and aerosol is only one of the many tools of the trade.

Through aerosol fumes of color and clouds of pigment, Manuel and his graffiti crew are exploring indigenous identity in the twenty-first century and, in Manuel's case, transforming O'odham tradition into the aesthetics and sounds of modern times: graffiti and hip hop. Change in tradition is a gesture often frowned upon on the reservations, because there is fear of losing traditions. It's an ancient fear passed on through generations among the tribes, a consequence of brutal history of American assimilation. Yet Manuel understands tradition must, like men, evolve. To this end, he uses graffiti art techniques to bring a new pictorial image to O'odham symbols like "[The Man in the Maze,](#)" a symbol of creation woven into O'odham baskets. In Manuel's art, it appears as a [stylized graffiti symbol](#) that breaks the traditional [maze circle](#).

On a daily basis, Manuel wears the classic wardrobe of his trade: a gray or black shirt, a pair of navy blue cargo shorts, black socks and rubber sandals. All, without fail, are covered in smears of plastic paint—pink, green, blue, yellow, white and red. He stands 6'5" tall, and tags with the name "Colossal," which is fitting for a big guy with a warm heart. Manuel refers to himself as a "tower of power, too sweet to be sour."

As he walks up to the wall, Manuel greets his painting comrade Tim Pasqual, AKA "Ingen," a tall slim man rocking a chinstrap beard, black clothes and a chain wallet. His braid of thick black hair reaches his tailbone. Pasqual unloads a five-gallon bucket of gray paint, two six-foot rollers, and a bag of white woven rollers. A hole is pierced through the middle of the plastic bag, and only two rollers remain. Good enough—for the job of today.

Pasqual is a member of Manuel's four-year-old native graffiti crew: Neoglyphix. The indigenous aerosol collective's name reflects the marriage of old traditions and new techniques: "Neo" means new, while "glyphix" refers to the prehistoric art form of petroglyphs, created by etching images into stone. "We're doing this artistic expression, but we're using even the can—the modern can—to do it," said Manuel. "We are a graffiti crew because we wanted to return to painting on the walls like we have always been doing it. Our ancestors would paint on stones. Paint on the wall."

The collective's mainstays are twelve indigenous artists, all coming from different roots: On'k Akimel O'odham, Tohono O'odham, Mexica, Purepecha, Apache, Yaqui and Navajo. All are tribes native to the Southwest and Northern Mexico. But the collective welcomes all artists to paint, regardless of tribal bloodlines, age or gender. Neoglyphix strives to establish a foothold in the community through graffiti and street art, highlighting and engaging the indigenous community with multi-genres that speak about culture, including dance, fashion, music, and spoken word, said Manuel.

Manuel's first cultural art encounter was during third grade, while he went to elementary school off the reservation in Mesa. Here, he discovered O'odham symbolism for the first time after a class assignment that asked him to draw "who he was and where did he come from?" He drew a native cat that wore braids, carrying a bow and arrow. He brought it home to show his mom, and explained the prompt of the school assignment. "This is who we are, Mom," said Manuel. He recalls her answer, "No, we didn't have braids. Our people traditionally had dreadlocks. It's more of the northern plane tribes that did braids."

With that, the 8-year-old's mind opened to seeing the differences between Native American tribes, noting everything, from the smallest distinctions between hairstyles and ceremonies. "We are all different, even though we are all Native Americans," Manuel says now. "Before, I thought we were all the same. But I was just little and didn't know too many Native Americans other than my people. I was also making that connection between that s**t you see on TV, or the movies, like *Dances With Wolves*. I knew they were native, and I knew I was native." After his awakening, Manuel figured out that being On'k Akimel O'odham had a unique identity, and he began his search for his culture, sketching characters on his notebooks.

The On'k Akimel O'odham People, also known as Pima (*pee-mah*) to Westerners, have occupied the desert region of Southern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico for centuries. The origins of the word Pima are unclear, but it's said to come from a white neighbor's misunderstanding of the native word for "I don't know," which is pronounced *pini-mahch*. In O'odham language, Manuel refers to his tribe as the Akimel O'odham, which means "River People." The Akimel O'odham share the reservation with another Native American tribe that has longed lived there, the Maricopa, Xalychidom Piipaash—people who live near the water.

Growing up in the reservation, the third son of five siblings, Manuel lived in the peaceful stretches of green, undeveloped land, sandwiched in the middle of two suburban cities: Scottsdale on the West and Mesa on the East. The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Reservation is one

of the four hearts, one of the reservations that makes the great Tohono O’odham Nation—the main reservation. The other three federally recognized O’odham tribes include: The Tohono O’odham Nation, the Gila River Indian Community, and the Ak-Chin Indian Community.

In Arizona, Manuel is not the only young artist in search for an indigenous identity. Different voices belonging to the rest of the 21 federally recognized Arizona tribes are making a calling in metropolitan cities like Phoenix and Tucson, painting murals to find an answer: How does a person maintain an indigenous mentality in these modern times? The answer for Manuel was to put tradition and history in plain sight; to put historical symbols and messages—the Deer Women (Yaqui), the Man in the Maze (O’odham), Huitzilopochtli—hummingbirds (Mexica), and Jaguars (Mayan), back where people can perceive them at no cost: the streets. He hopes an encounter with culture through murals will inspire a person to embark on a quest to discover the true meaning behind indigenous history.

