

Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world,
indigenous people stand up
for their traditional sacred lands
in defense of cultural survival,
human rights and the environment.

Shells and Bones BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

ONE NIGHT IN EARLY MARCH, my phone rang at 11pm.

Berkeley Vice Mayor Sophie Hahn said, “A friend from the National Trust for Historic Preservation asked if you could write a proposal to have the West Berkeley Shellmound listed as one of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in America. It’s very competitive, but I think it would be worth the effort. The deadline is noon tomorrow.”

“Absolutely,” I exclaimed, before pulling an all-nighter reminiscent of my college days circa 1975.

After releasing *In the Light of Reverence* in 2001, the Sacred Land Film Project helped get several threatened Native American sacred sites onto this list, bringing

national attention to their plight. In 2003, Zuni Salt Lake in New Mexico was threatened by a coal stripmine that would have devastated a sensitive cultural landscape. In 2004, Nine Mile Canyon in Utah, a site rich in rock writing and native history, faced a cataclysm of oil and gas drilling. National recognition of their endangered status helped protect both places. Since then, the Trust has continued to have indigenous sites on the list each year. Most recently, New Mexico’s Chaco Canyon (2011, fracking) and Utah’s Bears Ears (2016, radical reduction in size by the Trump Administration, and uranium mining) have been granted the dubious distinction of being listed as both historically important and imminently endangered.

Within a couple of days of submitting our application, we heard back that board members and staff from the National Trust would like to meet and then visit the site. They wanted to hear about the history of the village and shellmound from Ohlone leader Corrina Gould (*above*), who has worked for decades to protect the cultural sites and burial grounds of her ancestors.

The site in Berkeley was the first human settlement on San Francisco Bay, and it grew and thrived for 5,000 years. Though the now-urbanized area has been built up over the last century, a 2.2-acre parking lot has shielded the heart of the maritime village. Corrina and her allies have been working to stop a giant, retail-condo development and instead build a memorial cultural park.



field—was slightly further west, but the entire surrounding village site has cultural value to Ohlone descendants, who have continued to conduct ceremonies at the site over decades of remembrance. The memories are in the land—as are the stories, prayers, shells and bones.

As I gently lifted a piece of loose asphalt from the remains of the bore hole, a sprout of green appeared in the sunlit crack and came springing up into the air. Uncovering nature. Peeling back history. Discovering a living memory in the persistent soil. Hearing the ancestors' call—not my ancestors, but people with history and dignity, whose presence I could feel in that blade of grass, human beings deserving of respect and protection.



The National Trust staff told us that day that the 11 selected sites would be announced in May, but the pandemic swept in, and the announcement was delayed until September. Nonetheless, we felt optimistic and we set to work planning media outreach and completing a series of short films to keep the contested site in public view—the continuation of an educational campaign that has been ongoing for the past four years.

We also needed to maintain momentum as we await the results of protracted court proceedings. In October 2019, Corrina's Confederated Villages of Lisjan and the City of Berkeley won the first round when Alameda County Judge Frank Roesch ruled that the landowners could not use a new California affordable housing law—SB35—to gain fast track permit approval for their development project. The landowners have appealed and a decision won't come until June 2021. So we are in legal limbo, another factor compelling us to keep the story alive.

We released *Our Story Lives Forever*, a seven-minute film that follows shellmound artifacts from the basement of the Phoebe Hearst Museum on the U.C. Berkeley campus to an exhibit at the Berkeley Art Museum. Hundreds of people showed up on a Saturday afternoon in 2018 to see the stunning Ohlone creations, never before shown to the public, and to hear the wit and humor of local, native artists.

In the library of the Hearst Museum last year, I asked the museum director if there were photographs of the 1950 archaeolog-

Artist Chris Walker, who has created detailed drawings of Corrina's alternative vision for the site, offered his landscape architect firm's conference room for the meeting. His office is a short walk from the threatened historic site.

Vice Mayor Hahn said she would attend the meeting if I wiped down the table and chairs with Clorox. She could see what was coming just a few days later—the great Bay Area coronavirus lockdown, the first in the nation. In fact, the last hands I shook this year were those of the National Trust representatives who came to the meeting and then walked with us over to the shellmound site.



