Serra in the Garden

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Figure 1. Statue of Junipero Serra in the forecourt of Mission San Carlos, Monterey, CA

I am interested in a set of objects, statues of Junípero Serra in the gardens and surrounding landscapes of the California missions. Established along California's coast and inland valley from 1769-1823 by Franciscan missionaries on behalf of Spain, the missions' purpose was to convert and "civilize" California's native peoples. Today, nineteen of the 21 missions are owned by the Catholic Church, and many continue to function as both Catholic parishes and popular tourist destinations. Like the Mormon sites Melissa Bingmann is examining, the California missions have significance as both religious and secular sites. This multivalence has created complicated issues for those charged with their preservation and interpretation. The sites' often contested position as both Catholic heritage and state heritage is visible in the mission literature which has been polarized into what has been called "christophalic triumphalism", those who frame the sites as places of Native American persecution and genocide, and a range of histories that have attempted to approach the complexities of the sites within the critical lenses of post-colonial studies, settler-colonialism, and critical race theory.[1]

The interpretation at the mission sites themselves is similarly tenuously poised amidst the tensions arising from two primary ideological challenges. The first challenge is their position in the narratives of California history, particularly how they address the dynamics of the structures of power and dispossession that were part of the Spanish colonial project. Specifically, the missions are interpreted as the state's "origin sites", much beloved cradles of California history with all the romanticized associations of a "Spanish Fantasy Past"[2] and of a dominant narrative of settler colonial past more broadly. At the same time, the sites must account for the presence, if not agency, of indigenous people and many assert that they should also account for colonialism's violence, injustices, and contemporary consequences. The second challenge for interpretation at the missions, and the aspect most germane to this NCPH Working Group, is their tenuous position as sites of both sacred and secular history.

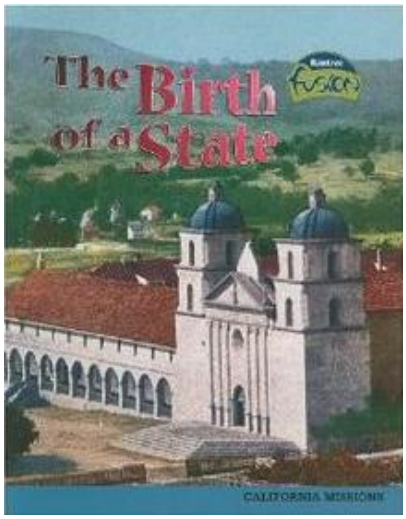

Figure 2. The cover of "The Birth of a State: California Missions" in the series, American History through Primary Sources.

Figure 3. Mission Santa Barbara, 1925.

Two episodes in the history of mission architectural preservation illustrate this tension of their significance as both Catholic and California history. In 1925 Mission Santa Barbara was severely damaged in an earthquake. The committee charged with raising funds to repair the building was comprised of Charles Lummis, John S. McGroarty and Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes, three public figures active in mission preservation and promotion. The campaign, anticipating concerns among the citizenry about supporting restoration of a Catholic church, consistently presented the mission as a California landmark. Iconography in the fundraising campaign deployed a lady liberty-like figure variously holding a banner or wearing a crown inscribed with "California." The authors' case for public support argued the public value of the missions as symbols of state identity, noting that "If you had to define California in a single word what would it be -- oranges, oil, gold, climate? No! The only other name for California is 'Romance'". They avoided using the words Catholic, Franciscan, or church, and instead couched the mission history in a vaguely pioneer ethos, arguing that the missions were "venerable monuments of architecture and art and faith and heroism, builded [sic] in the wilderness by men vowed to chastity and poverty."[3] Press coverage of the campaign declared that saving the building was "a task above church or creed."[4]

Figure 4. Senator Barbara Boxer at Mission San Miguel, which was damaged extensively by an earthquake in 2003.

