The Return of Rammay
Inés Ixierda and Nazshonii Brown-Almaweri

Long before there was ever any paper that said it belonged to someone, the land was here. Rammay is the ancestral land of the tribe sometimes called Ohlone. This is the story of the land and its rematriation.

Tucked away off from the hustle and bustle of San Pablo and Peralta, West Oakland or Rammay, meaning “west” in the Chochenyo language, is home to roughly 21,000 Oakland residents. Rammay always has been a community temmning with culture and resilience, pushing back and resisting against the multiple waves of colonization and forms of oppression.

It was first stolen and claimed as property under the Peralta Land Grant in 1820. Someone who never set foot on the land decided it was theirs and then gave it to settlers. Then it started being sold in parcels, passing through many hands. Now we are here today, the two houses hugging the garden on either side being built around the late 1990s and early 2000s. We don’t know much about who was here through all the years in between, but one reason this garden is still here is because of one of its caretakers, Inez Jones.

Inez Jones, a well known Jazz singer, lived here back when West Oakland was a thriving cultural center and 7th street was lined with famous jazz clubs. Inez married Paul Jones, a fellow Black Jazz musician and trumpeter. Together they made their home on Linden street in West Oakland and she was known for keeping a beautiful garden. From the Harlem of the West, the Boogie Baroness” was the resident singer at Harem Club and blessed many local clubs with her presence, during the 1950s.

1 The settler family responsible for the violent land grab of Ohlone land and other Bay Area tribal lands.
2 This does not consider houseless relatives who are living in the city’s more densely populated encampments.
3 People, non-Indigenous, who set up permanent residency on the land they are colonizing, taking over.
Around this time, the Ohlone people in the Bay Area were mostly still in hiding. Other Native people were being relocated from reservations to urban areas through Termination and Relocation policies, a continuation of the colonial government’s oppression and forced assimilation. Our elders say many relocated intertribal Native American families were also setting up their homes in West Oakland through this time.

As Oakland entered the 1960’s, the city eminent domain destroyed more than 5,000 homes in West Oakland to create the freeway and BART systems, drastically altering the community. Through the 70s and 80s, the area was impacted by economic decline. Inez Jones passed away in 1995 at 82 years old and public records show the house was foreclosed around the same time.

A group Ohlone and intertribal Indigenous people began organizing around trying to save important cultural sites under the name Indian People Organizing for Change (IPOC). The price of land and housing skyrocketed and Oakland continued to transform.

Around this time, some community gardeners who remembered Inez’s garden, saw the abandoned site and wanted to save it. Collaborating with school garden programs, and Northern California Land Trust, they raised the money to buy the house and land in 2006. The homes on either side of the garden became permanently affordable and the garden was designated as a community space named the Paula and Inez Jones...
Garden. For many years Oakland Butterfly and Urban Gardens (OBUGS) stewarded the site with youth groups before their organization sunsetting. The lease to the land was held by a fiscal sponsor and amidst the changes was more or less forgotten. Again the garden went into rest. It was years and years later, a former volunteer from our friends at Planting Justice who had learned about Sogorea Te’ was working at a large nonprofit when they ran across the forgotten lease to the garden site. They suggested the site be turned over to Sogorea Te and the original people whose ancestral land we are on. They contacted the Northern California Land Trust (NCLT), and the process of return started.

Land Trusts hold land and share it under alternative ownership models and long term leases. NCLT “owned” the garden and gave stewardship rights to Sogorea Te through a 99 year lease. The garden was officially rematriated and returned to Indigenous hands in December 2018. It was named Rammay, which means the West in Chochenyo, by Deja Gould, the language carrier for the Villages Lisjan tribe.

While the world navigates challenges and changes, Sogorea Te’ continues to build new kinds of urban Indigenous access to land. While the garden is not yet open for visitors, we looking forward to seeing you there some future day.

Today, Indigenous women are providing access and opportunity one square foot of green space at a time. Here in this small garden, our crew grows 12 different varieties of fruit trees and bushes, Native plants like Mugwort and Soap Root, and various produce crops. The fruit trees and raised beds supplement our food distribution program. There is a shed for seed saving and drying plant medicines. Plans are in the works for an outside classroom area and water catchment system. Small groups of youth are starting to visit, fruit is being preserved and medicines are being made from the plants.