Their preferred canvas is the wall. Walls are a historical symbol for division and separation. They have left deep scars of conflict on world history, from the building of the Berlin Wall that divided communist East Germany from the rest of the country after the bloodshed of World War II, to the Wailing Wall in the old city of Jerusalem, which continues as a symbol of a fight over religious prayer, to President Donald Trump’s call to build “The Wall” dividing the Mexican and U.S. border to stop illegal immigration. The Wall also threatens to divide the Tohono O’odham Nation, because many families near the border still have ties to their O’odham Brothers in Mexico.

Manuel hunts for legal walls for the crew to paint. A regular job for Neoglyphix is to paint over walls vandalized by gangs from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Reservation—the Crips and the Bloods—who under the blazing sun fight over territory with spray cans and bullets. While others see walls as gang signposts for territory or as a device for division of land, Manuel unites people with walls. When old brick walls drown in scratched-out tags, Manuel seizes this opportunity to paint, turning gang messages of enmity into works of art, representing culture with magic and pride.

But although the collective’s intentions are humble and good—to paint a positive image of indigenous culture to restore respect and appreciation for tribal history— Neoglyphix has faced resistance from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa tribal council. “There’s a lot of resistance, mostly from the older people,” said Manuel, “the tribal council people, because they see the graffiti. We use our spray paint cans for our tools and a lot of them wonder, why do we even use that? And in their mind, it’s bad, because people use it to vandalize. They have no idea that they can use it for actual works of art.”

He has, however, found that at least someone is listening: the Native youth.

Before picking up their cans at Walter's Tire & Wheel, the friends prepare the wall, dipping their rollers into the viscous paint as they cover up an old tag, a name in spiky letters painted on another Tucson artist's visit. With a single coat, Manuel has rolled a bonding plastic layer of color onto the rock. For years, Walter, the shop's owner, has allowed artists from all corners of Arizona paint on the shop's walls that have been standing next to the Circle K gas station, here since 1989. Walter knows the messages will be temporary, but gazing at his shop every morning gives him a feeling of anticipation, thinking about what image and message will come next. He is friends with Pasqual, who comes inside the shop to ask for permission to paint. The shop has become a gathering point for Neoglyphix's members, a place where they can throw single pieces with their tag names or native characters.

From a green dairy crate in his truck, Manuel pulls out a purple can—the sketch tool for his gray brick canvas. Sweeping his hand across the wall, the lines give life to a cracked coyote skull, but instead of having holes for nostrils, the bone shell becomes a respirator. Flamingo-pink mask filters sit on each side of the coyote's mandible.

Underneath the hollow mask, a piercing stare begins to take form. A brown face is the fire beneath these bones. [“The Trickster Mastermind,”](#) wearing a red hood, comes to life. He's an indigenous graffiti writer, pointing finger guns to the cloudless blue Arizona sky. He was originally drawn with spray cans on his hands, but always wears the coyote mask. “The coyote is out at night mostly, and he plots, he schemes, and he's always eating the chickens. He takes whatever he wants,” Manuel said. “Graffiti writers work at night, we go undercover at night to scheme and plot, too.”

In his youth, practice nights were Manuel's favorite past-time. To practice tagging, he frequented cement water tunnels built to channel water out of Scottsdale in case of floods. Today, as he walks through these water tunnels, the only remains of tagging history are two red-stenciled maracas. Manuel recalls coming here during his teen years to practice the different phases of his graffiti persona. In his first attempt at age 16, he called himself “Swift,” but, he says now, he “sucked and had no can control. I wasn't swift at all.” He continued to try other monikers: “Swift, Bang, Godamn, Hate, Hater, and Hator.” The latter came during a phase of teenage angst, and today, it's the writer name he is mostly known for in the graffiti community. Hator is the name he got up a lot, back in what he calls the “prime times.” Angry teen days also gave birth to his metal band, Scalp. But Manuel says he's always been a pretty mellow guy—mellow and metal.

When Manuel wasn't painting on walls, he was slapping the bass and singing in rock shows, spreading electric riffs and angry vocals throughout the backyards of the Salt River reservation. Scalp and the bands that followed were hardcore, singing about broken hearts. He pursued music for almost ten years, but even as though his stage days are now gone, Manuel likes to recall the good old days with photos, “back when trashin' was our business.” In one of the band photos, young Manuel has shoulder-length hair and is holding two drumsticks, crossing them into an X. He wears a denim vest with patches of punk bands, and a black patch with a white peace sign, which sits on the right side of his chest—on his heart.

Manuel's art transitioned from messages of pain and angst to history and culture. He enjoys incorporating traditional wardrobe elements on his characters, for instance, the trickster wears a "war bonnet." The war bonnet is a headdress of white and black feathers, the symbol of a leading chief and a true warrior, and only those who have earned the right and honor through recognition of their people may wear it. The acrylic feathers are outlined in black, filled in with white and hints of purple. They are hawk feathers, which are traditional to O'odham chiefs. On The trickster's forehead, an emblem of a purple hand is painted with a spiraling circle for a palm. The circle reflects O'odham ancient traditions, many of which are inspired by the mythology surrounding the circle of life.

