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Tangled Roots, Bittersweet Exposure

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Tangled Roots, Bittersweet Exposure



Bay Laurel Roots 1, 2015, Chase M Clow

My home rests on what was once Miwok-tended land, about thirty minutes north of San Francisco, California. The *Puyuku* and *Shotokmo-cha* families lived in the vicinity¹ and harvested acorns, hunted deer, and collected leaves for medicinal tea, perhaps in the latter years from the very same oaks and bay laurels that edge up to my back door. They may also have grown food here. That they once inhabited this valley is evident in the midden found down the road from my home when developers began converting this land into a bucolic suburb forty years ago. Over 130 years prior to this suburban development, and within months of the death of Chief Marin in 1839, a Catholic-baptized Miwok elder, Governor Alvarado deeded the land to Juan Ignacio Antonio Pacheco for his service to the Mexican government (Hines 1–2).

¹ Miwok families continue to live in the Bay Area. Many are affiliated with the *Federated Indians of the Graton Rancheria*, whose Tribal Office is located in Rohnert Park, California.

Whether the *Puyuku* and *Shotokmo-cha* families had already been displaced when the Pacheco family assumed ownership is unclear, yet it is likely given the Spanish missionary activity throughout the previous century. What is clear, though, is the Pacheco family also tended the land. Yet they did so in a decidedly different manner from those whose harvests consisted of native plants and animals. Instead, they planted orchards and vineyards, carrying on the agricultural practices and proclivities of old world Spain and Portugal.

The Pacheco footprint in this little valley (a tiny portion of their much larger estate) was small enough to be undetectable now or else was wiped away by the townhouses, condominiums, and single-family dwellings erected here in the mid 1970s. Blessedly, both the Pachecos and the developers left mostly intact the woodland bordering a creek that wends its way through this valley and, partially through culverts and underground piping now, eventually flows into San Pablo Bay.



Bay Laurel Roots 2, 2015, Chase M Clow

It has become my habit to spend time in these woods. I have come to love the trees, not simply through the act of making photographic portraits of their stolid beauty, but also through ingesting them. I've made acorn flour from various species of oak, dropped bay leaves into stews, and once even baked a batch of bay nuts, a foodstuff I wouldn't recommend to any but the most rugged or starving among us. With each harvest, whether photographic or nutritional, I give thanks while pondering how these very trees—some clearly hundreds of years old, and mostly live oak, California bay laurel, and California buckeye—may well have provided sustenance to the Miwok families and, later, offered shade for a Pacheco family Sunday picnic.

I wonder, who have these trees known? Who have they nourished other than those who still rely upon them: Columbian black-tailed deer, broad-footed mole, coyote, wild turkey, ornate shrew, dusky footed wood rat, acorn woodpecker, northern flicker, and a plethora of other species, including that bird who calls out so hauntingly in the night? Who might have fallen in love under their branches, buried a secret beneath their roots, or leaned against them with purple-stained hands after blackberry picking?



Bay Laurel Roots 3, 2015, Chase M Clow

As I imagine possibilities, I wonder, what does it mean for me to be the most recent resident of woodland praised by those who came before me? What responsibilities do I have to this place I now call home? I contemplate this as I explore, often with my husband and cat, the rather wild ravine carved by Pacheco Creek, a watershed only active during and soon after winter rainstorms. It is thrilling to be deep in the mostly forgotten and rarely frequented creek bed, where in spring through fall the water condenses into ever-receding pools. The bed of the creek lies at least thirty feet below ground in some instances, erosion still crafting its walls. Stumbling recently on a deer carcass picked perfectly clean by buzzards and yellow jackets, I thought once again of those who for tens of generations may have drunk from these waters, bathed and washed here, and, if the water ran long and fast enough, may have filtered tannins from their acorn stash. This before they started dying of European diseases and thereafter bedraggled, and by many accounts enslaved, grudgingly turned to the Missions for support. That time may seem distant, but the 200-year gulf between now and the era of the Missions and Spanish land

grants collapses when we consider how discrimination and exploitation of the Native population continues today.

