

THE SPANISH MISSIONS OF CALIFORNIA:  
DECOLONIZING PROBLEMATIC CHURCH-OPERATED SPACES

A THESIS

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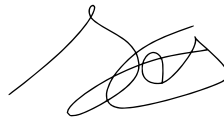
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## **Abstract**

The Spanish Missions of California were built throughout the 1700s as a means to convert the Native people of California to Christianity. These places have been telling their settler-colonial histories from the perspective of the Spaniards ever since. Most Californian fourth graders still learn that settler-colonialism was good and useful for the culture of California. A lot of this information is put forth by the missions, which are still buildings operated by the Catholic church. The church does not want to admit the genocide that occurred because then the continued presence of the missions would not be justified. Many Indigenous, Chicana, and other activists have been fighting for more historical perspectives to be told within these spaces and within spaces of learning in California. New curriculum put forth by the state for elementary schoolers includes Native perspectives from this time period, however, the information within the missions has failed to change for decades. In order to help inform the general public, I designed pieces of clothing for a streetwear brand that brings light to these issues.

## **Father Sarah/Father Serra**

In 2007, I was a fourth-grader at Monta Loma Elementary School in Mountain View, California. I grew up just down the street from my school – it still takes seven minutes to walk from my parent’s house to Monta Loma. Fourth grade was the first year of school when we discussed the history of California. I had been looking forward to it as much as I had been dreading it because I had seen all the field trips that my older sister, Libbie, got to go on in fourth grade, but I also had seen her struggle during the infamous “mission project.” I remember her buying white sheets of cardboard and diligently measuring and cutting out all the components of what she would turn into a mini version of the Mission Carmel.

When my class finally got to the mission unit, we found out that we would no longer be building the mission models– in previous years, too many parents had been building their kid’s projects or buying “mission-building kits” from Michaels. We still did everything else that my sister had done. We went to the Mission San Juan Bautista, about 60 miles south of Monta Loma, where we saw a lot of chickens. There, the concept of holy water made an impression on me – I grew up in a Jewish household so when the tour guide pointed out the basin that would have held holy water when San Juan Bautista was a working mission, I dipped my hands in the old rainwater that was then sitting in it.

In class when we talked about the missions, there was one name that I remember distinctly. Ms. Robinson, my teacher, told us about Father Junípero Serra. “Father Serra built the missions,” she said. I was a tomboy and my classmates thought this name was perfect for me. “Father Sarah! Father Sarah!” They mocked me when the name was brought up. I hated Junípero Serra, but for the wrong reasons.

In fourth grade, I learned the names of the missionaries and the names of the missions. I even think we talked about the people native to the land who worked at the missions. However, it was never relayed to me that when the Spanish came to California, they were committing a genocide on the original inhabitants. I also never learned that there were still living people descended from those first people of the land. I learned the history of missionaries and colonization from the settler colonial perspective.

### **Deborah Miranda: *Bad Indians***

I never learned what was wrong about my fourth grade education until I took “Native American Non-Fiction” with Professor Natanya Pulley. There, we read *Bad Indians*, a book by Deborah Miranda which aims to expose these flaws within history education in California, as well as chronicle her own family’s histories and ways that colonization and missionization affected her family. She says “[t]his story has not just killed us, it has taught us how to kill ourselves and kill each other.”<sup>1</sup> Miranda is part European as well as a descendent of Chumash and Esselen people who resided at the Santa Barbara/Santa Ynez Mission. She sits in a distinct positionality where she must grapple with her own conflicting identities. This is especially important because she grew up in California and learned the same settler colonial history that I learned growing up.

Miranda critiques the ways that fourth grade students are told to build models of missions, ingraining settler colonial ways of thinking into their early education. Miranda writes part of the book as though it is a textbook which exemplifies the ways that any history can be put

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Miranda. *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2013. xix

into that format and posed as true. Each section of the “textbook” is given a noun-phrase title like “Bells” or “Flogging.” She uses each section to describe words either from the perspective of Mission Indians or the perspective of the Spanish. For example, in the section titled “Adobe Bricks” it says “Recipe: Gather your Indians from the mission... Then you need dirt, water, straw... Your Indians... seem to like dirt...” and then continues on to talk about the process of building missions from the settler colonial perspective; the idea that humans can be objects and many Indigenous people living on the missions were enslaved. However, the next section called “Bells” is from the Mission Indian perspective: “The voice of the bell is the voice of the padres. We try but we cannot always obey.” By switching back and forth between multiple perspectives, Miranda is able to show how faceted the colonial history of California is, and how many perspectives get left out.<sup>2</sup>

Miranda’s multi-perspective textbook section is not like the textbook that I used as a fourth grader at Monta Loma Elementary School and that is still being used by fourth graders today. Published in 2006 by Scott Foresman and written by William E. White, this textbook includes no indigenous perspectives at all. Instead, it talks about California Indians from an outsider anthropological perspective that others them. Furthermore, the textbook says nothing about the wrongdoings committed by Junípero Serra and the missionaries, framing settler colonialism as inevitable rather than an act of genocide.<sup>3</sup> I will return to this deliberation, which delves deeper into the content of the textbook later, in my research discussion.

It was important for me to read Miranda’s work because I had not considered the opinion of someone descended from Mission Indians. I had never really thought about how there *are* still

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 6-20.

