

## CALIFORNIA'S SITES OF CONSCIENCE: An Analysis of the State's Historic Mission Museums

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### ABSTRACT

In California, Franciscan mission “museums” are used to supplement K–12 curricula about Native American history and the settlement of the state. Heavily influenced by the local Catholic diocese, many of these sites offer a slanted view of history and a distorted version of native life in the missions and erase the presence of native people today. I critically analyzed visual representations at the 19 operating mission museums, with in-depth research at six, and explored what emerged as the dominant narratives. I argue that as important sites of conscience, the mission museums miss valuable opportunities to educate the public and potentially heal past wrongs. Finally, I offer insights and suggestions for addressing misrepresentations, through sustained community engagement, for mission museum directors and staff who expressed a desire to do so. [California history, Franciscan missions, Native American representation, sites of conscience, narrative construction]

In California, social science curriculum standards mandate an introduction to Native American life and the impacts of Spanish, Mexican, and “American” colonization on the state’s indigenous people. Teachers in the state use museums to supplement this education. While natural history and anthropology museums offer programs for teaching third graders about native precontact life, mission museums (operated in large part by the local Catholic diocese) are charged with telling the story of settlement for the state’s fourth graders.

As sites of remembrance, California missions have an intrinsic power to heal Indian communities while raising public consciousness about the colonial legacy of the state but are instead centers of fantasy and *nostalgia building*, “valorizing certain positive aspects of the past, [and] endowing them with importance as truths” (Levin 2007:93). In reality, the mission system was the first and perhaps the most destructive blow to the fabric of Indian life and cultures in California (Hackel 2005). Despite this truth, Franciscan missions in California became sites for the promotion of

a “fantasy heritage” and “provided national landmarks of the highest appeal” beginning in the 1930s (Kropp 2006:49).<sup>1</sup> Ironically, these sites—glorified in popular literature and attracting thousands of tourists every year—were sites of death and cultural devastation for native Californians.

Much work has been done to chronicle and de-mythologize this romanticized Spanish past, including the restoration of the missions (McWilliams 1939, 1946, 1949) and some works have critically examined trends in tourism and growth in Southern California (Starr 1985). More recently, Kropp (2006) in *California Vieja* discusses the lure of El Camino Real, the “royal road” that linked California’s 21 missions (separated by a day’s ride, according to myth), which was fervently promoted by the tourist industry and early land development corporations until the end of the 1950s. Kryder-Reid (2008) also looks at mission landscapes and the construction of artifice in mission complexes. But while Spanish fantasy mythmaking has been heavily critiqued in scholarly literature, public history venues continue to promote it, keeping many Californians blind to the truth of settlement history: “Misrepresentations help keep us ignorant as a people, less able to understand what really happened in the past, and less able to apply our understanding to issues facing the United States today” (Loewen 1999:19). Similar to the erasure of an enslavement history in the South, native men, women, and children are rarely referred to by name in the mission museum narratives and are instead referred to as neophyte, Christianized Indians, Indians, laborers, or workers—in effect only in terms of the service they provided as captives of the mission project. These and other representations discussed below support Irwin-Zarecka’s contention that, “when even the minimal signs of memory work are missing, when graves are left invisible and unmarked, for example, or stories remain untold, these are strong indications indeed of a past confined to oblivion” (1994:13–14).

### METHODS

The larger project, of which the mission analysis was a part, was based on a series of interviews and observations over a three-year period within Central Coast mixed-heritage native communities and the museums situated in those communities. It presented

examples of the dominant messages observable in exhibits, which are the foundational forms of pedagogy in the museum (see Hein 1998; Hein and Alexander 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1994, 1995), as well as insight into the perspectives of the docents and staff charged with interpreting them for the public. I then explored alternative narratives that are more closely tied to the lived experiences of Indian people. Ultimately, the project revealed discontinuities between the dominant discourse on Indianness crafted from non-Indian historical and anthropological sources and the alternative histories and experiences of the people who embody those identities.

For the mission component of this project, I visited all 21 original Alta California mission sites. Of those 21, Mission San Rafael does not have a museum but has a few artifacts on display and Mission San Miguel has been closed due to earthquake damage. Two of the remaining 19 are owned and operated by the California State Parks system (Mission La Purisima and Mission Sonoma). The other 17 are owned and operated, at least partially, by the local Catholic diocese of the area or the Franciscan Order and have active churches with parishioners and attending priests.<sup>2</sup> Narratives differ greatly based on proprietorship, and although I recognized this throughout the analysis, the same set of methods was used for all. Because the thrust of my initial study was the Central Coast, more data were collected at these sites. These sites include the six missions in the cities of Carmel, San Luis Obispo, Lompoc (La Purisima), Santa Ynez, Santa Barbara, and Ventura. Spending more than twenty hours at each location, I conducted various ethnographic activities, including interviews with directors and docents, “shadowing” fourth grade tours, and conducting observations of visitors and docents. At the remaining 13 missions, I recorded detailed observations and visual data were collected.

