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Diversifying Local Histories: Religion's Erasure of Indigeneity (Episode 17)

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Diversifying Local Histories: Religion's Erasure of Indigeneity

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Podcast transcript

<<OtterPod theme music – :06 then faded under>>

Helene: This is an episode of the OtterPod from CSU Monterey Bay.

Camille: Just as a warning, this podcast episode does contain some heavy themes such as sexual assault and genocide.

<<Church bells playing – 0:22-0:25>>

<<Church choir in background - 0:25-01:04>>

Christina: You'll find one of the most desirable vacation spots is found on the central coast of California, Carmel's undoubtedly the perfect tourist haven. With beautiful weather, scenic forests, and unparalleled views of the Pacific Ocean, who wouldn't want to be here?

Camille: Known for their array of tourist attractions, the allure of wealth with a variety of beautiful million-dollar mansions, pristine green, expansive golf courses, and beautiful beaches.

[01:00]

Camille: However, what lies beneath the surface is much more sinister. We are on site at the Carmel Mission, and as we walk through the grounds, we will embark on a learning journey where we will find out what the Carmel Mission chooses to disclose as part of its history and what it chooses to ignore.

Helene: Before we begin our exploration into this history, we would like to inform listeners that most of our audio was recorded on-site at the Carmel Mission, which is why you may hear some discrepancies.

<<*Church bells ringing – 01:17-01:24*>>

Christina: Today we will be reviewing the whitewash history that the Carmel Mission asserts in order to dominate the narrative. I am Christina Fultz, alongside my podcast host

Camille: Camille Herrera

Helene: and Helene Marie Kristensen.

Camille: Our inspiration for this podcast stemmed from the roots of settler colonialism that deeply penetrates the belief of the general public. We wanted to know how religion, welded as a tool by colonists, has contributed to the erasure of indigeneity. Accounts taught within elementary schools across the state of California represent the one-sided, colonised narrative of the mission system. This widely accepted account is further perpetuated by the Carmel Mission in order to protect themselves from the history of tragedies that undeniably is correlated with their founding.

[02:10]

Christina: Ah yes, the California Mission Project is a staple in our state's educational system. Its role serves as a meager way of romanticising the mission. Similarly, to what narrative the Carmel mission aims to do. As we denoted throughout our walkthrough of the infamous tourist attraction of the Central Coast, the portrayal of the missions from the lens of a positive and peaceful account clashes heavily with the indigenous narratives to the point where it's deemed as erasure, simplifying the learning opportunities. The project often overlooks the harsh realities of forced labour, cultural suppression, and the devastating impacts on indigenous communities.

Helene: So, as a Norwegian tourist visiting the central coast of California, I'm wondering, what's the point of diversifying the narrative to the general public? Why is it important for

tourists like me to understand an overcorrected local history when visiting famous historical sites?

[03:00]

Camille: Assessing the importance of the settler consciousness is an important part of honouring and respecting the indigenous tribes and communities who once inhabited, and still do inhabit, the land one is standing on. It is a sign of respect to acknowledge the true history of a place and helps us to become better and more open-minded citizens of the earth.

Christina: For future reference, some context regarding one of the most infamous figures within the history of the Carmel Mission begins with the introduction of Junipero Serra. The mission itself is adorned with a myriad of Serra memorabilia, from statues to plaques devoted to glamorizing what many indigenous communities have called the Saint of Genocide. Junipero Serra is accredited for the formation of the first out of 21 missions found in the California mission system, starting with Carmel in 1769. The controversy surrounding this historical Catholic figure revolves around the ethical considerations of spreading the faith at the expense of the enslavement and mistreatment of the local indigenous tribes.

[04:00]

Christina: Junipero Serra is essentially the embodiment of settler colonialism, as he represents the colonisation of California and settlement over occupied native lands.

Helene: As we explore the Carmel Mission, it becomes evident that there's a stark contrast between the narratives presented and the harsh realities experienced by the indigenous people. How did the mission contribute to the erasure of indigenous narratives?

Camille: Using the teachings of Lorenzo Veracini, we are better able to understand how this false narrative has been so commonly accepted. Veracini teaches history and politics at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. In his book, *Settler Colonialism*, he uses terms like screen memory to define settler colonialism. Veracini's definition of screen memory is that it's "an inaccurate reconstruction that obscures what really happened" (Page 90, 2010). He further states that it's "how disregarding histories that

precede the arrival of the first settler is one of the essential features of the politics of memory in settler colonial contexts” (Page 90, 2010).