The second episode was the passage in 2003 of federal legislation to fund the historic preservation of the missions ("California Missions Preservation Act" S.1306.[5]). Arguments of the legislation's proponents echo the 1925 Santa Barbara campaign rhetoric: "The California missions represent some of our Nation's oldest historical treasures" and they "contribute greatly to the rich historical, cultural, and architectural heritage of California and the American West." Nowhere in the bill is there any reference to the Franciscans, the Catholic Church, or any other aspect of the sites' religious association. Senator Barbara Boxer (seen at left at Mission San Miguel, the site of extensive earthquake damage), one of the two authors of the bill, made a case that articulated both the cultural and economic value of the missions:

> "Aside from being a source of historical and cultural significance to their communities, the missions also provide income to local businesses. Tourists from all over the world visit Mission San Juan Capistrano to observe the migration of the swallows, and nearly half a million 4th

graders visit the Mission each year and to learn about California's rich history. The California Missions Preservation Act will protect these great symbols of California's cultural and historical heritage for future generations."[6]

Debate in the House of Representatives similarly emphasized the value of the missions as symbols of the state's history, and the representatives from various California districts repeatedly articulated their value as "symbols of Western exploration and settlement" and "an important part of the State's cultural fabric."[7] The bill spurred spirited discussion about the role of government in support for religious sites. This debate was expanded with a lawsuit challenging the Act as a violation of the Establishment Clause, which became the first case law addressing federal funding for the preservation of resources with both religious and historic significance.[8] The suit was ultimately dismissed and the funding for the legislation was approved, but the discourse it spurred exemplifies the tensions between the missions' position as sites of both sacred and secular heritage. A letter filed by Americans United argued that the legislation would provide funding "to maintain or restore religious artifacts and icons associated with devotional and worship activities at the missions" and asserted that the legislation was unconstitutional because nineteen of the missions "are churches, not just museums, and are still used for religious services."[9] The argument for the secular value of the missions prevailed, but the careful distribution of the funds for physical preservation and security projects continually requires navigating this perceived conflict of secular and sacred significance of the spaces.

Figure 5. Mission La Purisima, Lompoc, CA.

The problems of balancing contested narratives of secular and religious heritage are not just evident in schisms within the scholarly literature and preservation debates, but are manifest in the public interpretation and visitor practices at the missions, including the two missions that are California State Parks.[10] For example Richard Rodriguez's memoir includes a description of visiting one of the State Parks, Mission La Purísima. He describes the "Protestant" restorations where preservationists have "become handmaidens of amnesia…[who] have so diligently divorced place or artifact from intention." He concludes that "A secular altar guild that will not distinguish between a flatiron and a chalice, between a log cabin and a mission church, preserves only strangeness."[11] The tension is also visible in the intersection and sometimes conflicts of touristic and devotional practices at the missions. Wedding parties preparing to go into the church are subject to the gaze of visiting tourists. Mission churches are closed to visitors while services are being held. Even in the times when liturgies are not being held, the historic naves, as at other religious tourist destinations, are at times in conflict.

Rodriguez's account of his visit to Mission San Juan Capistrano, one of the most popular missions, describes how after he entered the Serra Chapel he knelt "to say a prayer for Nancy – a prayer that should plead like a scalpel." His meditation was soon interrupted by "camera flashes at the rear of the church. . . . A group of tourists has entered the sanctuary to examine the crucifix; one of them laughs. I cross myself ostentatiously, I genuflect, I leave the chapel."[12]

Figure 6. Junipero Serra statue overlooking the Junipero Serra Freeway in Hillsborough, CA

This context of multivalent and contested heritage at the missions sets the stage for my current examination of the Serra statues. Junípero Serra was the leader of the Franciscans who established the first missions in Alta California beginning with Mission San Diego in 1769. He has come to be seen, as Stephen Hackel's recent biography calls him, "California's founding father."[13] As might be expected given the polemical trajectories of California mission narratives, Serra has been a polarizing figure, as evidenced in the debate around ongoing efforts to canonize him (he was beatified by Pope John Paul in 1988 and Pope Francis is expected to canonize him in September 2015) and most recently on the occasion of the three hundredth anniversary of his 1713 birth. But in contrast to the polemics of the Serra histories, his material presence at the missions in the form of figural sculptures has gone largely unnoticed. Their production and reception in the landscapes is an intriguing place to explore the dynamics of the creation of public memory, particularly in the complexities and contestations of sacred/secular heritage sites.