Analysis of visual representations occurred in two phases. The first phase evaluated museum messages through analysis of photographs taken over a three-year period. I utilized *iView MediaPro*<sup>TM</sup> software, which enabled me to code and then sort digital photographs. The software also enabled me to attach corresponding field notes to images. Photographs were initially coded based on three criteria: (1) the layout of exhibit space; (2) primary mode(s) of representation; and (3) dominant rhetorical strategies

observed. Simultaneously, I conducted discourse analysis of transcribed mission museum interviews and interviews with the local native community. I then subjected the visual data to codes that emerged from the transcripts. Using methods outlined in grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967), I relied heavily on the data that emerged from interviews. The data defined two dominant modes of exhibition and several rhetorical strategies in the mission museums.

### **MODES OF EXHIBITION: THE ERASURE AND PROGRESS NARRATIVES**

The analysis revealed that exhibit spaces in mission museums follow one of two general themes or modes. The first of these, which is employed at half of the mission museums, I call an “erasure” narrative that emphasizes the romance of a certain point in mission history and relegates all other periods (as well as people)—past and future—to obscurity. These mission tours lead the visitor through a series of spaces reconfigured to resemble rooms in a historic mission complex. In this sequence are rooms such as La Sala (the salon used for entertaining), La Cocina (where the food was prepared by the enslaved native people for the priests, soldiers, and guests), and the priest’s quarters. In contrast to the living spaces that would have potentially been occupied by non-Indians, items belonging to native people, such as cooking and food preparation implements, are exhibited on the floor in dark, small (and I observed in one mission, *colder*), unattended rooms at opposite ends of the mission complex. In 20% of the missions, representations of native people are in another building altogether. This mode of exhibition suggests disuse of native items and sends a subtle message to visitors that these people will not be returning. At all active mission museums, regardless of the mode of exhibition used, I found stone mortars and pestles on the floor or on dusty shelves, notoriously unlabeled and unattributed, whereas items representing the church or non-Indian inhabitants of the mission are often sealed for protection in well-lit cases and at eye level, a form of exhibition that privileges those materials over others.

The second mode follows a “progress” narrative. This mode of representation is used in the two State Park venues and six other sites. The progress narrative tour begins with a room(s) dedicated to precontact

Indian life. In these venues a romantic, often colorful, version of precontact Indian life precedes the discussion of the arrival of Europeans and the ensuing clash of cultures. The “Indian room” is generally filled with baskets, shell bead necklaces, a model of a traditional Indian dwelling or diorama, and a discussion of food procurement strategies illustrated with bow and arrow, fishing gear, or acorns with their attending *mano* (hand stone) and *metate* (grinding stone). This room is followed spatially, leaving the narrative of native life behind (spatially and temporally) as the visitor moves along the proscribed trajectory. The difference between the two styles of representation may stem from the involvement of local history or anthropology faculty in the interpretive efforts at missions. Several missions have attracted such local historians to lead interpretive exhibits and educational program development.

While the entire mission as tourist site can be considered frozen in time—which is clearly part of its allure—one can easily see why the static portrayal of certain ethnic groups is especially problematic. The final room on the progress tour, which has been sanitized to the point that it can be sold as a complete “experience” to tourists, is the museum store. Mission memorabilia are abundant, yet the average number of books about local Indian history at each of the mission bookstores is two, with the emphasis on children’s story books based on oral traditions or coloring books about happy mission life for Indians. I found that some mission bookstores had no texts about local Indian people but had coloring books about Plains or Northwest Coast tribes. All gift shops offer dream catchers, arrowhead replicas, turquoise jewelry, and a variety of other “Indian” kitsch available for purchase. Eichstedt and Small suggest that this is the ultimate exercise in consumption, “Whites are thus urged not only to reduce [Indians] to these stereotypes but to consume these images and present them in their homes” (2002:139).

### RACE AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

In all sites, irrespective of the representational mode, I observed several rhetorical strategies for conveying certain ideas of race and the perceived superiority of European colonizers. Together these strategies are similar to Omi and Winant’s (1994:58–61) “racial projects,” where public portrayals of race serve to

embed certain ideologies of power in the public imagination. The mission museum sites do this in a variety of ways: (1) the artificial visual construction of a white colonizing body, when the vast majority of the first soldiers and settlers to Alta California were Indian and mestizo people recruited from Northwest Mexico (then simply lower New Spain); (2) the lionization of Franciscan priests through constant references to their noble motivations to bring a better way of life to the Indian population; and (3) the manner in which native experiences are trivialized within a system intended to crush their cultural and spiritual ways of life and embedded in the construction of race, which privileges notions of whiteness.

