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How Riverside County Celebrates Historical Indigenous Oppression

Logan Roselli

I grew up in Riverside County in Southern California. I say Riverside County because I really grew up in a multitude of cities within the county. I moved around within the same general area from the edge of Lake Elsinore, to Corona, to Norco, and then to Riverside. Though all of these cities have their own unique circumstances, the general themes more or less stay the same. Though I didn't always live in Riverside, Riverside was always a big part of my life. Both of my parents have worked in Riverside as long as I've been alive and I always visited the shops, went out with my friends, attended events and worked in Riverside. My movement throughout the county and my life in a solidly middle-class family has allowed me to experience the beauty and the pain that is present in all parts of the Inland Empire. The issues most often discussed are a lack of water, drug abuse, and homelessness. Those that are less talked about, but still present to those looking, are gang violence, gentrification, the celebration of colonization, and indigenous erasure. The Inland Empire does not face one of these challenges more than any of the others, they are simply all consequences and ailments of each other. However, all of their roots can be traced back to colonization and the continued celebration of genocide.

The colonization of Riverside began when Spanish explorers moved up from Mexico and until they found the Santa Ana River. The tribes native to this land are the Cahuilla, Juaneño, Gabrieleno, and Luiseño. The most prominent of all these tribes were the Luiseño and many live in the area to this day. The Inland Empire is drier today than it has ever been, but that doesn't mean that it was ever flowing with water either. The Santa Ana River was vital for the survival of all who lived in the land, providing both food and water. The Spanish long ago took control of the river, but after the Mexican-American war, the Riverside Water Company took control and has faced numerous related lawsuits throughout its history. An extensive photo essay written by John W. Lantz documents that "The [Riverside Water Company] and its parent companies were involved in over twenty-five lawsuits involving liability, property, and water rights" (2004). Clearly, this is indicative of a lack of alignment between public interest and those of the company.

The Santa Ana River still runs through Riverside County and Orange County straight out to the ocean. It also still provides a great deal of the water utilized by those living in the local areas. However, it is more known for providing recreational opportunities even though it is seldom used for such purposes. Growing up, my friends and I were some of the few that frequently enjoyed the benefits of the river. In fact, I have seen only twenty or so people in the areas of the river that are accessible from the City of Corona and I used to visit the area multiple times a week. In addition to the Santa Ana River, the Cleveland National Forest is also a part of the area where I grew up. Though it is considered a national forest, the parts that I know do not resemble a forest at all and very few plants are higher than my shoulder. Still, it is a beautiful and vast place to explore and identify native flora and fauna. It is one of the few places in the area that is not directly touched by the colonization of the land, though it can still be seen indirectly through its dryness and the presence of invasive species. These access points to nature were my primary source of entertainment growing up and places of extreme comfort when I needed it most.

In town, I often visited the Tyler Mall because, although I didn't have much money to spend until I was older and began working, my friends and I could go and pretend like we might buy things and feel independent. I smile to myself today when I visit the place and see kids doing the same thing. The day after I turned 16, I got my license and began driving my grandpa's old 2007 Honda Pilot with nearly 300,000 thousand miles on it. In a car-centric place like Southern California, being able to drive opens up an entirely new world of possibilities. I began to visit the Van Buren Drive-In, go to downtown Riverside much more frequently, and visit natural places like Mount Roubidoux and the California Citrus State Historical Park. Despite its age and its constant issues, I loved my car because it could fit up to eight people meaning that all my friends could fit in it when going places. Traffic in Southern California is absolutely terrible and I spent a lot of time in my car, so much so, that I would consider my car itself a space. To me, my car meant freedom and a private space where I could be temporarily away from the distractions of life. Car culture is a big deal in the Inland Empire and many people use their cars as a show of status. Many of my friends participated in street races and there are car shows or meet-ups almost every weekend.

