

Sogorea Te' Land Trust Is Huchiun, A Territory of the Lisjan Ohlone

By Rocío Moreno (translated by Deborah Meacham)

La *tierra*, the land, the possession of territory continues to be the main demand of the Indigenous peoples in any geographic location. Several Latin American countries have seen efforts to return the land to its first inhabitants. Throughout the Americas, we are still witnessing a colonization process that began in the 16th century. Since that time, the land has become the spoils of war. The colonizers fight to take the land and possess it, while the Native peoples struggle to keep the land and resist. Probably one of the fiercest battles is being waged in the United States, where capitalist power is protected and entrenched. Currently, the United States recognizes more than 500 American Indian tribes and Alaska Native entities at a federal level, but there are also many Indigenous peoples without official recognition (here and throughout the Americas). In addition to this lack of recognition, there is no communal land, which has been the ownership structure of the Indigenous peoples since ancient times. We cannot forget that the United States has not seen any real agrarian distribution—the question of whose land is it has not even put on the table for discussion.

The situation of the Native peoples in the United States is just as precarious, subject to racism, and unequal as it is in the rest of the Americas. Our brothers and sisters who inhabit these lands must fight a series of terrible battles against the great capitalist monster that is provoking a crisis of civilization around the world. That's why their struggle and their anti-capitalist strategies must be known by all of us who share the principle of fighting for life, for the recovery of life in our territories.

I've observed that the struggles of the North have their own forms and demands, and I am teaching myself to listen to and understand their history, since that is where their main demands are found, including the right to land and the right to exist as a culture, as a people. Both are broad goals, and once they are reached, more cracks will be opened in the foundations of capitalism. A few weeks ago, I met two powerful women, who are doing just this with their work in the north of the continent: Corrina Gould and Johnella LaRose, who founded the Sogorea Te' Land Trust in 2015.

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SOGOREA TE' LAND TRUST

A History of Dispossession or a History of Dignified Rebellion?

We must begin with their history, their past. Unfortunately, it's practically the same as with all colonized peoples. When the Spanish missions arrived, the colonization process began, and with it, the displacement of the Indigenous peoples who lived along the Pacific Ocean, in the forests, and on the immense plains. Unlike other Indigenous peoples elsewhere in the Americas, they were soon dispossessed and scattered. Indeed, their extermination continues today because the historical account still fails to recognize that these lands belonged to Native peoples. This territory includes the entire San Francisco Bay Area in California. Over the years, the area became a lucrative location, and little by little, the Lisjan Ohlone people were forgotten, as their territory, Huchiun, had been taken from them. In that painful past, Sogorea Te' remembers that they are still there.

In the present-day city of Oakland, California, home to the Lisjan Ohlone people, these two women decided to recommence this forgotten journey. Since there was no way to secure recognition of the right to communal land for the Lisjan Ohlone people, these women created the Sogorea Te' Land Trust. It is important to point out that the Lisjan Ohlone people are not federally recognized. Practically their entire territory is inhabited by capitalism, as it includes major cities like Oakland, Berkeley, Alameda, Piedmont, Emeryville, and Albany. I think there are plenty of reasons why capitalism suffers from amnesia, however, things are changing thanks to the efforts of Sogorea Te'. In fact, they are forcing the cities and their citizens to recognize that these lands belonged to an Indigenous people. Their movement has grassroots support and a broader community that will fight side by side with them, which is why their struggle, the struggle of the Indigenous peoples of this region and of the entire country, is so complicated—it seems impossible, yet once they start back on this path, they begin to be surprised at the willingness of so many people to fight for change and for life.

Sogorea Te' has community spaces where they are connecting with the land, places where they are able to plant, to harvest. They eat there, they talk and carry on, and they also learn and share with all members of the community, not just those who are Lisjan Ohlone. Now, it is a space for all the different people who inhabit that territory (Mexicans, African Americans, Mayans, Salvadorans, etc.). One of the activities that moved me the most was the teaching of the Chochoyeno

Reflection by a UC Berkeley Student

The landscapes, history, and circumstances of the town of Mezcala in Jalisco, Mexico, could not seem more different from those of Berkeley, California. Yet, through Dr. Rocío Moreno's four-part series, it became evident that although thousands of miles stand between these two places, a common fight exists. As a student of Development Studies in Latin America, the chance to learn about the Coca people of the Lake Chapala region in Mexico, the fight for Indigenous sovereignty on both sides of the Mexico–U.S. border, and the role women play in these struggles was a highlight of my last semester at UC Berkeley.