Figure 7 Mission San Juan Capistrano, 1916.

While Serra statues, such as the heroic scale Serra sculptures unveiled in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park in November 1907[14] and placed along Highway I280 in Hillsborough, CA, in 1975,[15] are found in many contexts, the first placed at a mission was the 1913 cast concrete sculpture of Serra with an Indian boy by John Van Rennselaer at Mission San Juan Capistrano. A similar statue of Serra with a native youth was incorporated into Brand Park mission garden created on public land in front of the San Fernando mission in the early 1920s. While little is known about the thinking behind the 1913 statue, the public context of the San Fernando park required not only a public campaign to raise funds and develop community consensus, and this discourse reveals the project sponsors' delicate navigation of the tensions between church and state. When presenting the initial proposal to the City Council and when releasing plans to the public, Martha McCan, who had led the creation of the "memory garden"

Figure 8. Junipero Serra and Indian Boy in the Memory Garden at Brand Park in front of Mission San Fernando, c.1935 (California Historical Society).

Figure 9. Serra sculpture by Sallie Farnham (photo of the author, 2008).

in the park, was very careful to point out that the garden was to be "purely historical in its intent and design and all reference to religion will be avoided."[16] She alleviated concerns about creating a "Sacred garden" on public land by emphasizing the European origins of the garden design and the allegedly historic nature of the botanical material which were perceived as ideologically neutral and avoided sectarian iconography. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that within two years of its construction, the garden was "completed" with the addition of a statue of the founder of the missions, Junípero Serra. The statue was commissioned from New York sculptor Sallie W. Farnham for $10,000 (almost half the cost of the entire project at that point) and underwritten by L.A. businessman Leslie Brand. The design proposed by Mrs. Franham was to depict "Junipero Serra as he made his pilgrimage from San Diego to San Francisco with his little Indian boy."[17]

The statue represented the church's historical role in a way that was consonant with the rhetoric and conventional sculptural formulas of commemorative monuments. Serra's pose and gesture, with his arm draped protectively and comfortingly over the boy's shoulder as they walk in stride, evoked the image of the caring padre who sacrificed all to bring salvation to the California natives. The statue of the frocked priest looking boldly ahead while the naked child looks down parallels the paternalistic postures of Lincoln and slaves that were sculpted as public commemorations of Emancipation at the time of the Civil War.[18] The image of the innocent, "uncivilized" child subordinated to the kindly but dominant priest seems an obvious vehicle for colonialist justifications, but in the late 1920s it was praised as a perfect addition "to make the garden a complete unity." McCan argued that the Serra statue, when "placed beside the fountain, in the shade of the pepper trees," would continue "radiating peace, as did the good padre in his life time."[19]

As was typical in the imagery of the day, the statues replicated the ideologies of social hierarchy through paternalistic representations of the adult Serra and Indian boy and the central civilized/wild metaphor contrasting the frocked monk and the minimally clothed boy.[20] They conveyed the benevolent view of missionionization through Serra's protective stance and, at San Juan Capistrano, his gesture pointing to the crucifix that was originally part of the composition (Figure 5.27). Such representative conventions are repeated in imagery of California native peoples and other visual culture that codified constructed markers of race and other social relations.[21] They also mirrored narratives of Father Serra's founding of the missions that highlight his trek into the Alta California. For example, a 1949 fourth grade textbook titles the chapter introducing the missions as "Father Serra Walks to California." It also includes the passage, "Father Serra was very, very happy to be going to California . . . [but he] was no longer young. He had a sore leg which hurt him all the time . . . But he wanted to go to California. And he wanted to

walk! He did walk all the way. Sometimes his leg hurt so much that he could not walk as fast as the others. Portolá wanted him to ride on a mule. But Father Serra said, 'No.'"[22]

Figure 10. Mission San Juan Capistrano, 2008 (photo by the author).