<sup>3</sup> William E. White, *History-Social Science for California: Our California* (Glenview, IL: Pearson Scott Foresman, 2006))

descendants. They are fighting against the narratives that have been told countless times in missions and classrooms throughout the state.

By reading *Bad Indians*, I was able to see one person's perspective on her family's experience in the missions. Just this single narrative changed my entire understanding of the history of California permanently because it made me start searching for more answers about what actually happened during the waves of colonialism in my state. The history that students like me have historically learned in California public schools is romanticized and Anglicized – periods like the Gold Rush era are framed as a time of growth and while this may be true in some senses, it rejects the fighting and killing that took place.<sup>4</sup> Vizenor's theory of survivance – the act of existing, of still being and not being erased – is crucial to emphasize in looking at Indigenous histories and colonization.<sup>5</sup> It is important to recognize genocide but also to recognize the ways that genocide is not completely an erasure, and the ways that communities have been fighting against genocide. Not only this, but the peoples that the missionization aimed to convert and kill are still alive and have stories and cultures which are uniquely their own. These stories must be shared as part of this theory of survivance, through the recording and sharing of Indigenous histories.<sup>6</sup>

Deborah Miranda is not the only person who has brought up issues with the way the missions are taught. Since the 1960s, the Chicano movement in California has been fighting to change the Spanish-centered curriculum to be more inclusive of the diversity of California's

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<sup>4</sup>Clifford E Trafzer. and Michelle Lorimer. "Silencing California Indian Genocide in Social Studies Texts." *American Behavioral Scientist* 58, no. 1 (2013): 64-82.  
doi:10.1177/0002764213495032

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Robert Vizenor. *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015.

population. Projects that encourage students to build missions romanticize the actions of the Spanish, while erasing the stories of Native peoples whose land we live on – literally building settler colonial structures on top of Indigenous land.<sup>7</sup> By raising up those voices which have been oppressed over time, textbooks and literature produced for elementary schoolers can help to change the ways in which students understand their place in the world. Pedagogy which emphasizes the ways that settlers have gained power perpetuates these settler colonial ways of thinking and the oppressive systems which make up United States society. If non-Native and Native students alike do not learn about ways in which survivance has been enacted and oppressed voices have been fighting back throughout time, they will truly believe that the oppressors “won” and that Native cultures no longer exist. This is beneficial to those in power who profit from oppressive systems – if students are taught that these systems of oppression have always won out, then they will be less likely to question these systems. However, since they are inherently racist and classist, it is important that these societal ways of thinking are questioned and changed.<sup>8</sup>

After looking at all the false histories that I learned in my early education and that seemed to be told throughout California, I wanted to see for myself if everything I’d been reading about the problems in the missions was true. I decided to visit some of the missions and talk to various educators and activists to find out what, if anything, is being done about the problems that Miranda presented in her book.

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<sup>7</sup> Zevi Gutfreund. “Standing Up to Sugar Cubes: The Contest over Ethnic Identity in California's Fourth-Grade Mission Curriculum.” *Southern California Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 161-97. doi:10.2307/41172518.

<sup>8</sup> Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum; 30th Anniversary Edition, 2000.

## Research Methods

In the summer of 2019, I used my weekends to conduct my research at seven of the Spanish missions in California: Mission Santa Clara, Mission San Jose (in Fremont, CA), Mission San Francisco de Solano, Mission San Juan Bautista, Mission Carmel, Mission San Francisco de Asis, and Mission Santa Cruz. The only two of these original mission sites no longer operated by the church are Mission San Francisco de Solano and Mission Santa Cruz. I took tours at the missions that offered them (San Jose, San Francisco de Solano, and San Juan Bautista), and investigated the materials presented by the missions describing the histories of the missions.





Figure 1. “Spanish Missions,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed March 8, 2020, <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Spanish-Missions/353471/339440-toc>).

I also visited museums that presented state history: The Oakland Museum of California, The Hacienda Peralta House in Fruitvale, and later in Sacramento during my research block in November, The California Museum and the State Indian Museum.

I interviewed (by phone or email) many folks who helped me understand my findings: Dr. Wendy Rouse, Jessica Morgan, Seth Donnelly, Dr. Angela Marino, Meghan Perfect, Dr. Clifford Trafzer, and Anna Naimark. All of these people either pointed me towards good resources or other people to interview.

I also read an array of works for this project, books such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Friere, Amy Lonetree’s *Decolonizing Museums, An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *The Missions of California: A Legacy of Genocide* by Rupert Costo and Jeannette Henry Costo, *Bad Indians* by Deborah Miranda, and the *Our California* textbook by William E. White. These were the foundational texts for my project.

All of this research was still not enough to fully understand the issue at hand— however, I was able to glean some patterns throughout the various ways that spaces in the state of California present the colonial history of the land.

### **Research Discussion**

According to Zevi Gutfreund, in the state of California, people have been romanticizing the Spanish Missions since William Keith and Edward Deakin created idyllic paintings of them

in the 1870s and then Helen Hunt Jackson wrote *Ramona*, an idealized narrative about a Mission Indian family after the Mexican-American War. Even in the 1960s, Chicano and American Indian activists were challenging “the romanticized version of history that the mission diorama creates.” In 1962, Anglo Californians were happy to teach their children the curriculum that “Max Rafferty, the state’s new superintendent of public instruction” wanted to teach, as he was hoping to “restore traditional values to the classroom.” Almost immediately after this, in 1965, the American Indian Historical Society “launched the first public protest of California-history textbooks.”<sup>9</sup> While activists have been contesting the presence of an extremely settler-colonial history for fourth graders, actual changes have been coming, but slowly.

