

I swallowed the sun and cracked the sky: Reflections from the field

Last October 2021, I was invited to a ceremony at Wishtoyo Chumash Village in Malibu, California while the Apache Stronghold, an organized group of Apache, Native and non-Native accomplices, and mining reform activists, were on their spiritual convoy from Oak Flat to the U.S. 9th District Court of Appeals in San Francisco to defend their holy land. [Oak Flat](#) (*Chi'chil Bitdagoteel*) is a sacred place to the Apache people, and is located in the Tonto National Forest, more than 100 miles north of Tucson. For about a decade, the site has been under threat by the federal government and Resolution Copper, a mining company. In short, Arizona congressmen and senators attached the Southeast Arizona Land Exchange to the National Defense Authorization Act in 2015, allowing the sacred site to be transferred to Resolution Copper to build what could be the largest copper mine in North America, a two-mile-wide crater into the earth, that would decimate holy sites of prayer, gathering, and burials, as well as local ecosystems and waters, forever swallowing the land of its relations and the people of their immemorial connection. The Apache Stronghold are fighting to repeal this land exchange, and you can read their statement [here](#).

The Stronghold had requested that non-Native artists working in direct connection with water be present at Wishtoyo. I was tasked with addressing [Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr.](#), the patriarch of the Stronghold and former chairman of the San Carlos Apache Tribe, and his family at Wishtoyo, and promised to raise awareness about Oak Flat's protection and to continue the work I was doing with the late [Tongva Elder Julia Bogany](#) by participating in LAND BACK actions however direct and creative they may be. The Tongva/Gabrielino-Tongva/San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians are the original stewards of what is often referred to as the Los Angeles Basin and the Southern Channel Islands. In relation (though not analogous), my father had asked me to share his solidarity with their fight, as his mother was forced to abandon her ancestral home and Indigenous culture during the Second Sino-Japanese War, Chinese Civil War, and World War II when she married my Han-Chinese grandfather at 14. When my grandmother finally returned in 2006, she found that her home had been dammed.

The installation I have made, *I swallowed the sun and cracked the sky. I ate the delight.* (2022), responds to my participation in ceremony and to the knowledge with which Elder Julia entrusted me. It is a tangible recording of the grief, digestion, intoxication, and stories I have held within my body until this ripe moment. The imagery and objects in the installation do not refer to Oak Flat, rather much of the imagery is taken from chasing the shadows under the California sun, sunbathing with lizards, fishing in freshwater with my father, and hiking across the Angeles National Forest. The work was made and life was documented outdoors in sunlight; it has become near impossible for me to make my work without the heat on my skin and the stench of my sweat. In my life, I care for the relational commitments between people, plants, and rock through historical, present, and futurist frameworks. I try to enliven the *felt sense of being* that exists in these connections and interdependencies through my hands. Elder Julia and I were advocating for the visibility of her tribe through the platforms in which we co-participated, which are the contexts of contemporary and public art, as well as K-12 classrooms and higher education. Moving beyond symbolic land acknowledgements, we worked to highlight the significance of cultural and ecological stewardship in both embodied and structural capacities. While our relationship often led to immediate politicization (i.e. our identities defined as a metric of difference within the operative and oppressive parameters of American neoliberalism), the very core of our shared time together uplifted the *felt sense of being*, as humble, difficult, slow, and expansive as that was.