These Serra statues are not just markers of their early twentieth century ideologies. They continue to stand in the heavily visited mission landscapes and they continue to reify the narratives implied in their gestures and poses. Still standing on their pedestals, the Serra statues continue to look out over the colorful flower beds and trickling fountains, a gentle, nurturing cultivator of souls, and the antithesis of an oppressive colonial regime. As Kirk Savage has argued regarding figurative sculptures dealing slavery and emancipation, "a funny thing happened once a monument was built and took its place in the landscape of people's lives: it became a kind of natural fact, as if it had always been meant to be."[23] Despite critical perspectives in other treatments of mission history, these sculptures appear to continue be a materialization of the same romanticized, celebratory impulses that spurred their commission. For example, in 2008-2009, the foundation that administers Mission San Juan Capistrano and supports its preservation undertook a restoration of the 1913 Serra statue.[24] It had been relocated in 1928 from its original position in the forecourt garden near the front entrance to the corner of the ruins of the church destroyed in an 1812 earthquake. The statue serves as a focal point at the end of an axial walk, and is a popular spot for group photos. The mission web site describes the restoration project, which involved stabilizing the failing concrete and reconstructing a cross and replacing a walking stick in lieu of the boy's bow that was part of the original group, in these terms:

Figure 11. Restored Serra sculpture, 2014.

> this cast concrete statue has become a prominent feature of Mission San Juan Capistrano. Symbolic of Father Serra's missionary devotions of guiding the Native Americans toward Christian beliefs and European ideals, the statue portrays a Franciscan friar pivoting a young Native American boy towards his skyward pointing hand and a large crucifix. . . . With the loss of the original cross, much of the context of the statue was lost too. As part of the restoration, Griswold Conservation Associates was commissioned to replicate the original cross to return context to the statue.[25]

The emphasis on restoring the original "context" symbolic of the "missionary devotions" not only preserves the original paternalistic imagery, but affirm its celebratory message.

For public historians interested in the relationships of religion and heritage, this project raises a number of interesting questions. One is the consequences of choices made in the conservation and restoration of ideologically charged objects. For example, does replacing the boy's original bow with a walking stick convey a message of cultural appropriation? If so, are these choices appropriate for the purposes of the site administrators? Far from an abstract issue of curatorial practices, the popularity of the San Juan Capistrano as a tourist destination and the prominence of the missions within elementary school curriculum make clear that these choices influence the contemporary reception of the statues.[26] Not only do tourists continue to gaze at the sculpture, take pictures of it, and pose in front of it, but it continues to shape public memory. For example, a fourth grader posted to YouTube a video of San Juan Capistrano. Her notes with the video state "The Statue of Father Serra Was Commissioned by Father St. John O'Sullivan in 1914. The Statue Symbolizes the Meeting of the 2 Cultures, the Old and the New Worlds." In the video clip as she films the sculpture and starts to reads a portion of the plaque on its base we hear her comment, "Oh, Junipero Sierra. I read about him. He was a great man who founded the missions."[27] This is not to assert that those consuming the paternalistic imagery do so uncritically. For example, Amy Fredericks posted a photo of the sculpture on Flickr in July 2008 with the caption "The statue is supposed to symbolize the meeting of two cultures. Me, I find it vaguely creepy."[28]

Another issue these sculptures raise is the role of private philanthropy and those promoting sectarian interests in the landscapes of historic sites. Savage has argued that public sculptures, that were conceived for public spaces and paid for by public subscriptions, serve an important function in the production of public memory because of the reciprocity built into the selection process. He asserts that “the monument manufactured its own public, but that public in turn had opinions about what constituted proper commemoration. In practical terms, the designers of public monuments. . . . could not impose an official version of history but could only propose one possible version, which then had to win a place in this peculiarly competitive public arena."[29]

But in the case of the Serra sculptures at the missions, the statues were commissioned and funded by private sources. There were no public campaigns or subscription efforts. Most prominent in this private philanthropic support of Serra commemorations has been a campaign to place statues of Serra at every mission and at other sites significant to Serra's life was undertaken by William H. Hannon, a southern California real estate developer.[30] Hannon's intent in the placing the statues was to "promote the spirit and contributions of Father Serra."[31] The bronze sculptures stand in various positions in the mission landscapes. At Mission Santa Ines, San Gabriel, San Rafael, San Antonio de Padua, and at Santa Barbara, the statue is positioned near the main entrance. At other missions the statue is in a garden, as at Santa Cruz, San Buenaventura, Carmel, San Diego, and Mission Dolores. The statues are typically blessed and dedicated when they are placed at a mission. Hannon was a proponent of Serra's canonization, and he held his Catholic allegiances openly. But in other respects, the figures are more multivalent. Hannon, for example, saw a connection between his own profession and Serra's noting, "The man was the first real

estate developer in Los Angeles if you think about it. Serra helped to settle what is now the Valley. It's important to remember where we came from."[32]

Figure 12. Mission Santa Inez, 2009 (photo by the author).