I started off my thesis research by trying to figure out if kids are still learning the history that I learned when I was in fourth grade. I met with a professor in the Department of History at San Jose State University, Dr. Wendy Rouse. Dr. Rouse is the program coordinator of social science teacher preparation. She had spoken to my mom, also a professor at San Jose State, and was excited to tell me about the work she and others have been doing around the curriculum on the colonial history of the United States. She was extremely friendly and hopeful for the future as she explained to me that California is currently changing the way that K-12 students are educated about the missions/Spanish colonialism.

Dr. Rouse told me about one organization working towards a new curriculum called the “California History-Social Science Project”. The CHSSP makes its perspective very clear in a blogpost by Tuyen Tran, CHSSP assistant director. The 2017 post is titled “Repeat after us: say

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<sup>9</sup> Zevi Gutfreund. “Standing Up to Sugar Cubes: The Contest over Ethnic Identity in California's Fourth-Grade Mission Curriculum.” *Southern California Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 161-64. doi:10.2307/41172518.

no to the mission project”. Tran lays out why past curriculum, such as building models of the missions, is harmful to California Indigenous communities, citing Deborah Miranda and others. Then, she points to various tools that teachers can use in the classroom, like a video on vimeo.com called *Map Your Indigenous Community*.<sup>10</sup> The video is promoted by the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) and explains how to use Google Map Maker– a resource for communities to add locations and addresses to Google Maps. This is important for Native American nations and communities because when the video was made, Google Maps had little data on predominantly Indigenous communities such as reservations (as well as many other communities around the world).<sup>11</sup> By promoting this resource, the NIEA can advocate for the existence and strength of Native communities today, thus enacting Vizenor’s theory of survivance.

The CHSSP’s “Grade 4 California History-Social Science Content Standards” is another resource that Tran encourages fourth grade educators to use.<sup>12</sup> This lays out the ways that teachers should be shifting the way that they talk about missions and the history of Indigenous nations and tribes in California. In the fourth grade standards text, something that is greatly emphasized is the importance of providing students with multiple perspectives on the missions, instead of just the Spanish perspectives that I learned in school. The text says that this will allow students to “...better understand change and continuity over time, as well as cause and effect.” For example, many Native Americans came to the missions by choice at first. However, once the change in agricultural practices brought about by the missionaries damaged the environment,

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<sup>10</sup> “Repeat after Us, Say No to the Mission Project.,” CHSSP (California History-Social Science Project, May 31, 2017), <https://chssp.ucdavis.edu/blog/mission>

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Dewire, “2014-08-27 17.03 NIEA Google Mapping Orientation,” Vimeo (National Indian Education Association, March 3, 2020), <https://vimeo.com/116772603>

<sup>12</sup> “Repeat after Us, Say No to the Mission Project.”

driving down the plant and animal populations that numerous California Indians had relied on, many were forced to go to the missions to get food and learn the new ways of agriculture.<sup>13</sup>

Information that lets kids see that pre-contact Native cultures were just as advanced as Spanish culture is often left out of history. According to Rupert Costo, a Cahuilla author and scholar, the European way of agriculture was actually much less efficient than that of the various California Indian tribes/nations. The Spanish believed that raising livestock and ranching was the most advanced way of getting food; however, people from the Indigenous nations had adapted to more of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle because it was more sustainable for the specific environment of California. The domestic animals brought over by the Spanish “destroyed the foods that native animals ate in drought years” thus “reducing the survival of native animals.” The domestic animals “were not adapted to the droughts” as were native animals, thus the domestic animals began dying. Even while the “Spanish missions reduced California[’s] Indian population by 75%, they still could not provide enough food for the survivors with the European form of agriculture.” This contrasts with the form of plant husbandry used by the Southern California Indians, which could produce food even during years of drought.<sup>14</sup>

Discussions about pre and post-colonial agricultural forms are also part of an important new standard now being integrated into the public K-12 classroom. Wendy Rouse told me about new state standards which place importance on California’s environment throughout time. Given the state of climate change, these standards aim to help students understand different ways that humans have interacted with their environment and what has led American society (and the

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<sup>13</sup> “PDF: Grade 4 California History-Social Science Content Standards ”(Davis, CA, May 2017))

<sup>14</sup> Rupert Costo and Jeannette Henry. Costo, *The Missions of California: a Legacy of Genocide* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1987)). 37.

world) to the state of environmental catastrophe that it is currently in. Part of this is learning how California Indians had adapted to their surroundings in California and how the Spanish brought change.<sup>15</sup>

There are also atypical learning environments where kids learn about California's history. Deer Hollow Farm, the community farm where I worked as a summer camp counselor for the past two summers, is a place for kindergarten through fifth grade supplemental education during the school year. Hundreds of elementary schoolers come to the farm to learn about farming as well as pre-colonial Native ways of agriculture. My boss, Jessica Morgan, created a third/fourth grade curriculum about Indigenous ways of life. She created this using input from various Indigenous community members and parks employees. One thing that she always emphasizes is *change*; as in, just because California Native communities may not look the same as they did before colonization, that does not mean that they are gone or are no longer tied to their Indigenous cultures.<sup>16</sup>

It is also important to note that while all of this seems like a big step forward from what I was learning in elementary school, it is not likely that many elementary schoolers are actually getting a comprehensive and layered history education. Dr. Rouse explained that many public schools simply "teach to the test" that their students will be taking. Social science is not a category on the California State standardized tests for fourth graders. Furthermore, these new standards were only put forward recently and so even if students are learning about the missions, the material may not have changed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wendy Rouse (professor) in discussion with the author, June 25, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Jessica Morgan in discussion with the author, November 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Wendy Rouse (professor) in discussion with the author, June 25, 2019.