Los Angeles, a portion of what the Tongva know to be Tovaangar, has become a wasteland of abundance perpetuated by real estate and capital. It is the place I was born and raised, and has become the place where my paternal grandparents have been buried. Tongva Elder and Culture Bearer Tina Calderon has said that when we bury our dead, we are indebted to the place and its relations.¹ We must learn to take care of the lands we share. Los Angeles has become a place where its original caretakers have been systemically coerced to form non-profits to purchase, lease, care for, and educate publics about their lands because they are federally unrecognized. Legalities have become mandated practicalities we must abide by within the nation-state's bureaucratic catastrophe. My formal training in art and participation in a field so tightly bound to wealth and power allows me — on occasion — to put pressure on individuals, arts organizations, universities, museums, and public entities to consider our relational dependencies and responsibilities to the lands we share and those from which we come. Though, much of the time, I question my own efficacy in demonstrating tangible change beyond my circle of kin. What becomes of the artist, and subsequently, her work and its participating contexts, when she wants to uphold being in creative relation, rather than the ego driven creative genius? What becomes of our desires, imaginations, and urges when the *felt sense of being* is usurped by illusion and virality perpetuated by social media and conditions set by capitalism? What becomes of the artist in our changing climate if their values do not align with cultural norms and the self-serving subtext of feeling seen, to use a phrase that captures the zeitgeist of our fragmented algorithmic realities? If economics and property are one and the same, we have become perpetually divorced from both the tangibility and sentience of land and being. Capitalist exclusion and delusion determines and restricts the creative process. What becomes of making relationships and the work they require? To what and whom are we committed? What becomes of poetry? As the division of culture and nature is perpetually enforced by bureaucracy and value, I find myself returning to my hands and the stories that have passed through them. The sacred is in nature, of which we are so deeply and intimately a part, and what we must redeem and love.

I made a delightful portrait of me as the oak moss lichen. Lichens are life forms that are composed of both algae and fungi. Fungi exist in their own kingdom, and because they do not produce chlorophyll, they rely on other organisms to live and they help digest organic matter. Separate from the kingdoms of plants and fungi, algae also exist in their own kingdom. Algae often live in water and offer the ability to photosynthesize. Lichens do not care for roots and are a committed partnership of multitudes that require at least two entities to grow on rock, bark, soil, and even plastic. Because their fungal component protects their algaic partner, they can endure and provide life in dry, heat-stricken climates, as well as climates all over the world. Lichens absorb everything in their environment, and are extremely sensitive to atmospheric pollutants, like me. Slow to spread and bound to their microclimates, they cannot be farmed or scaled. Newly discovered lichens are being scientifically identified and cataloged every day, and they are often studied to determine toxicity levels present within a given location. Charming and joyful to observe, they, through photosynthesis, allow us to breathe.

In November 2021, I embarked on a journey to Vashon Island in the Puget Sound. I was overjoyed to find myself surrounded by oak moss lichen hanging out atop tree branches. There, I learned to color with lichen. I collected a handful of oak moss and brought it home to Los Angeles, where I steeped the lichens in an ammonia and water solution for four months. After months of observing, waiting, and shaking, the lichens transformed into a purple juice. I submerged a few skeins of wool in the jar, and yielded delicious

¹ Calderon, Tina. "Place, Power & Justice: Land Rematriation Now." Organized by Sacred Places for Indigenous Peoples and Heal the Bay. Zoom, April 27, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=496977862129236>

colors ranging from taupe to violet. Lichens are often overlooked for their symbiotic partnerships and expansive role in supporting life, and as I realized this, I wept in both grief and delight for the sacred I discovered in their sensitive ways of *being*. A tiny and humble nexus in the expansive brilliance of nature, they maintain creative relations in their ability to tell stories, measure the health of their surroundings, provide medicine and craft, and transform carbon dioxide into oxygen for us to live. Lichens don't care to *know* or to *possess*, rather, they care to *be* — in feeling, in slowness, and in enrichment. I want too, to photosynthesize and plunge into transformation.

I swallowed the sun and cracked the sky. I ate the delight. (2022) is a journey of ingesting, processing, loving, and being intoxicated by the sentient beings that inspire me to live. For me, it has become integral to uplift the work of my hands and soul as both a response and resistance to the bureaucratic nightmare in which we are globally entangled. Central to the floor-bound painting is the figure of Blue CHILD., the sacred and feral essence within me. They are represented in indigo, an enchanting blue substance that has become the material, intellectual, and spiritual framework of my practice.² From a murky green vat, indigo arrives to me each time through an interlocking net of bubbling connections containing a myriad of stories and lifetimes I will never know. It is a portal into a magical world, in which tribes, clans, and villages have been brought together through material and song. It is also a portal into a nefarious world, in which people were severed from their homelands and corralled into the hands of slavery, war, and execution. Indigo bleeds blue only in the presence of oxygen, reminding us that the blue plant is just as alive as you are, breathing since time immemorial.