The sculptures' contexts suggest a certain ambiguity. In the front of missions they stand as welcoming doorman and sentry and also lay proud claim to the valorized founder, regardless of the controversy surrounding his legacy and canonization process. In the gardens the figures become both ornament and owner, referencing the same visual tradition as the frocked friars in the postcards. They stand as silent, static costumed interpreters performing the presence of the sites' principle historical actors. They also participate in the construction of the exotic other for touristic consumption of the sites in their role as the frocked figure from another time or religion. It is not uncommon to see tourists posing for photographs as they stand next to Serra. The meaning of the reception of these statues is difficult to assess. In some respects they are consistent with other devotional art in that people engage with them directly. At Mission Santa Barbara, an offering of flowers was laid at Serra's feet.[33] Other examples are more idiosyncratic. The Hannon Foundation web site recounts that when the statues were placed in schools, "At dedication ceremonies, where a school's student body often was assembled, William would encourage the children to rub Father Serra's toe for good luck. He would tell the children, 'After all, he walked all across California, so those toes are lucky; maybe rubbing his toe will help on your next big test.'"[34]

Figure 13. Serra statue with flower offering at his feet, Mission Santa Barbara , 2013 (photo by the author).

As a work in progress, I'm hoping that this working group can help me think through how to theorize and contexutalize these various tensions of sacred and secular history in ways that not only productively reveal the underlying issues of authority and ideology at the missions, but also identify strategies for interpreting these charged objects or at least supporting dialogue about the place of Serra in the garden.

[1] The California mission literature is vast, and in this context I point to the works of Franciscan scholars

such as Zephryin Englehardt and Francis J. Weber as representative of the celebratory, church apologetics narratives. In contrast stands the more critical work of Edward Castillo, Antoni Castañeda, Deana Dartt-Newton, Lisbeth Haas, Deborah Miranda, Stephen Silliman, and Barbara Voss. And there is a wealth of historical and archaeological scholarship that falls somewhere along this spectrum: Rebecca Allen, Robert Archibald, Virginia Bouvier, Stephen Hackel, Robert H. Jackson, John R. Johnson, Kent Lightfoot, Randall Milliken, Robert M. Senkewicz, and David Hurst Thomas.

[2] Kropp, Phobe. S. California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006; McWilliams, Carey. Southern California Country: An Island on the Land. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946.

[3] Lummis, McGroarty, and Forbes, "Old Mission One Of Your Big Assets." Los Angeles Examiner,(July 10, 1925).

[4] "A Task Above Church or Creed" is the title of an illustration in which a female figure reminiscent of Lady Liberty with a crown inscribed "California" holds a scroll reading "The restoration of the most important landmark in California's history." The image signed by "Gale" is from an unidentified newspaper in the clipping file of the Coy Collection, California State Library.

[5] The legislation's purpose is "To support the efforts of the California Missions Foundation to restore and repair the Spanish colonial and mission-era missions in the State of California and to preserve the artworks and artifacts of these missions, and for other purposes."

[6] Senator Barbara Boxer, Official Website. http://www.boxer.senate.gov/ (accessed 3-12-2008).

[7] Samuel Farr, [Congressional Testimony, November 17, 2004]. Farr is the U.S. Representative for California's 20th Congressional District which includes Carmel.

[8] Americans United for Separation of Church and State ("Americans United") filed a federal lawsuit (Doe v. Norton, No. 04CV02089 - D.D.C. filed Dec. 2, 2004) challenging the constitutionality of the Missions Act on October 2, 2004, two days after the passage of the original legislation. Cooperman, "Federal Aid For Churches Is Criticized," A25.; Mahaney, "The California Missions Preservation Act."