"Pretty much everything is a circle in O'odham culture," said Manuel. "The Man in the Maze, the maze of life, the sun, the moon. We dance in a circle, and a lot of ceremonies utilize circular composition."

In the early 1900s, the O'odham People began employing "The Man in the Maze" pattern in their basketry. The design also appears in jewelry and petroglyphs. It positions a man at the entry of a labyrinth believed by the Akimel O'odham People to be a floor plan to his house, and by the Tohono O'odham People to be a map giving directions to his house. A black figure, representing the man, is contained inside a circular maze. The little man's name is "U'ki'ut'l." The maze represents our paths in life, seven concentric paths, orbiting around the seed pattern in the center circle. The corners represent low points or hardships and the rounded straight lines represent happy or high points. The center dot represents the passage into the world after death—not heaven or hell, but "the next place." There is one last corner before reaching the center, representing one last reflection on life, to clear your consciousness before meeting your ancestors. In the middle of this "maze," a person finds their dreams and goals. U'ki'ut'l searches for his path through the maze of life. The journey is often puzzling and difficult, but the People must struggle and work hard to reach that deeper meaning. The motif of the circle of life is a common symbol in many tribes. Although Native American tribes practice systems of beliefs with different artistry, they all share a common belief: Everything in life is a cycle. Everything returns to the Earth.

The Man in the Maze now appears in Manuel's murals as a [stylized graffiti symbol](#), which speaks about the clash of two worlds. "A lot of our murals have to do with the whole clash of modern and traditional," said Manuel. "The cliché of two worlds, and that's what we're living in. It's almost inevitable to talk about it with the work we're doing, because we're trying to have this indigenous mentality from where we all individually come from, but at the same time, every day we have to live under this Western society. Time is Western. The calendar is Western."

The native crewmates live in these two distinct worlds even though they originate from one seed, one people—the O'odham People. Pasqual identifies himself as "Tohono O'odham," while Manuel identifies himself as "Akimel O'odham." But Manuel says there is no difference,

because he considers all O’odham members family, even after their forceful geographical separation by the American and Mexican governments in the eighteenth century.

Historically, the O’odham People inhabited an enormous area of land in the Southwest, extending south to Sonora, Mexico, north to just above of Phoenix, west to the Gulf of California, and east to the San Pedro River. This land base was known as the “Papagueria.” The ecosystem is naturally desert land and it has been home to the tribe for thousands of years.

From the early eighteenth century to the present, the O’odham land was occupied by foreign governments: Mexico and the United States. In 1853, through the Gadsden Purchase, also known as the “Treaty of La Mesilla,” O’odham land was divided almost in half between Mexico and the United States. According to the terms of the Gadsden Purchase, the United States agreed to honor all land rights of the O’odham People now stuck in Mexican land, and this would have entitled the tribe to have the same constitutional rights as any other American citizen. However, the demand for land escalated with the development of mining and the transcontinental railroad and O’odham land was lost on both sides of the border.

“We’re the same People even if we’re in different areas, in different reservations. People think that we’re different, but we are not,” Manuel said. “If you take away those reservations, if you take away the city, back then, we roamed freely back and forth with one another, a long time ago. We were agriculturalists. We grew crops. People would migrate to one another and help because it was hard work. We always help each other out.”

Manuel and his crew draw from these indigenous myths, mixing the ancient stories with their contemporary experience of life. He sees messages of indigenous tradition as uniting them all in spirit and heart. Physical barriers do not matter when family hearts are united in prayer. Physical barriers cannot contain people’s thoughts. It’s the way O’odham People overcame hardships to maintain a heart at peace—through art and culture.

Back at Walter’s tire shop, the air smells of aerosol and tacos. Nearby is “La Taqueria El Rapido,” a little stand ran by a married couple and their brother-in-law. The friends don’t miss this opportunity to get their grub on, and each order four tacos of asada. After they finish eating, Manuel returns to the wall and reaches into his shorts’ pocket. He takes out a pocketknife and reaches for a dark-gray spray can from his truck. He shakes it and with a quick swing pierces the aluminum can. Under pressure, the paint squirts out of control, but Manuel shakes the can, forming a dark halo around the image of the trickster.

Nearby, Martina Dawley, assistant curator at the Arizona State Museum for American Indian Relations and Neoglyphix’s co-manager, is sitting in a red canvas chair, watching the bloody Arizona sunset as Pasqual cleans up his outlines. “Graffiti, it just continues to be the stigma,” she said. “People associate it with gang activity. They associate it with vandalism.”

Dawley works to “convince not just the elders, but the council members, people that are in charge of different programs to try and seek funding for them. It’s very difficult to convince them that this is art. Because again, we are in this society that looks down upon this type of art. And it’s not just with the tribe, but with the general society,” she said. Neoglyphix’s first attempt to get tribal funding for projects failed. Manuel’s proposals were rejected until Dawley archived and presented Neoglyphix’s work to the tribal council, using a PowerPoint presentation. Today, the council gives them roughly \$500 each year to use, mostly to buy paint cans for murals they paint with the youth.