### *Constructions of Race*

Consistently, visitors to a mission museum are told the origin of the mission project was Spain, emphasizing the ethnic distinction between these first white *European* priests and settlers and the local Indians and later *Mexicanos* or *Californios*. This suggests (and is rarely clarified) that the missions were built, guarded, and operated by Spaniards. Ironically, a very small number of the mission population was actually Spanish or of European origin—typically just one or two priests (Bancroft 1886, 1888). The census of 1790 demonstrates that soldiers, farmers, and their families brought to establish nearby pueblos were primarily Cochimi and Mayo Indians and mixed-heritage people of Indian and African parentage (Mason 1998). These rarely depicted Indian and mestizo people of the Sinaloa and Sonora regions of Mexico accompanied Junípero Serra to Alta California (Voss 2008). These Hispanicized Indians, it was hoped, would help teach foreign agricultural practices, adobe manufacture, and animal husbandry to local natives (Street 2004).<sup>3</sup>

This history, one that acknowledges a very early mixed-heritage population in California and stories of early migrations, might actually foster a sense of belonging among the growing mestizo community in Southern and Central California. In only a few cases do the mission narratives discuss ethnicity, and when they do, they inevitably frame elites as white Europeans and workers as “Mexicans.” As Mexico did not exist prior to 1821, and at the time was southern New Spain, it is erroneous and misleading to call the colonizing body Mexican. It is even more misleading,

however, to frame them as Spaniards, which creates the illusion that they were European or white.

The absence of more meaningful and authentic portrayals of the settler population in the mission museum narratives may be due in part to misinterpretations of census and other historic documentation that describe “*Californio*” identity. Written initially by lawyers, bankers, and other prominent men who came to California after the gold rush, the first composite description of Spanish–Mexican California reflects the political and socio-racial ideology that justified both the war with Mexico and the subsequent sociopolitical marginalization of Mexican-Americans. Too often, museum practitioners have not critically analyzed the secondary literature they have used in the development of exhibits and programs. Understandably, these people consider early California historians such as Bancroft (whose work spanned 1884 to 1888) and Kroeber (1925) to be the experts on such material. Most of these sources are considered outdated by recent scholars, however, who offer alternative epistemologies such as those employed in feminist or postcolonial historiographies (Bouvier 2001; Castañeda 1990a; Leventhal et al. 1994; Lightfoot 2005). Deconstructing gendered, racist, and classist representations of the colonial era is necessary to accurately address the social, political, and economic factors inherent in identity formation on the California frontier.

### *Valorizing Whiteness*

Europeans are consistently portrayed as moral, democratic, loved, self-sacrificing, and devoted to the ultimate well-being of the enslaved. A quote at Mission Santa Barbara, “The Missions in California were the result of a blending of religious desires and political aims—Franciscan Friars were eager to found missions among peaceful Indians,” suggests that conversion of pagan souls was one of the primary aims of the Spanish Crown, equal to that of empire building. While the mission museums extol the virtues of the church’s role in conquering California, some historical scholarship suggests that economic motivation was primary (Costo and Costo 1987; Tinker 1993). The term “peaceful Indians” also suggests that native Californians were passive receivers of spiritual and cultural conversion. Ironically, Indians from Mission Santa Barbara led the revolt against the mission

system in 1824 (Sandos 1991). There is no discussion of this revolt at Santa Barbara, however. It is discussed at Mission Santa Ynez where the revolt occurred but only in terms of a child’s, Pasquala, story. The myth of Pasquala is that she, as a symbol of the “good Indian,” got word to the priest of the intended revolt and he was able to thwart the rebellion and punish those responsible.<sup>4</sup>

Another quote at Mission Santa Barbara states, “The Missionaries’ task was to Christianize and Civilize the Indians” and that “by law Missionaries were defenders of the Indians.” This statement suggests that Indians needed the missionaries for a variety of things, including protection. What it does not say is who might protect the Indians from these men, who, according to Jackson and Castillo “imposed a rigid system of coerced and disciplined labor, enforced by the use of corporal punishment and other forms of control” (1995:76). These “protectors” also ignored the fact that “civilizing” Indians for almost a century in Baja California led to identical patterns of disease, death, and devastation (Jackson 1981:138).