[9] Rev. Barry W. Lynn, [Congressional Testimony, November 17, 2004]. Rev. Barry W. Lynn is the Executive Director, Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

[10] Thomas S. Bremer has explored the navigation of this tension in a comparative analysis, "Tourists and Religion at Temple Square and Mission San Juan Capistrano." Journal of American Folklore 113, no. 450 (2001): 422-435, and explored larger themes of sacred and secular history at heritage sites in "Sacred Spaces and Tourist Places." In Tourism, Religion, and Spiritual Journeys. Edited by Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen, 25-35. New York: Routledge, 2006.

[11] Rodriguez, Richard. Days of Obligation: an Argument with my Mexican Father. New York: Penguin, 1992, 125.

[12] Rodriguez, Days of Obligation, 123.

[13] Hackel, Steven W. Junípero Serra: California's Founding Father. New York: Hill and Wang, 2013.

[14] The statue by Douglas Tilden was dedicated by the Native Sons of the Golden West, November 17, 1907. Anonymous, "Tilden's Latest Statue," The Silent Worker. 20, no. 5 (February 1908): 81.

[15] This 26 foot tall cast concrete statue was designed and funded by Louis DuBois, in conjunction with the CA Dept. of Transportation and San Mateo County Historical Association.

[16] Park Commission Superintendent to Mr. Sylvester E. Weaver, President, Chamber of Commerce, Sept 22, 1921, (Correspondence on file, City of Los Angeles, Records Management Division, Recreation and Parks Board, Facilities Files, Brand Park).

[17] Park Commission President to Mrs. Mary Griswold, Chairman, Landmarks Committee, Ebell Club, Oct. 2, 1923 (Correspondence on file, City of Los Angeles, Records Management Division, Recreation and Parks Board, Facilities Files, Brand Park).

[18] Savage argues that the commemoration of emancipation in public monuments reveals the

nationalistic and racial discourses negotiated through statues in which the relationships of white nation and black body were represented in figural form. Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

[19] McCan, "Mission Garden Restored," 10.

[20] For deeper discussion of this paternalistic rhetoric in colonial and post-colonial contexts, see Douglas Monroy, Thrown Among Strangers: The Making of Mexican Culture in Frontier California. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 44-50; Lizbeth Haas, Saints and Citizens: Indigenous Histories of Colonial Missions and Mexican California. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014; Phobe. S. Kropp, California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006; Linda Heidenreich, This Land was Mexican Once : Histories of Resistance from Northern California. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

[21] James J. Rawls, Indians of California: The Changing Image. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1984.

[22] Enola Flower, A Child's History of California, California State Series (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1949), 46

[23] Savage, Standing Soldier, Kneeling Slave, 7.

[24] The cast concrete sculpture had deteriorated over time and been subject to various restoration techniques. The most recent restoration sought to reverse the accumulated surface treatments, repair cracks, stabilize the structural elements of the figural group, and replace the original crucifix.

[25] Mission San Juan Capistrano web site, Restoration Projects. http://www.missionsjc.com/preservation/projects-serrastatue.php (accessed 1-31-2015)

[26] Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, Crafting the Past: California Mission Models and the Curation of California History. Heritage & Society (in press)

[27] Memel, Video of San Juan Capistrano bells and Serra statue.

[28] Frederick, photo of "Father Serra and Indian Boy."

[29] Savage, Standing Soldier, Kneeling Slave, 7.

[30] Hannon died in 1999, but a foundation in his name continues to sponsor essay contests about Serra and to carry on Hannon's philanthropic support of Catholic schools, hospitals, and other organizations. http://www.hannonfoundation.org/

[31] http://www.hannonfoundation.org/; The Tidings [get specific issue]

[32] Rimbert, Eric, "Junipero Serra Statue Unveiled and Blessed." Los Angeles Times May 30, 1998.(http://articles.latimes.com/1998/may/30/local/me-54783) accessed 6-25-12.

[33] Observed February, 2013.

[34] (http://www.hannonfoundation.org/)