Behind her, Pasqual stands on top of his silver truck. His brown tattooed arms reach out to the top of the painting, spraying the finishing touches on the trickster’s hawk-feathered war bonnet. His metal chain rattles against his black pants, and the truck gently wobbles with his steps. Dawley gazes at the almost-finished work, and lets out a small chuckle as she recalls Neoglyphix’s first show at the University of Arizona. Dawley assisted in organizing the live painting show, and remembers university staff being concerned over Neoglyphix members going on a “bomb run” to tag all over campus. “They were really offensive,” recalled Dawley. “But these guys were very patient. The communities might see this as vandalism, but I think if they knew that people like Walter is allowing this, then I think it would really make an impact.”

Neoglyphix’s work began four years ago, painting a live show on the front lawn of the Arizona State Museum at the University of Arizona, accompanied by live music and other artists’ performances. Since then, the collective has painted about a dozen murals throughout the Tucson and Phoenix areas. When Dawley found Neoglyphix, she was curating a project for the Arizona State Museum: a request to bring in more Native People’s artwork. She says the museum has the best collection of Native American belongings collected from sites in Arizona. “The museum features Native People from the north like the Pueblos and the Navajo,” Dawley says. But every so often she would hear people say, “Where are the O’odham People?”

“It was my goal to say, ‘Let’s get some O’odham People here and, you know, make people aware that they are here,’” said Dawley. “Neoglyphix is a large part of this, not only to show the community the artwork, but let the greater community see Native People doing things other than what you see at Indian Market.”

Indian Market is as an organization with a simple mission—to promote American Indian Art. Each mid-August, Santa Fe, New Mexico becomes the Indian Market, enveloping the town's central Plaza for the weekend of the market and during the two weeks preceding it. Hundreds of gallery openings, live painting shows, dances and musical performances take place in this annual artisanal market. Last year, Neoglyphix participated in Indian Market with a live painting, and Manuel plans for a bigger show this year to rock out the market.

When talking about cultural identity, Dawley said, “A lot of people think they have lost their heritage and culture.” Yet, she continued, “But when they see the artists drawing these [cultural] images, they’re like ‘Wow, they’re really in tuned with that.’” The imagery is portrayed in a modern way, but the message remains the same.

Next to the trickster, Paul Pablo, AKA “The Nox,” a Tohono O’odham graffiti artist, has painted his name on the wall on bold neon green letters, radiating a baby blue halo. On the center, a blue eyeball with a small white glow stares back at the viewer. “Neoglyphix is family. It’s like a ‘brotherhood,’” said Pablo, letting out a chuckle.

The brotherhood of graffiti writers also includes sisters, and the consistently active members include three women: Jeanette Rocha AKA “Lady Rise,” 38, Anitria Melina AKA “Yukue,” 32, and Tasha Martinez AKA “Rezmo,” 33. In Native culture, there’s a stigma against graffiti writers, but even a bigger one for living as a female graffiti artist. “I never heard of anybody having girls in their crews,” said Pablo. “I mean, actually admitting them because they’re so rare. The females need to see that, too. They need to see that they can do it.”

“For those girls and the girls that are in Neoglyphix, that’s a good role model for them to see,” said Pablo. “Wherever they go, and whatever we have shows and everything, if they see that they think, ‘If she’s doing it, then I can do it.’”

Manuel has also become the bridge for many Native American artists in Arizona to connect with other indigenous artists in other cities and states. In Neoglyphix projects, indigenous artists come from deep in the reservations, where tribal families plan long trips to collect water and groceries. Adventuring out of the reservation to network is not an easy task. “It wasn’t like how we can do today. Some of us can just do a five-minute drive and go to the store,” Pablo says. “But out there you have to plan, and grow crops. You can’t always depend on the outside.” Manuel hunts for walls, sets up shows and gathers the crew together to paint. “We all have that similarity that we like to paint,” he says. “It’s our lingo.”

The Trickster Mastermind is finally finished, and Pasqual calls out to Manuel to check it out. The teammates, the friends, the native brothers, stand next to each other, gazing through the darkness at their work. The stars shine brightly in the deep blue sky above Walter’s tire shop. Capping their spray cans, the two friends smile.

“That’s tight, bro. You did a good job,” says Manuel, patting Pasqual on the back.

In addition to the Neoglyphix collective’s 12 adult members, children and teens also contribute to the murals. As Manuel drives through the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Reservation, he points at the murals he has done with the reservation youth, including a baby blue cement wall on the horizon ahead. It’s Gayl Howell’s place—also known as “the cat guy.” “He owns a million cats,” Manuel says. The walls were offered to Manuel after Howell came to a program Manuel helped organize in 2013 called [Labor of Love](#). The program aims to erase gang graffiti art with stories of culture, and the man wanted them to remove his home’s old graffiti tags, as his wall was a constant target.