Standing in the center of the asphalt expanse, Corrina described burial ceremonies on top of what was once a 20-foot-high mound, since leveled to pave Berkeley

streets and fertilize farm fields. I walked off to visit my favorite part of the site, "bore hole 19," now just a circular scar in the pavement (*see above*). An archaeologist drilled down from that spot 20 years ago and hit a 4-foot-thick layer of shell. This was contemporary, physical proof of the rich cultural heritage beneath the parking lot. The whole site was given landmark status by the city of Berkeley in 2000, and is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Fifteen years later, that same archaeologist, now being paid by the developers, claimed that he drilled down a second time in the same place and hit a boulder, so he could go no deeper. He also changed his opinion about the 4-foot-thick layer of shell, and declared it an insignificant collection of disturbed shell moved from the original shellmound. We know the center of the enormous mound—the size of a football

ANIMATION BY CHRIS WALKER

ical dig, conducted hurriedly before what was left of the shellmound was finally leveled by industrial expansion. Berkeley scientists extracted 3,400 Ohlone artifacts and 95 human burials. A few weeks later, the director called to say his staff had discovered negatives in a freezer in a storage unit and they would send us the digitized images. It was a treasure trove. Up until then, only one good photo of the shellmound existed—shot by archaeologist Nels Nelson in 1907.

Working from our homes, editor Callie Shanafelt Wong and I turned the photos into another short YouTube film to keep the story moving: *Unearthing Ancestors at the West Berkeley Shellmound*.

As the summer solstice approached, after three months of sheltering in place,



Corrina felt the need to pray at the site. As virus misery spread around the world, the earth was clearly out of balance. It would be a risk to have even a few people gather. Corrina invited a half dozen spiritual leaders from a variety of traditions, and I offered to help broadcast the prayers and songs via Facebook Live.

I set Corrina's iPhone on a tripod, and made sure my mask was firmly in place as singers and leaders from Christian, Jewish, Hawaiian and Native American traditions

sang and prayed for an hour. Noisy Amtrak trains interrupted the ceremony a few times, but the masked practitioners waited patiently and then resumed their call for protection of the sacred site. Hundreds watched the ceremony on Facebook, and thousands later watched the recording. Education, resistance

and filmmaking go forward, thanks to social media and Zoom.

As the folks left, I walked over again to visit bore hole 19—in the corner of what's known locally as Spenger's Parking Lot.

I have to say, the West Berkeley Shellmound is an unlikely sacred site. Spenger's Fish Grotto, once one of the busiest restaurants in America, is now boarded up, shut down forever. Strawberry Creek flows hidden in a culvert beneath the pavement. Bulging shopping bags from the



PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON

nearby Apple Store are loaded into Teslas and BMWs. Bells ring loudly at a nearby street crossing as graffiti-covered freight trains rumble by, air horns blaring. Hills covered with houses rise to the east, green trees in sidewalk hollows the only nature in sight. The concrete pillars that hold up the University Avenue overpass are strangely decorated with murals of Ohlone ceremonial dancers, meant no doubt to show respect when they were painted years ago.

It feels so weird.

That evening, I was talking about the ceremony with my 23-year-old daughter, who'd come home during the pandemic. In a far-reaching conversation, Fiona uttered the phrase "the essence of colonialism," and something inside me clicked. I felt the powerful presence of the original, unadulterated shellmound. Its wounding now had a name. The strangeness of its current state suddenly made sense, and the feeling of weirdness vanished. It was like a door had opened.

The site's mysterious, magnetic force suddenly made sense to me. This land has its own story. It remains. It endures—in spite of colonialism and capitalism.

Memories are rooted in the land: 5,000 years of human interaction with water, weather, shellfish and sand. This place of life and death, birth and laughter, feels strong, undeniable, and no longer lost in time. It may all be buried under an asphalt layer, but it's a thin veneer. Can we see through it to restore this sacred place? Can we make a film capturing this opportunity for healing and remembrance, and document the community collaboration that is making it happen?



In August, we got the call from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The West Berkeley Shellmound and Village Site was recognized as one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in 2020. Though it felt a little odd to celebrate being "endangered," it meant international recognition. It was an affirmation of our struggle—and it offered a potent media opportunity. We held a Zoom press conference and generated a flurry of media coverage. Video statements of support flowed in from Representatives Barbara Lee and Deb Haaland, and Berkeley Mayor Jesse Arreguin. Corrina Gould was invited to make an hour-long Ohlone his-



Corrina Gould with Vice Mayor Sophie Hahn at the site after our Zoom press conference

tory presentation to the City Council. Chris Walker created two stunning, animated sequences illustrating the beauty of the village.

After the Zoom press conference, Vice Mayor Hahn joined Corrina at the site and we hung a banner on the fence next to a "Private Property No Trespassing" sign. A photographer from the local Berkeleyside website captured the scene. Socially distanced, wearing our masks, we celebrated a rare feeling of victory in these very sad times.

I walked over once again to bore hole 19, the circle in the asphalt surrounded by white zigzag lines painted to keep the cars in order. Seeing the bizarre, barren landscape now as "the essence of colonialism," it struck me that Corrina and her allies are creating a ceremonial space in the city, to ritually grieve and heal.

How does her green vision heal? Let's imagine the site and feel the two alternatives.

First, envision a five-story cash machine that shades the sun as it feeds consumers' addiction to comfort. More density, more people, more cars, more high-speed industrial civilization. Will we really build another monument to capitalism on top of a burial ground?