Whiteness is also privileged through the display of native-made materials. Baskets, pottery, and other hand-woven items can be found at all missions, but in many cases these are accompanied by text placards indicating only that they were made by Indian people. In all but two cases, this is the only information available about the artisans. More commonly (at 12 missions), the attribution for baskets and other materials is the donor. In two instances, the materials used in the basket are described and the only date given is the date of donation to the mission. This ambiguity leaves the visitor to assume baskets were woven during the mission period (except for the contemporary dates and images at two sites). At most missions, valuable opportunities to extend the Indian story beyond the mission period are missed. Also missed is the opportunity to explore life in the missions by addressing such questions as: How were the women able to collect, process, and take the time to weave baskets during such upheaval of their traditional life-ways and gathering places? Or, were baskets made for sale, for use, or for trade to women in the nearby pueblo for items not available at the mission? At the majority of the missions, baskets on display are from other areas (the Southwestern United States, Mexico, Northern California) and, as mentioned, the only

attribution is given to the wealthy Anglo collector-donor. A photo of him or her is often associated with the baskets; the weavers themselves are invisible. While this information is more difficult to come by, what could serve in its place is what is known about weaving at the mission, the struggles of artisans to find weaving materials in an altered landscape, or the difficulty of maintaining traditional knowledge during such a tumultuous time. Sadly, stories of survival rarely exist here, only the unspoken stories that large collections from an era of “salvage” ethnology convey—loss, exploitation, and desperation. Visitors leave with the idea that Anglo heroes and heroines saved the baskets, restored the missions, and left us the lasting nostalgia of the mission era.

### *Erasure of Native Experiences*

Similar to the narratives of African Americans in the Antebellum South, narratives about the enslaved Native American in California mission history rarely view indigenous people as human beings. Eichstedt and Small's (2002:10, 105–108) description of the rhetorical strategy of symbolic annihilation and erasure regarding the institution of slavery, which I found especially applicable in the mission narratives, is characterized by the perfunctory inclusion of information on slave (or Indian) life and exploitation of them as human beings. In relationship to the mission era, this strategy is defined by the lack of context for understanding the experience as mission Indians, as well as the construction of romance attributed to the period (often achieved through an overemphasis on architecture and furniture). Also characteristic of the annihilation and erasure strategy is the use of euphemisms and the passive voice, which both allow speakers (in this case, curators, exhibit designers, staff, and docents) to avoid identifying injustice or laying blame. Additionally, universalizing and ahistorical statements are used to erase privilege while reducing the enslaved to stereotypical roles and identities. These devices all work to erase or marginalize any serious consideration of the institution or experience of slavery in both the plantation museums, as observed by Eichstedt and Small (2002), and in my observations at the mission museums.

There are few places in mission tours that discuss native people as central to the mission project. All wealth and success attributed to the missions or the

mission period was a direct result of the sweat, tears, toil, loss, and hardship of Indian people, but this remains unspoken. At their height, the 21 missions in Alta California had an estimated annual production of \$2 million (approximately \$500 million in 2010 dollars). This income was generated through ownership of 400,000 head of cattle; 60,000 horses; 300,000 sheep, goats, and swine; crops of wheat, maize, and beans; as well as vineyards at some of the missions (Bancroft 1886). The missions were producers of wine, brandy, soap, leather, hides, wool, oil, cotton, hemp, linen, tobacco, and salt. Like the relative wealth of Southern plantations in their heyday, the missions owed all of their wealth to the enslaved men, women, and children who produced these materials for sale and trade by missionaries. The only non-Indians working at the missions were a handful of soldiers and usually one or two missionaries (Newell 2009).

There is rarely context for understanding the experiences of the mission Indians aside from the mention of tasks they performed and the numbers of people performing each task. In addition, the native people are always depicted as healthy, well-built male workers in a utopian world of compromise and congeniality, rather than as most historic accounts describe them, as emaciated and miserable (La Perouse et al. 1989:98).

One caption at Mission San Jose reads, “The number of Indians who lived in the Mission community increased gradually over the years ... they also lived in Valle de San Jose to the east herding cattle, and by San Leandro Creek tending the grain fields.” This statement suggests that the population of the “Mission community” grew of its own volition and ignores the 1803 Viceroy's edict in which he ordered “active recruitment” by whatever means necessary as mission populations declined. If the mission community grew, it was due to forced relocations, devastation of traditional food resources and sources of fresh water by mission livestock, and a rupture in traditional sociopolitical lifeways caused by introduced diseases, crops, and religious beliefs (Dartt-Newton and Erlandson 2006). The wording “herding cattle and tending grain fields” suggests individual agency in these endeavors, as if the local Indians *chose* to live near *their* livestock and crops, to tend them more efficiently. I do not deny that native people exercised agency in this and a multitude of ways before, during,

and after the mission period, but highlighting notions of ownership in such a context skews the reality of disenfranchisement and the impacts of land loss on native communities.