Manuel started Labor of Love with his right-hand man friend, Akimel O’odham artist Thomas Breeze Marcus, AKA “Breeze.” Through the program, students learn about art techniques, composition, mediums, art history, and street artists, but also learn about respect, responsibility, O’odham culture, heritage, and more importantly—themselves. Labor of Love runs with funds from the tribal government to assist the youth, but in solo endeavors with Neoglyphix, Manuel and the crew pay out of pocket.

To fix Howell’s house, Manuel’s seven students replaced the tags with murals of traditional baskets. Under the hazy heat waves, blobs of earth colors can be seen at a distance. The land is dry, and the grass radiates gold, standing three feet tall from the cracked sandy surface. On the blue stone, Navajo and O’odham basket designs are painted in yellow ochre, burnt sienna, raw umber, and Venetian red—the natural colors of the Earth.

The true earth tones are found in natural pigments—the colors are made of clay, rocks, charcoal, shells, minerals, plants and insects. In ancient times, pigments were then mixed with a natural binder like water, spit, animal fat or urine. Artists have used variations of this earth-tone palette since the prehistoric times, painting stories and glyphs on stones. Sharing knowledge. Painting on walls.

Manuel’s students were working on painting the topic of roots and representing “home.” In their mural, the word [“Arizona”](#) is spelled out in shapes of sports mascots, a student’s design from his art class. The “A” represents the Arizona Diamondbacks, “R” is the Salt River High School logo, “I” is for the Sun Devils, “Z” for the Coyotes, “O” is a basketball for the Phoenix Suns, “N” is for Flagstaff, and the ending “A” is the cardinal bird, glaring back at the viewer inside a halo of royal blue.

Lastly, [on the third wall](#), the words “Akimel O’odham” are sprayed in purple, neon pink, cardinal, yellow and gray. The word is pronounced “a-key-mal o-tem,” and the L’s are rolling L’s like in the Spanish way. “It’s a tongue twister,” Manuel said. Three ocean waves precede the text—royal blue, teal and light blue, and at the end of the tide we meet the gaze of an O’odham boy. His portrait stares warmly at the viewer, with twinkling eyes and a smile. His skin color is a combination of Naples yellow, sienna and Venetian red for his rosy cheeks and forehead. The youth took two weekends to paint this mural, and the wall was not vandalized again.

While driving to the next stop on this tour of walls, Manuel’s truck bounces the stash on his glove box: a box of matches, a yellow measuring tape, old receipts, a bundle of sage, and a triangle set ruler. He stops in front of the Valentine’s mural from 2016, a light purple wall. Here, Neoglyphix came to put up their writers’ names. Jeanette Rocha has sprayed her tag name, Rise, using red, pink, white and indigo blue, next to a grumpy gorilla wearing a small business suit. She has sprayed blue flames on her name, rising like smoke in a backdrop of floating red and pink hearts. Rocha chose her writer name to empower women to “Rise.” Reflecting on her own Mexican heritage and the women that live “oppressed” under “machismo,” she has chosen this action word to help women break out of that mentality.

Anitria Melina's design also stands out—she has spelled out her alias, Yukue, meaning “rain” in Yaqui, using green, pink and baby blue, shaping the letters with a cactus texture. She chose “Yukue” as her graffiti persona to memorialize her grandmother, who colored her life with Yaqui culture. Grandma would yell out, “Yukue, Yukue!” when the rain approached, warning Melina to run outside and get the clothes hanging from the line.

In the mural, Yukue's “Nopalita”—one of her native characters—smiles, raising up a fist with the rock and roll horns. Her hair is in two buns beneath her green suit outfit, and the only strands of hair sticking out are her fluffy whirled “copete” (*bangs*), which are ocean blue. She wears a pink Margarita flower on the side of her head—the color and style you frequently find on Melina's own hair. The Nopalitas are dark skinned because “they work the fields,” and in these character creations, she expresses her “love of the land.”

The paint for this mural came from friends, and from Manuel sharing his own paint. But it's a constant struggle to buy paint for the artists. In her younger days, Melina served county jail time for stealing spray paint out of Home Depot along with her now-husband, Ryan Webster, AKA Erode One. Sometimes with no money for paint or for rent, the couple would hit Home Depot like a ritual date, loading up with supplies for the week. It was a necessity to keep painting, although the couple also loved the adrenaline rush of shoplifting. Paint is costly to cover a wall. It costs \$6.50 for basic colors, with specialty colors starting at \$9.45. One mural can take twelve cans.

On the wall next to the Valentine's mural, Manuel painted a collaboration with Breeze. The base is baby blue, and the Man in the Maze design extends to the end of the wall, abstracting the circular maze into graffiti designs outlined in black. It appears as a forest of blue branches, swirling into squares and spirals that are layered on top of each other, giving the notion of space. In the middle, the recognizable circular maze emblem shines in iron green, streaking out of circumference with blue streaks, which blend into the rest of the designs in the wall.