Most kids are still learning the same history that I did. I emailed Meghan Perfect, a fourth grade teacher at Monta Loma Elementary School, where I went as a kid. I wasn't home during the time when she was teaching the mission unit, but she emailed me to let me know what she would be doing. Something that stuck out to me was the textbook that she uses. *Our California* published by Pearson/Scott Foresman in 2006 is the same textbook that I remember using in fourth grade. The textbook says that there are "Four California Indian groups" however, there are still approximately 200 tribes in California today, 109 federally recognized tribes and 78 of which are still petitioning for recognition. While there is no formal process for state recognition, currently in California there are 100 separate reservations or Rancherias.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 2. William E. White, History-Social Science for California: Our California (Glenview, IL: Pearson Scott Foresman, 2006). 32. California Indian Groups Map

<sup>18</sup> "California Tribal Communities." California Tribal Communities - Tribal\_projects. Accessed May 14, 2019. <https://www.courts.ca.gov/3066.htm>.



Figure 3. Educator News, “Native American Heritage Month,” California Educator, October 16, 2019, <https://californiaeducator.org/2019/10/15/native-american-heritage-month/>). Actual Map of the 200+ California Indian Territories.

*Our California* refuses to acknowledge the vast amount of pre and post colonial California Indian tribes and nations, downplaying their status and importance by simply calling them “groups.” Furthermore, while the textbook does say that “American Indian groups have lived and still live in what is now California,” it continuously describes each of the “four groups”

in the past tense as when it says “The Cahuilla... lived near what is now called the Mojave desert” and “The Miwok had a custom of using holes in slabs of stone to grind acorns into flour”.

<sup>19</sup> The way these sections are mostly phrased in the past tense, switching back and forth between past and present tenses, is confusing and could easily lead elementary schoolers to believe that the California Indians no longer exist.

The *Our California* textbook describes Europeans coming to California, but fails to include recognition of the Indigenous guides who were the reasons that European settlers were able to brave the harsh and varying landscapes of California. The lack of Indigenous perspectives is part of what makes the textbook such a bad resource. The textbook talks about how many California Indians lived at the missions by force and died because of European diseases but it does not talk about the blame that should be placed on the missionaries. For example, the book states, “Many [Native people] died from diseases... that were brought over by Europeans” and “some California Indians were not free to leave.”<sup>20</sup> By treating enslavement like it’s not an issue and by acting like death by European disease was inevitable, the textbook excuses colonization and frames California’s missionary project as more of a demographic disaster instead of what it was, a genocide.<sup>21</sup>

*Our California* is mainly problematic because it simplifies complex issues like colonization and the textbook itself is confused about the existence and resistance of the people native to California. This is an incomplete history. This is primarily California history from the

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<sup>19</sup> William E. White, *History-Social Science for California: Our California* (Glenview, IL: Pearson Scott Foresman, 2006). 32-34.

<sup>20</sup> William E. White, *History-Social Science for California: Our California* (Glenview, IL: Pearson Scott Foresman, 2006). 43.

<sup>21</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015). 40.



perspective of the Spanish missionaries in its most basic understanding of California's indigenous peoples as well as its erasure of many of their histories.

The textbook explains that Father Junípero Serra established 9 missions which “introduced many California Indians to Catholicism.”<sup>22</sup> What it fails to mention is what Catherine Siva Saubel, a Cahuilla Indian, describes as “the atrocities Serra inflicted on my people” because “Serra believed that Indians were not human beings.”<sup>23</sup> In part, the textbook is justifying the possible canonization of Fr. Serra, while many Indigenous nations stand against it. A letter signed by the Los Coyotes Indian Reservation states that while converting “so-called heathen peoples” was a popular and accepted activity for a long period of time, this historical context does not change the fact that Serra does not deserve canonization now, with what we understand about history and conversion. Serra was a “foreigner who forcibly detained and brain-washed... free people in order to impose an alien religion upon them.” There is no way that this is justifiable in our present understanding of the world and religion.<sup>24</sup>

This is what fourth graders have learned for decades and while Indigenous and non-native scholars alike are trying to change this curriculum, the same lies (often using harsher, racist language) are presented in the missions themselves.

Of the seven missions that I visited (Mission Santa Clara, Mission San Jose in Fremont, CA, Mission San Francisco de Solano, Mission San Juan Bautista, Mission Carmel, Mission San Francisco de Asis, and Mission Santa Cruz), the only two of these original mission sites no

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<sup>22</sup> William E. White, *History-Social Science for California: Our California* (Glenview, IL: Pearson Scott Foresman, 2006)). 43.