### *Replacing Reality with Artifice*

Common in mission cemeteries are elaborate tombs and grave markers for Spanish clergy and military; even *Californio* families are glorified in death at these sites. Unmarked are the graves of thousands of Indian men, women, and children. The exception can be seen at Mission Sonoma, one of the two missions that the California State Parks operate, where a memorial was erected in tribute to the native people who died there. The designers of the monument placed an asterisk next to the names of the people who died as children to draw attention to the significant number of young children who died there—a testament to the tragedy of the mission period. Unfortunately, the exhibits inside do not reflect the commitment to the truth that the monument suggests. Much more common in the other 18 locations are small and simple signs reading: “Many neophytes are interred at this location” (Mission Soledad), or “In memory of the Christian Indians and Spaniards who were interred in this cemetery between the years 1771-1833” (Mission Carmel).

At Mission Carmel, an Indian graveyard has been reconstructed in a European manner with graves side-by-side and wooden crosses. Each artificial “grave” is adorned with abalone shells. At first sight, it appears that the mission is attempting to honor the Indian dead. What goes unsaid, however, is the false impression that Indians were shown the same respect in death as the Spanish priests and military. At Carmel, this faux cemetery is the favorite and most memorable spot for visiting schoolchildren. Ironically, the (falsified) attention paid to Indian life in this space is to their inevitable death.

At Mission Dolores, a strange juxtaposition of a miniature tule (tall, marsh grass) house in the graveyard gestures at reconciliation. This abstract placement, with the only other reference to Indian people being a statue of a Plains Indian warrior, leaves some visitors confused. I quietly observed dozens of people look quizzically at the tiny dwelling, with one teen commenting, “do Indians still live in here?”

Two individuals at Mission Santa Barbara offer an exception to the nameless Indian. These individuals are used strategically as icons of a lost people. The individuals depicted at Mission Santa Barbara are Tomas Yngacio de Aquino, “The Last Canalino” and Juana Maria, “The Lone Woman of San Nicholas Island”—suggesting that these were the last of a disappearing race. The sad story of Juana Maria is that she jumped overboard from the ship sent to gather the last of the Island Tongva for missionization because her baby had been left behind in the shuffle. She survived there, in her homeland, for 18 years, although her child did not. She was “rescued” and taken to the home of her captor, a local businessman, where she spent the last seven weeks of her life on display as the lone, primitive woman, until she succumbed to dysentery. Echoing the “disappearing Indian” myth is Jan Timbrook (2007) of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, who says of Juana Maria, “her story embodies the demise of native peoples and traditions following Spanish and American colonization.”

### *Constructions of Nostalgia*

Through interviews with local native people, I discerned that the most subtle narrative in the museum, but most profound to a native visitor, is the sense of isolation. Each mission is surrounded by people-less, pristine landscapes. For example, center courtyard areas—which were used for labor such as tallow processing and hide scraping—are today filled with flower gardens and fountains. This artifice of serenity, peacefulness, and beauty creates an environment that contradicts, in fundamental ways, the historical use of the space for producing profit-making products (Kryder-Reid 2008). In fact, these central spaces were used as what Foucault (1995:195–228) referred to as panopticons or spaces where the native people could be seen at all times during their daily activities and have their behavior scrutinized by the authorities.<sup>5</sup> The empty and pristine landscapes help the visitor to forget and even deny any traditional relationships with the land held for thousands of years by native occupants and erase the domination aspect of utilizing the Indian population as a labor force.

Within the complex of Mission La Purisima buildings is one called *el monjerio* or the woman’s

dorm, but no context is provided to understand what these dorms meant to the people who occupied them. There is no explanation, for instance, why girls over seven or eight years of age and young women were separated from their families due to the conservative sexual beliefs of the colonizing body. The mortality rates for native girls and young women was ten times higher than others because of damp, overcrowded conditions in the dorms (Bouvier 2001; Castañeda 1990a, 1990b), but at this mission the public is spared this harsh reality. Female staff at La Purisima, while discussing the inclusion of the *monjerio* story in the museum, said that they are interested in the struggles of women during the mission era, but the incorporation of it into the storyline is not likely. As one La Purisima staff member said in 2007:

Even though we have a *monjerio* here I know there's some books that talk about how life was for women in that period, when you're dealing with kids, you're kind of at the "G" level....The main district interpreter wants to put it on display [the *monjerio* story], but we just think that the Chumash people would get very upset.