As the friends painted this mural, a next-door neighbor's dog visited them and rolled around in a bucket of blue paint. The friends laughed at the dog's spontaneous visit, but thirty minutes later, the dog's owner barged into their painting session. Manuel recalls her anger, fearful that she would make the quick assumption that the graffiti artists had vandalized her dog. “She be tripping,” recalls Manuel, but he stepped forward to greet her. “Which one of you is Dwayne Manuel?” the lady asked, glancing around at Manuel, at Breeze's face toasting under the sun, and the mess of blue paint splashed on the dirt ground.

Finally, she glared back up at Manuel. “If you're going to paint something on my dog,” she said, “at least paint something cool.”

Manuel sits on his garage, and [an aerosol mural of the Man in the Maze](#) in neon pink, blue, yellow, and green glares behind his head. U'ki'ut'l sits on the edge of a stylized purple arrow

that forms the maze. The maze is a mess with lines leading all over the wall in different directions, and it is vivid, colorful and unfinished.

Manuel relates well to his young artists. He developed a love for painting at their age—when he was 14. While running on errands, he would spend hours flipping through magazines in pharmacies. Manuel found graffiti and mural art printed on those glossy pages, too pricey to purchase, but it was a source of inspiration to start practicing his own style. “Drawing is my favorite tool of expression,” said Manuel. “It allows me to relentlessly focus, and at the same time, allows me to lose myself in the process. There is nothing closer to pure bliss than experiencing a good drawing.”

Growing up, Manuel dreamed of following the traditional O’odham artistry much like his mother, [Alice Manuel](#), a basket weaver. He realized his dream when he studied fine arts at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. After four years spent obtaining a Bachelor’s of Fine Arts, he continued his education and earned a Masters in Fine Arts from the University of Arizona. In Manuel’s thesis work, he painted contemporary history paintings that told stories about “Native American issues, health issues, diabetes, violence, addiction; and historical water, and land issues,” said Manuel. “I feel it’s my responsibility as an O’odham person to address these issues.”

In one Manuel’s thesis artworks, a surreal painting called [“Mommy Knows Best,”](#) the artist describes diabetes and addiction—both rampant in the Native American community. A red soda can with round breasts, the only feature that distinguishes her as female, wraps her arms around a chubby Native American baby, who has puckered up his lips to receive a squirt of bubbly black soda. The baby gazes up curiously at the animated red can as she spits soda pop from her mouth and feeds him with her left breast. The characters take life against the backdrop of a heated and dry desert. Above this scene, a man in a prison cell is wrapped on a blanket, scared, gasping for help—terrified.

Diabetes is a common issue among young adults and children on Native American reservations. Before the 1940s, diabetes was uncommon among Native Americans, and only 21 cases of diabetes were identified among the Akimel O’odham people. But by 2006, approximately 38 percent of Akimel O’odham adults aged 20 years or younger had [Type 2 diabetes](#), states a Health Promotion and Diabetes Prevention study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP). And in 2017, a [CDC study](#) found that “American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest diabetes prevalence among any racial/ethnic group in the United States.”

Looking through glossy sleeves of new drawings, Manuel pulls out [“Broken Relationships.”](#) A woman is pushing her face through a phone screen, cracking the glass as her earthly body cracks, too. The body is pierced with [“shegoi”](#) plants through her belly, disintegrating her flaky skin—the left side of her body gone. She has no heart. No face. No identity. In Manuel’s private work, he enjoys to sketch about the clash of two worlds, technology versus nature, and the loss of native traditions to technology.

“Our natural medicine out here is called shegoi,” says Manuel. “It’s a plant all over the res, and you can use it for anything. You mostly boil it and make a tea out of it.” The plant [shegoi](#), also known as greasewood, sarcobateous or [creosote bush](#), is an evergreen shrub that grows from three to seven feet tall with flexible stems—small greasy or waxy green leaves, and small orange-yellow flowers. Shegoi is among the longest-lived plants, and each stem lives a couple of centuries spreading more seeds from one original ancient seed. The O’odham People believe it was the first plant created on Earth. Shegoi is promoted as a “cancer fighter,” although clinical studies have not shown benefits yet.

In “Broken Relationships,” the woman is plugged into the big eye through a USB cable, the attention-seeking monster, keeping her addicted to all “the likes and the comments.” On her forehead, a heart-shaped hole breaks open. She holds a phone on her left hand, while on the right, she folds her fingers into a thumbs up. Manuel says the drawing is a commentary on technology and social media destroying the natural world. The machine is blinding humans to the natural medicines of the Earth, and soon, the knowledge of natural healing will be buried and gone even as answers exist right in front of us. “But even my people, the further we go along, they don’t know what it is. People don’t tell them or teach those teachings,” says Manuel. “It’s going to disappear, that disconnect is going to happen more and more.”

Manuel sketches these drawings to warn people about the loss of traditional teachings. But he also wants to warn the American people about the trickster on TV, President Trump. In [“Coyote and his Shithole Headdress,”](#) Manuel drew the coyote with a feathered headdress resembling the president’s head, after Trump referred to Haiti and African countries as [“shithole countries.”](#) In this portrait, the coyote stands firm with a sardonic stare, and the president’s pupils are lifeless, looking upward while an arrow pierces his skull. Manuel chose to reverse roles on this drawing, showing Trump as a headdress in place of the traditional coyote headpiece worn in native ceremonies, because, he said, the coyote “is making a public mockery of their [American] beliefs, their leader, their hate. He wears the presidential head as a ritualistic performance. Just as the president entertains the American people daily, Coyote does this to entertain the Indigenous consciousness.”