<sup>23</sup> Rupert Costo and Jeannette Henry Costo, *The Missions of California: a Legacy of Genocide* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1987)). 144.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

longer operated by the church are Mission San Francisco de Solano and Mission Santa Cruz. The others have connected parishes and still host Catholic services and weddings.

### **The Church-Operated Missions**

The California missions continue to operate as working churches, with the exception of three that are operated by the state.<sup>25</sup> I have found that this is why so many of them provide misinformation regarding their colonial histories. They feel that they must justify their existence as churches and museum spaces by telling lies and concealing the negative actions that occurred in these church spaces. To tell the truth would be to admit wrongdoing. It takes much more work to right a wrong than to pretend like nothing wrong was done in the first place.

The first lie that the church-owned missions tell is that the California Indians needed the missions— that they came from various lesser cultures and they needed to learn morality and agricultural methods from the Spanish people. At Mission San Jose in Fremont, the docent leading my tour explained that the “Ohlone were truly a stone age culture.” He further asserted that the main goal was for those Indigenous people living in California to learn from the Spanish and become self-sufficient in Spanish agricultural methods. This docent clearly lacked an understanding of the sustainable forms of plant husbandry used by the Native Californians.<sup>26</sup>

While the missions justify the Spanish occupation of California as the Spanish believing that the Indigenous people needed their help and needed to be saved, these are simply mechanisms of colonization. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues that the belief in land ownership and therefore land-taking has been a method of colonization since the Inquisitions of the 11th

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<sup>25</sup> “PDF: Historic Missions Are Part of California State Parks ,” n.d.

<sup>26</sup> Rupert Costo and Jeannette Henry. Costo, *The Missions of California: a Legacy of Genocide* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1987)). 37.

through 13th centuries. The crusades, ordered by the various popes, allowed soldiers to participate in mercenary type ventures where they could loot and pillage Muslim towns and cities, while killing any heretics along the way.<sup>27</sup> The Inquisitions began over 800 years before the Spanish colonized California, but set the scene for the Spanish to do so. While some mission docents like to perpetuate the idea that the Spanish colonization was the next logical step in the evolution of the “unevolved” Mission Indians, the Indigenous people of California were not any less advanced than Europeans of the time. The Spanish had adapted to their European environment and the Native Californians had adapted to their environment in California. The Spanish believed their system to be more advanced under the guise and frameworks of Christianity and colonization.

The second lie is that the various Native peoples who ended up living on the missions, were there fully out of their own free will. When I visited the Mission San Juan Bautista, the tour guide, an older white man named George, told me that the Indians who lived at that particular mission were something like “voluntary slaves.” In those exact words. It is true that some of the Mission Indians did arrive to the missions by choice. This was often due to the depletion of native food sources due to newly inflicted Spanish agricultural practices.<sup>28</sup> Once converted to Christianity, these people were no longer allowed to leave. In fact, according to an “1878 interview of a Kamia man named Janitin, when he arrived at the mission, he was locked in a room for a week... when he tried to escape or didn’t do what the missionaries expected of him, he was whipped and beaten, even to the point of unconsciousness.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Mission

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<sup>27</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015). 33.

<sup>28</sup>“PDF: Grade 4 California History-Social Science Content Standards ”(Davis, CA, May 2017)). 2.

<sup>29</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015)). 128-29.

Indians were promised land for working at the missions, however none were ever awarded this land when the missions dissolved.<sup>30</sup>

The third lie that the church-owned missions perpetuate is that Indigenous Californian culture no longer exists. At Mission San Juan Bautista, the tour guide Robert told me that to start off, there were 49,000 Indians as opposed to the 60 Spaniards. He said that there are the “same amount of Native Americans today but now they’re intermarried with Europeans” and they come and visit the mission in their BMWs.<sup>31</sup> This way of thinking excuses colonization because it furthers the idea that it was necessary for the Spanish to bring their European lifestyle to California. However just this logic is a form of genocide– Robert was erasing the fact that Indigenous cultures are still thriving throughout California and justifying the idea that California Indians nowadays are more European than Native. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz explains that “The objective of US colonialist authorities was to terminate their existence as peoples—not as random individuals.”<sup>32</sup> This is essentially what Robert did; he excused colonization by explaining that it’s good that now Indigenous people can drive BMWs and live as Europeans. He was erasing the cultures that have persisted throughout thousands of years.

### **State Park-Operated Missions**

For the most part, the missions are operated by the church; however, some were rebuilt or don’t have working churches and these ones are operated by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks). I found the mission spaces operated by State Parks to be much less

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<sup>30</sup> Rupert Costo and Jeannette Henry. Costo, *The Missions of California: a Legacy of Genocide* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1987). 74.

<sup>31</sup> Robert at Mission San Juan Bautista in discussion with the author, July 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015). 6.

problematic/one-sided spaces than those operated by the church. I believe that this is because California State Parks rely on the history that California now relies on, which is being integrated into elementary education. The missions operated by State Parks have no need to justify their existence as churches because they are simply historical learning sites.