In December 2021, I met Sheng Lor, a textile artist and weaver, who connected with me over the Internet. On her porch in San Francisco, she introduced me to *Ntsuab* (meaning “green” in Hmong), the variety of indigo sacred to the Hmong, my paternal grandmother's people. It is also known as *Strobilanthes cusia*, and its roots and stems are used in traditional medicine. Since I was a child, my mother would purchase its powdered form from the local apothecary to relieve my allergies and colds. Because its seeds are relatively inaccessible in the States compared to other varieties of indigo, Sheng propagated the blue plant from her aunt's garden, and gifted them to me in a container along with a bloodleaf sapling, or *Iresine herbstii*. Known colloquially as the chicken-gizzard plant, bloodleaf heals the postpartum womb, and yields a beautiful pink color when mordanted with copper. Sheng and I journey to remake the sacred in asynchronous and connected ways guided by our primordial mother indigo. Together with my chosen kin, we occupy the local and global connections between rocks, plants, and people, and remake our relationships to how we live and with whom we choose to be in kinship. The modern empire has become an amnesiac's paradise, where lands and waters are continually decimated and privatized, families perpetually separated, and death — literal and spiritual — forever unresolved.

It is now May 2022, and I have traveled to Tucson to install *I swallowed the sun and cracked the sky. I ate the delight.* at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Two days after my arrival, I learned that the local church, Grace St. Paul's Episcopal, would be hosting the Apache Stronghold in an evening of prayer and action. Upon stepping into the church, Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr. asks the attendees to rest their hand on their heart. He speaks of his late mother, who taught him that one's greatest life journey is from the mind to the heart, but most people never make it. The fight for *Chi'chil Bildagoteel* (Oak Flat) continues — it is one in defense of prayer, connection, and the future of our shared earth mother and our collective relations. With my hand on my heart, I ask myself: What becomes of connection if we do not know what we have lost?

² hu, iris yirei. “Grand Blue Mother.” *Amerasia* (Volume 47, Issue 2). 2022. 249-251.

What becomes of our *felt sense of being* if our relationships to land, prayer, and each other is determined by corporate deception and repression? What becomes of creativity, if we do not attune ourselves to the rhythms of the original creators — the water and the earth — that enable us to live? To what and whom may we be loyal and devoted? How do we love?

Introducing Blue CHiLD.
of Blue CHiLD.'s star chart and note from the field (2021/2022)

Blue CHiLD., as told to me, was born from a blue plant and the dust you carry beneath your feet. They are both here and there, everywhere and nowhere. They are shy and jealous, irreverent and feral, creative and always pregnant, but never a mother.

Blue CHiLD. is limitless, spiritual, post-lingual, in process, in feeling, nebulous, and on their journey. They are most expressive when they find themselves in relation to sentience. They like to share their encounters to me through pidgin and pigeon, and to those not me in song and image. Sometimes I don't have the words for what they're conveying to me. They are coy, and they adore persuasion. They like invitations; you can invite them into your world by looking at your hands and the multitude of stories they carry. Then, put one hand on your heart and the other on your belly. Take a deep breath, notice the matter within you, and plunge. Blue CHiLD. might arrive, or you may miss them the moment you open your eyes.

Before you go, Blue CHiLD. would like to offer you a song. Historically, they would sing this poem for the deities, ancestors, and kin, and for the caretakers of the lands upon which Blue CHiLD. steps foot. This is known as a heart prayer and an acknowledgment of the brilliance and creativity that protect and guide Blue CHiLD. on their journey towards you.

The Song of the Blue People

I was born of b l u e
The blue womb, wound
Come home to
The rivers, flowing
into your breath, I grieve
b l u e

Visit <http://apache-stronghold.com> for updates, ways to take action, news, support and much more.

iris yirei hu
May 2022