The drawing got almost 4,000 shares on social media with the local tribes, [a magazine article written about it](#), and [black shirts that sold out](#). Many people supported the image on social media, but others commented on the impoliteness of disfiguring an American president. “They say that’s disrespectful to do that to our president and have his head chopped off,” Manuel said as he chuckled. He compares his drawing to political drawings made of former [President Barack Obama](#), and said he does not understand the difference. “They talked [mad shit](#) about Obama. It was horrible,” he said.

Manuel says only natives immediately understood the message of the drawing, but even for those who don’t see the humor, he hopes his audience gains consciousness. “The coyote is a trickster and he does all this crazy sh**t, but he learns from his mistakes, so the coyote is also a teacher,” he said. He hopes the American People will grow from these mistakes.

Manuel enjoys helping minds grow, and after graduation pursued an art teaching career. In the 2014-2015 school year, he became an art educator at the Salt River High School. After nine long years of being away for college and working away from home, he wanted to return home to teach, inspiring the youth to venture out the reservation borders in search for their dreams. But after Manuel had been home for two months, gang violence on the reservation escalated, leading to the death of a Salt River police officer who was killed after being lured into a traffic stop with suspected gang members, according to a report on news website [AZcentral](#). Following the death of Officer Jair Cabrera, the Salt River Police Department pulled out of the “gang taskforce” that the Mesa police force had created in hopes of stopping gangs. Cabrera was the first Salt River officer killed in the line of duty, and Salt River’s decision to pull out of the taskforce left the reservation with less police patrolling.

Not enough bodies were out to fight gang crime, and graffiti became an everyday presence on Salt River. “At the time, the graffiti was going on pretty big on our reservation. People’s houses and cars were getting tagged on,” said Manuel. But in working with the local youth, he came across a newfound passion to beautify his reservation. And so Manuel took his cans, knocked on doors and did what he knew best: paint.

“I go to the owner. I knock on the door and I say, ‘Hey, I noticed you’re having problems with graffiti and I’m a muralist. I’m an artist,’” Manuel said. “I want to know if maybe I can paint your wall for you. Free of charge. You don’t have to pay nothing for it. You just have to let us have access and have your permission.”

Manuel began recruiting for Neoglyphix at live painting shows, galleries, and art projects on his appearances throughout the art scene of Phoenix and Tucson. He mingles and he talks, finding interesting “wild natives” to join the crew. To be part of Neoglyphix, Manuel has only one request: to have passion for the paint. Because Manuel recalls his former high school being “gang infested” with Bloods and Crips, he wants to change the intimidating surroundings in which he grew up. In August 2007, Manuel’s former high school became the new grounds for the Department of Corrections in Salt River. “We used to laugh at how funny this [building] used to be our high school and now is the Department of Corrections,” Manuel said, chuckling at the thought again. He laughs at the irony of transforming a gang-infested school into a jail, locking up the same kids that caused the trouble. “The reason behind the gangs are family ties,” Manuel said. “Children grow up in gangs, which later become part of those gangs in their adult life—it’s a cycle.”

But after teaching for a year, he decided he had to put in practice what he preaches, and ventured off onto his own dream of working as an artist and leading Neoglyphix. In 2015, Manuel began to paint more commissions, individual pieces, gifts for friends and hunt for more walls. Until 2016, he was an active co-teacher with Labor of Love. Manuel’s last “official” mural was painted at the water tower in the reservation. He still enjoys returning to paint with Breeze not only to help an old friend, but for his students. “I miss the students. They’re pretty fun,” Manuel said. He also likes to remember his Salt River students, and he keeps an old calendar

picture that laid on his teacher desk: On the top right-hand corner of the page, the students wrote in red letters, “Mr. Manuel is awesome.”

It’s a sunny day in Phoenix, and the light is blinding white. The wind gushes hard, picking up sand past the cement sign reading “Granada East School.” The school’s mascot is a roadrunner, and their motto reads “Headed for the Future.” It’s past 2 o’clock, and most of the children have gone home. The elementary school’s walls are bare and white, windowless, and video cameras are posted in every corner. It’s mid-April, and the friends have gathered to paint at Rocha’s school, where she teaches art education. They are making four mural projects with the children: “The Flyest Dreamiest Art Club.”

Neoglyphix today is just three members: Rocha, Melina and Manuel. Rocha applied for an art grant to liven up what she calls this “prison-looking school” and add color, culture and a message that represents all her students. The small \$200 grant gave her the supplies she needed—paint cans. Rocha has asked Manuel, Melina and Martinez to each design one wall, and join her to paint with the children on their free afternoons.