One of these missions is the Mission San Francisco de Solano in Sonoma, California. The last mission built under the orders of the Spanish missionaries, Mission San Francisco de Solano was a working mission starting from 1823 for only 3 years, at which point General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, a Mexican commander, moved his troops to Sonoma and secularized the mission. The other two Parks-operated missions were destroyed in fires and earthquakes and then rebuilt, which is what allowed parks to take control of them.<sup>33</sup>

By the time I took a tour at Mission San Francisco de Solano, I had already taken tours at a couple of the church-operated missions, so I was expecting more of the same. However, the first person I talked to, an older man named Alan, told me that the Spanish cattle were an invasive species and that was part of the reason why so many Native Californians were attracted to come to the mission. When I told Alan what other tour guides had said about the Indigenous people staying at/building the missions by choice, he said, “Well that’s funny, that’s not how I understand it happened. That’s funny.”

About 15 minutes later, I got an official tour of the mission from a docent named Carrie who talked about what the fourth graders learn when they come to the mission– mostly about Native cooking and basket weaving. They also learn that many of the non-Spaniards were there by force and how the Spanish tricked many of the Mission Indians by telling them that they

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<sup>33</sup> “PDF: Historic Missions Are Part of California State Parks ,” n.d.

would receive the mission lands once fully converted to Spanish religious and agricultural ways. Eventually, the Californios or, Spanish-descended people, got the land after the turmoil of the Mexican-American War.<sup>34</sup>

Carrie also pointed out a placard honoring those California Indians who died at the mission, with asterisks next to the names of children. She told us that this beautiful engraved and polished granite on the side of the mission is a gathering place once a year for descendants of those who lived at the mission. I found it really lovely to see the Mission San Francisco de Solano getting involved with those whose ancestors' land the mission sits on.

When I asked the park ranger at the front desk of the mission, she told me that their docents are required to go through history training where they read the official history of California, as updated by historians and scholars *now*. This contrasts with the church-operated missions which seem to simply have history buff docents who learned about the Spanish colonization of California when they were in school, over 50 years ago.

### **Other Decolonial Spaces**

The official history that California now emphasizes can be seen in many places throughout the state. One example of this is at the California Museum in Sacramento. There, the Native American exhibition is fully curated by Indigenous historians and artists. The wall label called “California Indians: The First People” explains that when the first Europeans arrived in 1537, there were around “500 different tribes in the area” and despite the disruptions in traditional husbandry practices, new diseases, and enslavement/killing, “today, not just

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<sup>34</sup> Mission San Francisco de Solano tour guide in discussion with the author, June 2019.

surviving, the California Indian population is actually increasing.” They have “made a difference, on their own terms, in their own voice.” This exhibit then displays the history of California Indians through past and present art and Indigenous perspectives and understandings of history.

Amy Lonetree describes the importance of decolonial museum spaces, which “must involve assisting our communities in addressing the legacies of historical unresolved grief.” Furthermore, a “decolonizing museum practice must be in the service of speaking the hard truths of colonialism.”<sup>35</sup> The California Museum strives towards these ideals. The caption in front of a display case called “Annihilation, Appropriation, Assimilation” explains how “in the 19th century many in the USA thought that Native Americans were defeated and on their way to extinction.”<sup>36</sup> This explanation helps me to understand why many of the docents at the church-operated missions perpetuate the histories that they do – in part these are the problematic perspectives that the docents have learned.

Another place that tries to tell more perspectives of California’s colonial history is the Peralta Hacienda Historical Park in Fruitvale, California. Located in the middle of an Oakland neighborhood, this park includes a two story house with the downstairs as exhibits of the history of the Peralta family, who were granted 45,000 acres of land in the Spanish colonial period.<sup>37</sup> Not only this, but the history of the land from pre-contact to now is portrayed as one walks throughout the rooms of the house. The Native American room contains flip books filled with historical facts that place blame on the Spanish colonizers. For example, one page explains why

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<sup>35</sup> Lonetree 3 & 4

<sup>36</sup> Wall text, Annihilation, Appropriation, Assimilation Display Case, Peralta Hacienda, Fruitvale, CA.

<sup>37</sup> Peralta Hacienda, “The History .,” Peralta Hacienda <http://www.peraltahacienda.org>, accessed March 8, 2020, <http://www.peraltahacienda.org/pages/main.php?pageid=26&pagecategory=3>)

many Mission Indians were drawn to the missions (promise of land) and includes pictures of the Spanish statutes that decreed the arrival of the Indigenous people to the missions. The question at the bottom: “What was the Spanish plan for California?” allows the viewer to decide what they think happened from the evidence presented in the exhibit.

One chilling element in the pre-contact history section are the shackles that lay on the floor to remind visitors what the true effect of Spanish colonization was.



Figure 4. Peralta Hacienda Indigenous History Exhibit. Photographed by the author. July 13, 2019.  
Shackles.

Other rooms in the Peralta Hacienda lay out the history of the Peralta family itself, as well as descriptions of the brutal history of the Gold Rush, other facts often skimmed over in K-12 education. Since Peralta Hacienda depicts history until the present, there is one room called



“Undocumented Heart” which has art from Undocumented Laborers in Oakland. Each piece has a label written in English and Spanish. There is also a “kitchen” room in the house which shows examples of pre- and post-colonial foods as well as a 3-foot tall community cookbook with recipes from various community members. I got a tour at the Peralta Hacienda– my tour guide was a man from Mexico who talked about power struggles throughout history. He took the tour group to the back of the house, which has a community garden specifically for women from the Mien ethnic group, many of whom live nearby the Peralta Hacienda. He explained that it is difficult for these women to access their traditional foods and that once a year, there is a cookout/potluck where these women cook for community members and people gather with their own traditional recipes.