Riverside, just as many cities, has a history of erasing the past of its native populations. If one were to search online for “things to do in Riverside,” some of the top results are the Mission Inn and Mount Roubidoux. Two places that I found comfort in visiting growing up. Yet, despite the importance of these landmarks to today’s community, they represent a history of oppression and a continued celebration of colonization. The Mission Inn was never a real Spanish Mission. It was constructed over a hundred years ago to look like a Spanish Mission for the purpose of attracting tourists who were interested in seeing the real missions of California. Encouraging tourists to stay at a luxurious place, not indicative at all of how real Native Americans were forced to live is of course problematic, but the owners also established a working relationship with the Sherman Institute, a federal Native American boarding school. Those traveling to the city of Riverside were promised that they would see “real live Indians” at the Sherman Institute (Whalen 2013). In fact, the Sherman Institute was originally based in L.A. County, but the owner of the Mission Inn convinced officials to move it to Riverside because he thought it would boost tourism and enthusiasm for his hotel (Rice 2017). Of course, things have improved over time, but the Mission Inn still is an exhibition of oppression. Racism can take up a physical space, and this often happens through the design of buildings (Perez 2022). The Mission Inn is designed to look like a mission, but it is also intended to contain many more people than a real mission would have been. Consequently, the property is surrounded by tall walls and behind those tall walls are even taller buildings. Furthermore, the hotel is a luxury hotel and prices for a room designed for two adults in December 2022 do not fall below \$329 per night. The combination of extremely high prices and unwelcoming architecture create a tone that is clearly not inviting members of the community, especially not those that the hotel and its owners have historically disenfranchised.

Mount Roubidoux is the highest reachable physical location anywhere in downtown. It is a popular spot for locals and visitors alike to exercise and enjoy the day. It has a few trails, varying in difficulty, but all the trails feature fragments of buildings left behind from Spanish colonizers. At the peak of the mountain, where all the trails end up, a huge cross is planted, towering over any who come to visit it. The cross, as well as other landmarks, are dedicated to Father Junipero Serra, one of the most infamous colonizers in California’s history. Once again,

spatial-culture politics come into play. The towering of the monument and its point as the highest peak in the nearby area represent and are a reminder of the oppression that was once readily apparent, and the oppression that silently perseveres today.

Recognition of the continued impacts of colonization are hard to find in Riverside. However, the community is beginning to reclaim the space through the multitude of local museums that are willing to celebrate the indigenous culture and recognize the impacts of the various local players. One of these museums is the Riverside Art Museum. Filled with a collection of various pieces, the museum constantly changes its exhibits and features local artists and items of historical significance. I remember around the winter holidays many years ago I visited the museum to see the exhibit on concert posters, but in addition to the exhibit I came to see, I also discovered a temporary exhibit celebrating historical Indigenous religion. I remember very clearly a small sculpture of a wind god. At the time, I was very interested in ancient European religions and this was the first time I had ever seen an Indigenous god represented. The Riverside Art Museum has opened this year a separate museum, called The Cheech. The Cheech is managed by the Riverside Art Museum but contained in its own building and functions somewhat independently of the general museum. The Cheech was founded by Cheech Marin of Cheech and Chong and is dedicated to celebrating Indigenous and Chicano art. The museum has been in progress for several years and had numerous fundraisers within the community to help fund the project. Every event received an outpouring of support and the community has rallied around the museum. The new museum is so beloved that I have not been able to visit it beyond the front doors because every time I have tried, the building has reached capacity and cannot allow any more visitors.

Despite the dark and often forgotten history of Riverside, it is a community of diversity and of growth. The creation of spaces for the diverse community like The Cheech are strong indicators of progress toward a more equitable future. Cities in Riverside County that are considered the worst places to live are beginning to increase the number of community events, and those events are often focused on celebrating the diverse people present in the towns. Access to nature, public places designed for education, and rich culture are all proven to increase the

quality of life in a city and all of these qualities are present in the city of Riverside. Present, just often forgotten. By acknowledging the Indigenous cultures expelled from our home, we are provided with the opportunity to take action and to stop choosing to forget.

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