A crude drawing of a soldier outside a barred window and door accompanies sewing implements in a glass case at Mission San Antonio, making reference to the activities in and around the women's dorms but providing no context. Aside from this one reference and a building called "*el monjerio*" at La Purisima, discussion of this horrific aspect of mission Indian history is ignored.

Although useful in some contexts to orient the visitor, timelines are also common devices for erasing Indian people or relegating their experiences to the distant past. Timelines are used in practically every museum along the Central Coast and are quite popular in mission museums (and mission websites). At Mission San Jose, the timeline (or time itself) begins with European arrival: the appearance of Columbus, Cortez, and Cabrillo in North America. After the mission's founding in 1797, the timeline moves through the prescribed eras of "Mission," "Rancho," and "American." The timeline ends with the re-dedication of the mission in 1985. Indians on this timeline exist only after 1492 when "Columbus arrives in America."

### EXCEPTIONS TO THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE

At the time of my analysis, a total of four missions were making efforts to counter the extinction aspect of the dominant narrative. At Mission San Gabriel and Mission San Antonio, I found photos of living descendant community members and gestures at cultural survival. In both of these cases, however, depictions of contemporary Indians were located outside of the main exhibits and were limited in terms of context. Eichstedt and Small (2002:170) would characterize this form of representation as "segregated knowledge"—not part of the central storyline. The missions sincerely striving for a competing narrative are Mission La Purisima and Mission Santa Barbara. At La Purisima, one of the two California State Parks, interpretive efforts have included collaboration with the Santa Ynez Chumash from 2003 to 2007, with a new exhibit space at the park's visitor's center. Although the new materials illustrate—within historic context—a continuum through the present day, it is again outside of the main mission complex. Further audience research is needed to determine if visitors will follow the desired route, which begins at the visitor's center. The mission grounds, which include over 200 acres of buildings, livestock corrals, and the small Chumash village, still remain without textual interpretation. This is problematic, because where text is absent, self-guided visitors are presumed to have arrived with some background knowledge or to have stopped at the visitor's center. At the time of my study, La Purisima's consultation was the only example of a mission site regularly working with a group of native advisors;<sup>6</sup> however, that example is not expressed in California State Parks policy. This project was spearheaded by conscientious La Purisima staff who, to their credit, insisted on a collaborative project. Current California State Parks policy does not mandate consultation or collaboration in the design and implementation of new interpretive exhibits and programming.

At the time of my analysis, discussion of Indian people's survival into the present is found in only one other mission. Mission Santa Barbara has a small contemporary exhibit space with photos and local contemporary Chumash art, developed through the advocacy of the mission museum director, a long-time colleague and supporter of the local Indian community. The story of loss, however, is absent in

favor of a “we are still here” message, which ignores the hard truths of mission life for Indian people, depicting descendents as happy, enduring survivors. This strategy, although a vast improvement, avoids complicity by leaving a gap in the history between secularization and the restoration of the missions in the 1940s and 1950s. Still, making the living local Indian community visible is at the heart of these efforts and the director should be applauded for being the first to take the risk of including the living Indian story. In addition, she also took the risk of including non-federally recognized Chumash bands. Few missions, even those with larger budgets, have been willing to go this far.

Although the major themes in recent mission scholarship have addressed such issues as population decline, Spain’s military and economic motives, the disruption of indigenous cultures and loss of language, severity of punishment, resistance, escape, *monjerios*, and the lasting legacy experienced by the Indian communities who survived them, these themes are absent from mission museum narratives. The one overarching theme among these sites is extinction, although none take responsibility for their role in obliteration. Mission museums commonly depict a peaceful precontact life replaced in favor of civilization and progress, with Indians dying out or assimilating into the mainstream. Some might be tempted to address the declension model with a counter story of resurgence and revitalization, such as in the small exhibit at Santa Barbara. But the well-meaning people who construct these exhibits should be careful not to gloss over the hard truths of colonization. Like critiques aimed at the National Museum of the American Indian, many people feel that the complex nature of colonization, with all its suffering, sadness, and cruelty, is overshadowed with a revitalization story, one that may be more palatable because it has a happy ending (Lonetree 2006; Lonetree and Cobb 2009). But ultimately, can a visitor truly appreciate what revitalization means without the whole gruesome reality of the past two centuries? Because missions try as hard as they do to avoid complicity, they aggravate rather than heal the wounds of many descendants of mission communities. As sites of conscience, the missions should have a special responsibility to tell the whole truth for the benefit of descendants on all sides of historic racial divides.