Now envision—and feel—song and ceremony next to flowing water. You walk up a spiral path for the view of distant mountains. Sunlight glimmers on the Bay in the late afternoon. The ocean horizon beyond the western gate calls your soul just as it beckoned departing Ohlone spirits centuries ago, as fire crackled and families laid their loved ones to rest in the mound.

The antidote to commercial is communal—a shared space in nature where history is honored. In that place we feel humbled. We feel connected. We remember who we are supposed to be.



The West Berkeley Shellmound represents an invitation, a pathway into the hidden, painful part of ourselves, the part damaged by colonization. All of our psyches have been damaged too, like this land, our emotional vitality paved over, yet with a spirited story still held in our bodies and in the land.

This place is transformative. Ceremony here invites people of all colors to come together, just to be here, to remember, to contemplate the trauma, to feel it, to share it.

What kind of trauma do we each hold and share? Can we all talk about it in community? Can we unearth it through ritual? Can we loosen its grip by restoring an ecosystem? This place offers that opportunity.

As Corrina says, "This is a place of healing for all people."

The struggle over the West Berkeley Shellmound is about building a new world and going forward in a new way. We are all indigenous to somewhere. We all want to love and know the earth, to be in direct relationship with nature and the ancestors, who await us. The way in is through collective acknowledgement of our historical trauma. The Shellmound site is teaching us: first, we grieve together about our forgetting, and then we can celebrate our remembering.



REFLECTIONS ON PANDEMIC PRODUCTION

From the at-home desk of Editor Callie Shanafelt Wong

EACH TIME I get off a Zoom session, editing videos with Toby while struggling through the distance and technical difficulties, only to spin around and see my four-year-old son grinding Play-Doh into the rug beneath me, I wonder how we've possibly posted 15 videos on our YouTube channel since the shelter-in-place order sent us home on March 17. As a proud, sleepless and stressed mama, I'd like to share a few of these pandemic videos with the hope that you will support our commitment to continue telling these crucial stories.



Hopi Prophecy by Thomas Banyacya



It started when Toby noticed that thousands of people were watching *Hopi Messenger*, our profile of Hopi elder Thomas Banyacya. Sensing an increasing interest in indigenous wisdom, we dove into our archives. While filming *In the Light of Reverence* in 1995, Toby

followed Banyacya to Las Vegas, where he delivered the Hopi Prophecy at the Whole Life Expo. The two-part presentation has been viewed more than 35,000 times since we posted it in March.

20-Year Filmmaker Reunion



In honor of the 20th anniversary of the broadcast of *In the Light of Reverence*, Toby got the crew back together to reflect on the decade of production and the film's still-thriving distribution campaign. Co-Producer Malinda Maynor Lowery (Lumbee), Writer Jessica

Abbe, Cinematographer and Editor Will Parrinello, Cinematographer Andy Black and Narrator Tantoo Cardinal (Métis) joined the conversation, which was briefly zoom-bombed!

Recall to Basic Consciousness



Toby got a call from Santa Clara Pueblo elder José Lucero asking for help to spread the word about a ritual he was asking us all to join. Lucero worked with his grandchildren to film the ritual in which he asks everyone to meditate on eliminating the coronavirus, while holding some-

thing resembling the earth. While filming, Lucero's balloon unexpectedly popped and he replaced it with a blue ball. José explained this represented the disappearance of one world and the beginning of the next.

Our Story Lives Forever



On April 7, 2018, artifacts from the West Berkeley Shellmound, some thousands of years old, were removed from storage at the Phoebe Hearst Museum and displayed at the Berkeley Art Museum. Three hundred people viewed these remarkable objects and heard a panel

of Native California artists at an event organized by *Ohlone Way* author Malcolm Margolin. We filmed the event to increase awareness of what's at stake in the struggle to protect the West Berkeley Shellmound.

Sacred Conversations



In honor of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day—with everyone looking for things to watch online—we streamed all four episodes of our *Standing on Sacred Ground* series for free. Toby learned how to host Zoom webinars and discussed each episode with the subjects of the

films. I found the conversation with Winona LaDuke so inspiring that I watched it multiple times before posting it online. Other powerful conversations with Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk and activists from the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana are on our YouTube channel.

The Birthplace of Berkeley



When the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the West Berkeley Shellmound as one of the 11 most endangered historic places in America, we updated our film, *The Birthplace of Berkeley*, about the struggle to protect the shellmound. While it seems ominous to be on

this list, I find it hopeful that the site is getting the attention it deserves and may be transformed from a parking lot to a green space and cultural center. One day soon we hope to release a film with a timelapse sequence of the site's transformation, if we can win the battle to protect this sacred place.

Check out these and other videos at the Sacred Land Film Project YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/sacredlandfilm/>