I saw the Peralta Hacienda as a space working towards decolonial values because it serves as a site of “knowledge making and remembering for the community that it is in.” Further, this place “assists the community in their efforts to address the legacies of historical unresolved grief by speaking the hard truths of colonialism and thereby creating a space for healing and understanding.”<sup>38</sup> Unlike the church-operated missions, this is a gathering space for community members to make of it what they will.

Other groups have been working to try to decolonize the mission curriculum, like the Chicana and Indigenous activists in the 1960s.<sup>39</sup> Universities are especially among these groups trying to make changes. The Critical Mission Studies group, through the University of California

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<sup>38</sup> Lonetree 3

<sup>39</sup> Zevi Gutfreund. “Standing Up to Sugar Cubes: The Contest over Ethnic Identity in California's Fourth-Grade Mission Curriculum.”

San Diego, awards grants to those doing this work to integrate Indigenous perspectives into history education.<sup>40</sup>

### **Working Towards Solutions**

Seeing as there are some missions that are extremely colonial spaces and also some museums and other places that are working towards decolonization, I wondered what people are doing about the missions now and what I could do.

I spoke with Professor Angela Marino from the University of California Berkeley who talked about money and law as ways to hold these places accountable for perpetuating harmful histories. She suggested that the California Department of Tourism pull sponsorship of the missions until they begin working towards decolonial practices. This could take the form of legal action.<sup>41</sup>

I also talked to Anna Naimark, who works for California Governor Gavin Newsom's office in gaming policy. She told me a bit about how gaming policy brings money back into Indigenous communities for history and community education. Those communities who help with history curriculum not only within their own tribes but also outside in the communities near them get more tax breaks on the money they make from casinos. Thus, many people living in Central California (where most reservations are now) actually tend to get a better colonial history education than those from coastal areas (like me).<sup>42</sup>

Activists in the Sogorea Te' Land Trust are Indigenous women facilitating the return of "Chochenyo and Karkin Ohlone lands in the San Francisco Bay Area to Indigenous stewardship." They also offer the option for people to pay their Shuumi Land Tax based on

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<sup>40</sup> "Home." Critical Mission Studies. Accessed March 8, 2020. <http://criticalmissionstudies.ucsd.edu/>.

<sup>41</sup> Angela Marino (professor) in discussion with the author, November 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Anna Naimark in discussion with the author, March 2020.

whether someone owns or rents residential or commercial property on Chochenyo/Karkin Ohlone land.<sup>43</sup> These activists are working towards a decolonial California, or a return of their ancestral lands.

As part of this thesis project, I also decided to make streetwear that would stand in solidarity with those California tribes whose ancestors experienced genocide and land theft. I have been fascinated by streetwear ever since I started learning about it during my sophomore year of college. While studying abroad in Russia, I did research about the intersection of Russian and American streetwear and high fashion. The brand Supreme is especially interesting to me because of their ability to excite an entire generation. I wanted to make my own Supreme-like brand, but with a social justice twist. It was important for me to use mission imagery specifically. I decided to use the Supreme logo, but with the term “Decolonize” instead.

Once I sketched up what I wanted to do, I found a cotton t-shirt, hoodie, and hat – all of them were white. I then got permission to use the arts and crafts studio to dye my clothes the colors that I felt fit them. I made the crop top an orange-yellow and used olive color for the hoodie and hat. The dying process was strenuous and I had to wear a face mask, elbow-high gloves, and an apron. It took about an hour and a half per color and I had to be mixing pretty constantly. I felt connected with the clothes and the way that the beauty of the missions is inherently mixed with the colonial history of the places.

After I dyed the clothes, I brought them to CC’s costume shop and trimmed the crop top, and ironed on my patterns. I also embroidered a “decolonize” logo onto each of my garments, which made them each look more hand-made.

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<sup>43</sup> Sogorea Te' Land Trust. Accessed March 8, 2020. <https://sogoreate-landtrust.com/>.

It was important for me to do this hands-on experience because it helped me feel more connected with my research and what I learned from it. It also helped me break up my writing nicely.

The hypothetical proceeds of this brand would all go to the Sogorea Te' Land Trust and other non-profits working towards redistribution of land/ decolonizing California. That way, I would be able to use the profits to benefit the descendents of those whose lands were stolen. By raising money, I can use the money to try to make changes in the ways that Californians think about the land that we live on.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, not a lot has changed in the Spanish missions of California since settler-colonial times. While I'm definitely not the first person to notice these issues, the church-operated mission spaces lack Indigenous perspectives and perpetuate settler-colonial histories. Missionaries like Junípero Serra are still being idolized, instead of being exposed for their evil actions against the Native people of California. Some children in California's public schools have started to learn a new curriculum to understand pre-contact life and culture, but many teachers are slow to implement it. The state parks operate a couple of the missions and these spaces tend to give much more rounded historical perspectives based on the state's official history. State-funded museums in California also tend to have Indigenous curators for their Native history sections.