Today’s California Indian families survived not only the mission period but subsequent waves of oppression and violence. Their stories are incredible testimonies to resilience and resistance, triumph and pain.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE

Although I make some explicit recommendations as to the direction of exhibits and programming in mission museums (stemming from my interviews with local native people), consultation and collaboration with local community members should remain foremost in the minds of curators and museum staff who want to tell a more accurate story of Indian life. To this end, I encourage museum practitioners to invite everyone to the table and understand that not everyone will respond. It is vital, however, to spread the word as widely as possible and be willing to accommodate the needs of this very under-represented public. Aside from any local, federally recognized band or tribe, it is also wise to contact social service organizations and Indian Health Service clinics in the area. It should not be expected that people will give freely of their time. They should be paid when possible and provided with transportation, especially elders.

Cultural competency among museum people is often an issue. There are native consultants available to guide museum staff and docents through the process of understanding cultural differences and commonly held misconceptions. It is unwise to avoid cultural competency training for staff and docents. I experienced more cultural ignorance, racism, and insensitivity in the field than I can recount here, most often among docents. One insensitive comment could quickly destroy all networking efforts. Some museums on the Central Coast schedule meetings for their docents wherein local natives are asked to share their community’s precontact history—assuming this is the only real or authentic Indian experience. These trainings are generally very popular, but a good number of the docents who participated in these types of “trainings” retained racist notions that I later heard expressed to classes of third and fourth graders.

Based on my observations and interviews with local native people, I learned that in addition to edu-

cated and sensitive interpreters, efforts to correct the dominant narrative expressed in exhibits and programs could be approached in the following ways:

- Be sure to tell the story of the indigenous people of the area. To avoid it is to inadvertently participate in the “obliteration” narrative. The most destructive thing any museum can do is to avoid the Indian story because they fear it is too controversial. To do this is to erase the aboriginal history of California in the minds of visitors.
- Start at a time other than first contact and show the dynamism and diversity that existed prior to the arrival of Europeans. Linear progression and timelines are overused and in some ways are counter to Native American perspectives of time and history.
- Express the hard truths of each colonial regime. The Holocaust Museum is one of the most well-attended museums in Washington, DC. People are not afraid of the truth.
- Frame narratives in terms other than “eras,” i.e., Spanish—mission; Mexican—rancho; and American—gold rush. One alternative might be to follow a family through these periods and discuss ways that their lives were affected by newcomers—including negative impacts.
- Include interesting and little known stories about real people from a range of ethnic groups.
- Show that all groups have survived (not just white Americans) and talk about ways that their cultures are expressed in the area today. An example might be to show how local Indian people intermarried and survived on *Ranchos* (large, Spanish and, later, Mexican land grants) owned by Mexican families, and how those families adapted to and resisted assimilation and managed to remain in their homelands even after *Rancho* lands were taken.
- Discuss the issues a variety of people faced with California statehood such as the foreign miner’s tax, the indenture laws of 1850 and 1860, et cetera.
- Discuss contemporary American Indian issues, which might include: (1) sovereignty—what it is and why it is important to communities; (2) an explanation of federal recognition, what it means to Indian people, and why it has been so rare in Coastal California; (3) an examination of identity battles exacerbated by nonstatus, blood quantum criteria, federal and state laws that *define* Indian in limited ways, and historic trauma; (4) the Mission Indian Federation, why it was formed and how it benefited Indian people; and (5) urban Indian communes and activism of the 1960s and 1970s, which include interesting stories such as the American Indian Movement and the occupation of Alcatraz Island, activism for the preservation of sacred sites and cemeteries, and the creation of laws to protect them such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the National Historic Preservation Act Section 106, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and other pivotal legislation for native peoples.
- Discuss the CA SB 2063 State Indian Museum bill and why native Californians feel so strongly about representing themselves.
- Emphasize living communities and the participation in extensive cultural activities such as the revitalization of: (1) canoe culture (including paddles in the Santa Barbara Channel from the 1970s through today); (2) basketry and the preservation and restoration of traditional plant habitats through the work of organizations such as the California Indian Basketweavers Association (CIBA); and (3) California native languages in the past decade. There is abundant material available from the Breath of Life organizers at UC Berkeley, various California linguists, and the Indian communities themselves—many of whom are restoring their ancient languages with little financial support.
- Explain the origins of casinos and gaming in California, engaging the audience in facts about tribal gaming, such as the little known history of its origins in traditional native life, as well as highlighting the ways gaming has benefited tribes, surrounding communities, and the State of California.