In this bittersweet creek, full of exposed roots, I cannot hide from the truth. Like the non-native palm tree thriving by the creek's edge after taking root here who knows how, I am an acclimatized invader making a home in a place from which others were pushed long before me. And although I engage with this land and have formed a preliminary reciprocal relationship with it, I do not tend to it as others did before me, nor do my neighbours, whose commitment seems to extend no further than an appreciation of its beauty and an aversion to littering. We are dwellers upon a land once carefully nurtured by those who in turn were nurtured by it. I mean to say the woodland for most of us living here now is simply a "pleasant backdrop of nature" (Abrams). We are glad it is here, but we don't know it intimately in the way the Miwok and the Pachecos have known it, each in their own way. We sleep here, jog here, walk dogs, and make polite conversation about the weather, but we aren't embedded here. Our lives are made elsewhere, our sustenance purchased down the road.



Bay Laurel Roots 4, 2015, Chase M Clow

Yes, in this bittersweet creek I can't help but wonder if my affection for this woodland, connecting me as it does to the *Puyuku*, *Shotokmo-cha*, and Pacheco families, could in any way be enough to ease the dark mess of our collective history and repair our relations with one another and the land itself. There has been quite a roll call of occupiers here, most notably the Spanish and Euro-Americans, and to a lesser extent, the Russians. My own ancestors emigrated from Wales, Scotland, Sweden, and Germany. Although some of them arrived on the North

American continent nearly four hundred years ago, we are nevertheless recent arrivals. We are even more recent to the state of California and I, specifically, have only resided in this particular woodland for sixteen years.

The roots of colonization and occupation are deep, tangled, and profuse, just like those of the trees whose portraits I make. With each passing year our ability to ignore the injustices engendered by our collective Euro-American way of life upon indigenous peoples and the environment erodes even more quickly than the banks of Pacheco Creek. This is so regardless of whether our own individual ancestors, or, frankly, we ourselves have wittingly or unwittingly perpetuated systematized racism or unsustainable environmental practices. The exposed roots make us vulnerable and the very foundation upon which we have built our lives, while always unstable, becomes increasingly so. This is painful and frightening to admit, as the political rhetoric within the United States makes all too apparent. We are afraid. But we should not turn away. We need to face this entanglement and humbly acknowledge these exposed roots. While exposure makes us vulnerable, it also discloses possibilities.

Immersed in this creek bed I sense a radicalism rising within me, from the Latin *radicalis*: “of or having roots.” A radicalism, though, that is neither a yearning for a return to the roots of an imagined bygone era (and, indeed, any past era is only ever imagined by those living now) nor a reformist urge to rip up everything to plant anew, naively believing we would somehow not make equally devastating mistakes in our zeal to wipe away our transgressions. No. Instead, I refer to the most ancient radicalism known to humankind: love. It binds all of us together across time—the *Puyuku* and *Shotokmo-cha* families, the Pacheco family, and my own family. We are united by our shared affection for this place, this land and this place among all places existing before our respective families and long after we each pass away; this place that changes over the course of time, but nevertheless remains part of a life-giving planet upon which we all have and will always depend. Our shared love of this place, although felt and expressed differently by each of us, draws us together and provides a means of healing.

Love is more than affection or a *feeling* of fondness, though. Like healing, it manifests as concrete expression, in action, and not all actions are equal. Thus my “love,” felt as a call to the woodland’s beauty and expressed via artful photographs or felt as a call to its fruits and expressed via acorn pancakes, differs not only in kind but more important in degree from the love that finds its expression in developing mutually enhancing right relations with the earth.

Present now in this little valley, imagining my way backward while contemplating a way forward, I note the radicalism growing one valley to the north of me. The [Indian Valley Organic Farm and Garden](#), a community educational farm, has begun the healing process by actively renewing right relations with the land in partnership with the tribal communities of the area.² Overflowing with herbs, vegetables, and fruits, the farm includes ground specifically dedicated to growing traditional native foods as well as an ethno-botanical garden dedicated to preserving and propagating native species. This farm, which provides food to the undernourished in our county, serves as an active, living laboratory for everyone who resides

² The farm is located in Ignacio Valley, Marin County, California.

here, a hub for people whose ancestors lie beneath our feet as well as those who hail from around the world to gather and learn sustainable organic farming and traditional ecological knowledge. It represents a beautiful partnership between multiple organizations and differing peoples, a partnership based on mutual respect and a shared commitment to carefully tend to the earth in gratitude for the ways it tends to us.

As I contemplate ways of radicalizing my own little valley and begin the practice of right relations, I'll continue to tenderly engage with the trees. They have communicated something so vital already. What else might they reveal?



Foggy Morning, Bay Laurel and Live Oak Forest, 2015, Chase M Clow

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