Despite so many people putting in the work to represent California's settler-colonial history from multiple perspectives, somehow the Spanish Missions are frozen in time. The

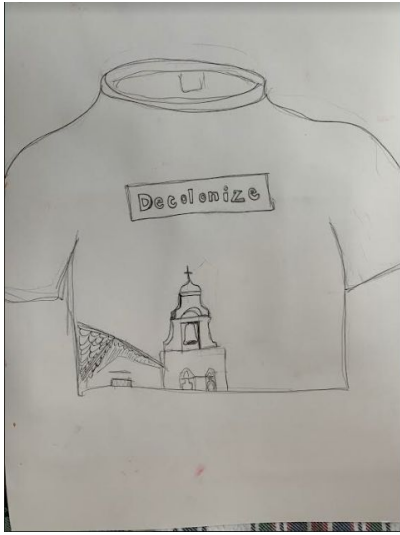
missions couldn't exist without the enslavement and death of Indigenous people, but admitting this also admits the need for a lot of work. Docents would have to be re-trained and exhibits would have to be re-worked. Furthermore, the institution of the Catholic church would need to justify the settler-colonial nature of its existence. Most people working in the Spanish Missions now are not willing to make these changes. Dr. Marino from UC Berkeley talked to me about ways that these spaces could be held accountable: through litigation and getting California's department of tourism to de-fund these spaces until they are able to be better.<sup>44</sup>

I made a streetwear brand to spread awareness. When I finally go back home to California and when all of this COVID-19 stuff is over, I hope to wear my brand to one of the church-operated missions. Who knows, maybe I can even get one of the mission gift shops to sell it.

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<sup>44</sup> Angela Marino (professor) in discussion with the author, November 2019.

Clothing Brand Sketches/Final Products



Initial sketches of the crop top.

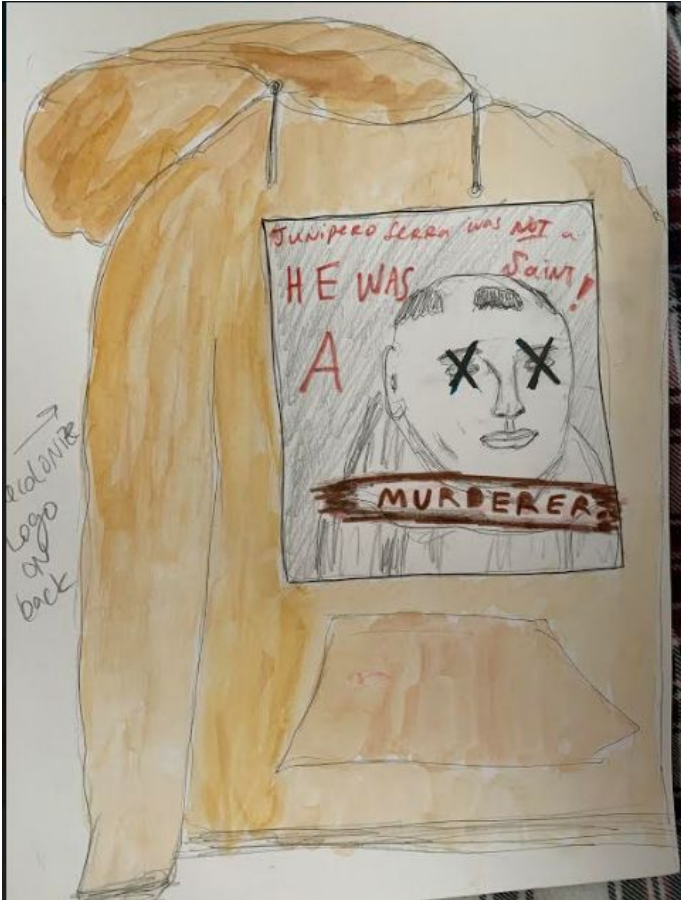


Dying the white cotton shirt orange.



Final crop top.





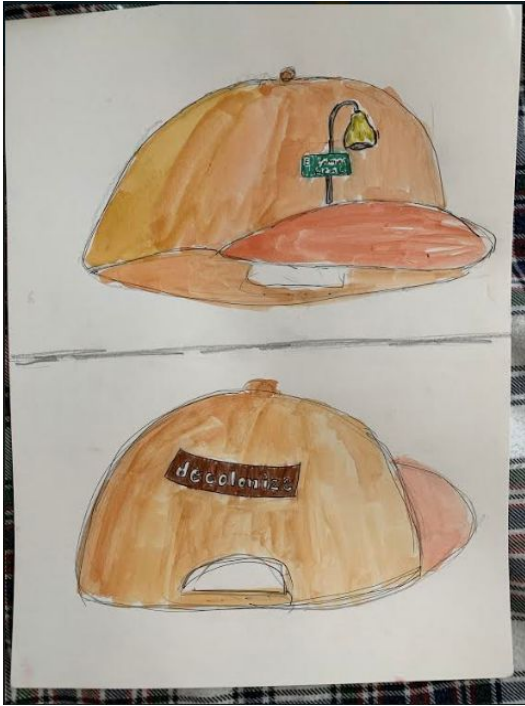
Initial sketch of hoodie.



Finished hoodie. San Junipero was canonized, however he was a murderer and all-around bad dude.



"Decolonize" embroidery up close.



Initial hat sketch.



Front of hat depicting one of the famous El Camino Real bells.



"Decolonize" embroidery up close.



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