There are also many issues facing the Mexican and mestizo population of California, whether they be

newly arrived or among the descendants of the *Californios*. Authentic portrayals of *Californio* histories, rather than romantic portrayals of haciendas, fiestas, and fictional *Ramona*-esque representations, are sorely needed. These might offer working-class stories that people (including the descendant population) can relate to. Inclusion of the history of the U.S.–Mexican border, and what has it meant to tribes and families straddling it, help complete the picture. If consultation with the broader community is done well, many issues—as well as solutions—will emerge, beyond what I can suggest here. I have not offered an exhaustive list of suggestions because my goal is to encourage museums to collaborate and communicate with local people, not to negate the need for such efforts.

One of the questions I posed to museum staff and docents was, “Do you think it is the job of history museums to tell the stories of contemporary groups?” Seventy-five percent responded by asking, “If we don’t, who will?” In many cases, museum directors and staff apologized for the state of their exhibits, and, in fact, the majority of them want to change the dominant message. They stressed the two major obstacles to doing so: fear and money.

What I propose addresses both of these issues—that mission museums can work as advocates for social justice and that it need not require an enormous budget to do so. I recommend that this work begin *prior* to the revamping of exhibit spaces. Exhibits can still inform public programs, even by using outdated exhibits to discuss stereotypes and commonly held misconceptions as long as they are accompanied by a script that addresses the shortcomings of the exhibit copy. Rather than avoid such topics because their visual representations are outdated, why not incorporate them into the storyline of the ways people of color have been portrayed in the past and how those ideas have changed and evolved over time? In this scenario, visitors are educated about the changing role of the museum and docents become better informed. These changes can be done with little or no money. In addition, it could be extremely useful to staff and docents to visit tribal museums to see self-representations of native and *Californio* histories and the social justice issues these facilities address.

At the Barona Cultural Center in San Diego and the Agua Caliente Museum near Palm Springs, for

example, visitors can see and hear Indian history from an Indian perspective. In these types of venues, the mission period is discussed in terms of its impacts on California Indians. Disease, malnutrition, confinement, punishment, and the devastating loss of cultural knowledge and language are underscored rather than highlighting the “useful trades” and beneficial religious training discussed in the mission museums. Individual family histories are told, exemplifying the depth of relationships local people continue to have with the land and each other. Items owned and borrowed from tribal members are on display to reveal cultural artistic traditions, rather than the popular anthropological display of stone tools that gesture at a primitive “stone age” lifestyle. In tribal museums, the visitor is likely to see color photographs of children and elders practicing ancient traditions, perhaps some with a contemporary twist. They hear audio recordings of living people speaking their native languages. Visitors leaving a tribal museum are often filled with a sense of hope and excitement about the restoration and revitalization of native life in North America (Erikson et al. 2002).

Current mission museum representations engender a form of social forgetting that exacerbates struggles for native sovereignty and the retention of land rights issues, whereby state and federal governments ignore the rights of descendant, non–federally recognized Indian communities. The relegation of Indian peoples to obscure margins of public history denies those communities a presence on the landscape, both theoretical and literal. Currently, in California’s mission museums, the primary narrative remains static and primitive and echoes a sense of loss, countering the sense of hope elsewhere. As important sites of conscience, mission museums can (and have the ethical responsibility to) alter this grim narrative with a commitment to work as a source of community cohesion. This article is a call to action.

#### NOTES

1. Carey McWilliams first coined the term “fantasy heritage” during the 1940s in his trenchant deconstruction of the mission myth. Most often attributed to Helen Hunt Jackson’s (1884) *Ramona*, the mission myth entailed reinventing a romantic Spanish history for California—a fictionalized past exploited by Los Angeles “Boosters” bent on transforming

the region into the cultural and economic capital of the West. "Discovered as a tourist promotion in the 1880s," McWilliams (1949:42) writes, "the Spanish mission background in Southern California was inflated to mythical proportions." "Fantasy heritage" named the selective appropriation of historical fact, the transformation of selected elements of history (e.g., the economic system of missions and haciendas) into a romantic, idyllic past that repressed the history of race and class relations in the region.

2. Mission Santa Cruz and Mission San Juan Bautista are owned and operated jointly by the State of California and the local diocese.
3. Meaning the people colonized a generation or two earlier that had adopted Catholicism and other aspects of European or Spanish culture, language, and worldview; a few also had Spanish bloodlines.
4. James Loewen (1999:407) suggests that to soften invasion narratives, conquerors often highlighted the stories of natives who helped them. Americans might call these "Tonto figures" after the Lone Ranger's famous sidekick—the archetypal "good Indian," always ready to help track down the "bad Indians" and outlaws who menaced whites on the frontier.
5. Central observational spaces, such as in prison complexes, which are used to observe prisoners.
6. Two missions have hired a native individual (who also works for the church and who does not represent a larger tribe or band) to help with exhibit planning.

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