My family has roots in historic Coca territory, and I was born and raised in Amah Mutsun Ohlone territory, making the “Struggles for Rematriation from the South and North” discussion between Corrina Gould, from the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, and Dr. Moreno a bridging of two geographies. The realities and possibilities of Indigenous land stewardship are present in both places, and hearing from both women inspired me and motivated me to think more about the significance of the landscapes I take for granted in my hometown in Salinas, my hometown in Jalisco, and the new home I have made in Berkeley for the past two years. Dr. Moreno's *lucha* and her leadership in Mezcala and in Mexico's National Indigenous Congress, despite the barriers she has faced as an Indigenous woman in Mexico and in the United States, show how the universal fight for “life and territory” is not limited by borders. Her work is an inspiration, and this series was exactly the kind of material I expected to encounter and engage with at UC Berkeley.

— Ilyne Junuén Castellanos,
UC Berkeley Global Studies Major

language. Despite the fact that the Ohlone people do not have federal recognition and especially in light of their tumultuous past, they have managed to preserve and continue to use the Chochoyeno language. What an admirable achievement! In their language and in their connection to their land, Huchiun, the Lisjan Ohlone people exist today.

Returning Indigenous Land to Indigenous Hands

The primary goal of this organization is the return of Indigenous lands to the Indigenous peoples. “We have survived more than two centuries of genocide and colonization during the Spanish, Mexican, and American eras,” they say. “Today, we continue to inhabit our ancestral

homeland, fighting for our sacred sites and revitalizing our cultural practices.”

Rematriate the Land

The women of this organization carry bags and t-shirts with the motto “Rematriate the land,” which is, of course, a provocative phrase since it assumes that women play an essential role in this fight for land. Sogorea Te’ calls on Native and non-Native peoples alike to heal and to transform the legacies of colonization, genocide, and patriarchy. They began their journey in 1999 with a campaign in Vallejo, California, to block plans for a construction project that threatened the foundations of a 3,500-year-old Karkin Ohlone village. In their first organized action, they convened a spiritual camp to stop the construction project.

“We went to save the land in Sogorea Te’,” Johnella remembers. “But actually, the land saved us. [...] We didn’t really understand how much we needed the land until then.” These stories about their reencounter with the land are seen in all the territories of Indigenous peoples. It’s like the tip of the iceberg that Indigenous peoples see first, and from there, they are able to dive more deeply to understand the full dimension of what happened. That is why it is so important to start with that reencounter.

Sogorea Te’ has already begun the profound work we must undertake in this moment of crisis. Their work, their commitment, their tenacity in conserving and transmitting their language, in creating common spaces, in giving voice to the words of Native women, and above all, in asking, “Whose land is it?” This is the beginning of a future return of the land.

“We have spent 15 years in the Bay Area organizing the Indigenous community. And honestly, all the issues we’re struggling with come down to the land. You know, the land was taken, and that was such a deep wound. The seizure of the land, the peoples’ heart, was the cause of so many problems. And I think, with the land trust, and you know, the land itself, I think that’s really going to help us find our way back.”

— Johnella LaRose,
Co-Founder/Director of Sogorea Te’ Land Trust

Johnella’s words are true and painful. The Indigenous peoples must find their way back. We must retake our lands and the forms and structures of community that are so profoundly needed today. With their fight, I realize that California is an Indian state. It is the home of the descendants of the ancient peoples who took care of the Pacific Ocean for thousands of years, the enormous and beautiful forests, the fertile plains that make this region so amazing.



Photo from desInformémonos, courtesy of Rocío Moreno.

Rocío Moreno.

Sogorea Te’ teaches us that only a few are needed to start a worthy struggle in a territory dominated by capitalism; it also teaches us that alliances must be diversified and strengthened not just among the Native peoples of the South (Mexico) and North (United States), but with other cultures such as African Americans and urban inhabitants who also fight for life. It also teaches us find strength in our history and, thus, return to the old path, which will allow us to make it possible for the land to be truly returned to the hands of the Indigenous peoples.

¡Nunca mas un territorio, sin nosotrxs! Never again a territory without us!

¡Rematriate the land!

Rocío Moreno received her doctorate in social sciences from the Universidad de Guadalajara in 2022 and is the representative from Mezcala for the Indigenous Governance Council of Mexico’s *Congreso Nacional Indígena* (CNI, National Indigenous Congress). In April 2022, she sought refuge in Northern California following retaliation for her work securing Coca land rights in Lago de Chapala, Mexico.

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