The metal balls rattle inside the paint cans at the blue front gates of the school, and Melina stands on the center-right mural, fixing the wings of a green hummingbird. She has painted a four-foot-long bird taking flight—the wings streaking in greens and purples as if they are flying in quick motion. An ocean wave washes over the hummingbird and three wine-red clouds float in the light pink sky. She’s working on painting details, but the wind is too strong. It sends the aerosol paint flying in the wrong directions. Melina hunches over, and uses her left hand to cover up the wind to keep spraying. It doesn’t work, but she persists. Three fourth grade students and one high school volunteer join her. They have stuck around despite the sandstorm, and they stand behind her, watching the friends paint.

Manuel joins in on a mural next to hers, and stands on the right-hand side with an aqua-green spray can. In this mural, three O’odham children stand holding hands, watching over the horizon—over the desert land. Two boys stand on each side and a girl on the center, and saguaro cacti are spread across the landscape in different sizes, shapes and forms. Each has been painted by a different student. A ghostly emblem of the Man in the Maze appears in the sky, and U’ki’ut’l rises to the center of the maze like a mythical hero.

Rocha brings paint cans from her classroom for the students, and they join the crew on the wall. The high school student joins Melina, and she helps her clean the ocean wave off the mural, rolling it away with light pink paint. Fourth graders José, Cornelio and Nathaniel join Manuel on his wall, hovering around him, asking to spray saguaros. José takes a metal stool and sits, painting a bush over an oval of dark brown. He’s 8 years old, and wears the school’s uniform: navy blue pants, white shirt, and a navy blue sweater stripped white. He fiddles with the can’s tip, trying to point it at an angle as the wind blows the paint away. Frustrated, he gets up and

asks Manuel for advice. “Does this look like a bush?” says José, pointing at the blob of green in the landscape.

“It’s alright, it’s alright,” says Manuel.

“I tried to do it this way,” José says, raising the can at an angle and looking up at Manuel.

“Oh, okay, you made up your angle?” says Manuel as he chuckles. “No, it was good. Do some more. Put bushes all over the place, you know what I mean?”

After Jose’s coat of paint dries, he has moved down the wall, and Cornelio and Nathaniel sit on the dirt ground in front of the mural. Cornelio holds a black paint can, making a circle for a bush. Cornelio wears a gray t-shirt with a spray can, spreading its hawk wings over a pencil, a brush and a Sharpie. On the bottom, “The Flyest Dreamiest Art Club” is written in blue cursive.

Nathaniel points at Jose’s cactus. “What happened there? Why is that green one all messed up?” says Nathaniel.

The three boys keep struggling to draw bushes on the landscape, trying to learn can control. They apply the paint despite the strong wind, as Manuel reassures them and offers guidance. Nathaniel approaches the wall with a shaky hand, wondering where to point the can. “Point it a little closer. Put it right there,” says Manuel, pointing at the wall on an empty spot.

Nathaniel approaches the wall, and Cornelio helps him, holding the can with both hands. After several tries from Nathaniel, six blobs of black paint appear on the desert land. “I don’t know which one is a bush. They all blend into each other,” says José, looking critically at their work and picking up a green can to apply some finishing touches. But his additions don’t make things any better and the students improvise. By the time Cornelio and José’s mothers pick them up, the boys have turned the saguaro cacti into little black bugs with green eyes.

The orange light shines above the three Neoglyphix friends as they join Nathaniel, the last little helper, on the wall. Melina and Rocha have finished painting over the wave with light pink, and Nathaniel kneels below them painting the rest of the wall with the same color. Manuel bends over fixing the cacti, making them skinnier and cleaner using the aqua-green can to blend the excess into the background. He adds blue to the black lines of the maze, giving them depth and little bit more color.

While they watch the paint dry, the three friends sit on metal stools as the sun sets behind them. Nathaniel is finally ready to go—he tells them that he actually doesn’t attend to this school. He was just nearby to meet his sister at track practice and joined in on the fun after he saw all the paint. Nathaniel celebrates his accomplishments with his new friends, calling them all “great artists,” before waving goodbye.

The three friends laugh about this funny meeting, and gaze at the image of the three O’odham children on the wall, pondering future plans. Rocha is drawing the design for the fourth wall. Once the project is completed, she plans to organize a school show with traditional dances and songs from each tribe the walls represent. Melina, who not only paints on the wall, but also on hair, hopes to open her own hair salon soon at the reservation. And Manuel has big plans for Neoglyphix to continue painting at shows. He hopes to return to the Indian Market this summer with bigger mural ideas from his new sketches, adding native hip hop group [El Vuh](#) and more graffiti writers to “kill it with the cans.”

Neoglyphix is not only returning tradition to the people, but hope and warmth. Their hope is for the youth to not only carry on ceremony and culture, but also carry on in their lives with respect to mother Earth and their fellow human beings. Native Americans live with gratitude towards the four elements—water, earth, air, and the sun—and they present art as a gift to Mother Earth. Manuel thinks of life as an ongoing line, and wants to “see the endless possibilities of where our line will continue,” he says. “We just gotta keep that pencil moving. It will stop someday, but not today. Not today.”

Source List

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Books

Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism
By Devon Abbott Mishesuah

A Toltec Wisdom Book: The Fifth Agreement
By Miguel Ruiz and Jose Ruiz

Tohono O'odham/Pima to English
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