[05:09]

Camille: Denial, rationalisation, and intellectualization are all techniques. that are used to shape a screen narrative. For example, writings that denied children were stolen and saying things like, it was for their own good.

Christina: A quote from Veracini that beautifully sums it all up, reads as follows, “As denialists have not reasoned themselves into denial, they cannot be reasoned out of it. Something else is needed” (Page 93, 2010). In the context of the Carmel Mission, we argue that Veracini’s concept of screen memory reflects the reconstruction of history, that actively seeks to shine a light on the traumatic experiences of the native Californians, in order to critically assess the flaws that the California Mission System projects towards tourists and the general population, we need to analyse who gets to tell the story.

[06:00]

Christina: It is important to bring attention towards the silent voices of the indigenous tribes who suffered at the hands of the Christian and Western forced assimilations. Challenging the protected narrative is crucial to the promotion of an honest and accurate account of this historical narrative.

Camille: In his prayer garden the plaque memorialising his life reads as the following

<<Audio playing a reading of the plaque from the Carmel mission – 06:21 - 06:42>>

Camille: Junipero Serra, an unassuming Franciscan played a vital role in the evangelization and settlement of Alta California. He set out to bring Christianity to the native peoples in 1769 and at the same time to solidify Spain’s control over lands it had claimed years earlier. Challenges were enormous for a man plagued by ill health. Much of his adult life.

<<Audio playing reading of infographic at the Carmel mission – 06:43 – 07:04>>

Christina: In his own words, excerpts from Father Serra letters and diaries state that he was struggling to cope with the deaths of Native children. As he writes, two weeks ago, over the course of a few days, eleven infants from the mission ascended to heaven, one after the other, and several adults also died. It was dysentery.

[07:04]

Christina: It appears that the Carmel Mission actively seeks to dominate the historical narrative through the portrayal of peaceful coexistence, conveniently overlooking the forced labour, cultural suppression, and diseases that devastated Native communities. This intentional framing served to erase the struggles and resilience of the Native peoples.

<<Audio of walking through the Serra memorial prayer garden – 07:23-07:53>>

Christina: As we walk through the Serra Memorial Prayer Garden that's adorned with a fountain and even a life size figure of Serra himself.

Helene: Wait, he wasn't larger?

Christina: Anyways, we're not getting onto the height of that. But this plaque says, On the 28th of August 1984, Of the bishops of Alta and Baja California assembled in this memorial garden To commemorate the 200th anniversary of the death of Fray Junipero Serra, The Apostle of California.

Christina: Despite the portrait these words paint, Helene's observation of this near life size statue begs the question of how much importance he really had to all of Carmel's important and original inhabitants.

[08:07]

Camille: While he did play a very large role in the disruption of indigenous life, he was not the benevolent saint this mission portrays him as.

Helene: The following audio clip is a recording of a priest on the television, informing visitors of the Carmel Mission about the role Serra served in being a fundamental part of Carmel's fruitfulness and success in spreading religion.

<<Audio of a priest talking about Junipero Serra at the Carmel mission - 08:29 - 08:49>>

Priest: He made it a reality. He brought it to fruition. He had a dream that a place of faith and worship would be established here in Carmel. It was a barren place and he has enabled us to produce the fruits of faith over many many generations.

Helene: That definitely makes Junipero Serra seem very kind and generous to the natives. What narrative is missing here?

[09:00]

Camille: To show you a native perspective, here is a letter written to the Postmaster General, Patrick R. Donohue, in 2012, by the Amah Mutsun tribe, complaining about the portrayal and description of the Carmel Mission on a stamp. "Your recognition of Mission Carmel as a historic location is insensitive and insulting. It is our perspective that recognizing the mission is tantamount to recognizing the beauty, architecture, and saturated color of any other massacre and or genocide site anywhere else in the world. Furthermore, the text of your public information release says nothing of the Indians that were forced under slavery conditions to build the mission and then were forced to live there as prisoners for the remainder of their life. Mission Carmel was originally built in Monterey next to the Monterey Presidio. The priests were forced to move the mission to Carmel because the soldiers were raping the Indian women and girls. The raping of our ancestors did not stop when the mission was moved to Carmel." (Lopez, 2012)

Helene: I find it incredibly interesting how the differentiation between the historical accounts of the Carmel Mission Project versus what was revealed in a narrative of the indigenous tribe.

[10:00]

Helene: This reminds me of what concepts of settler colonialism was aforementioned. Within this discussion, this juxtaposition between the narratives seems to be an example of Veracini's screen memory. By granting the other side of the story to be told, a more expansive and accurate account of California history can be curated through the exploration of narratives to ultimately generate an honest and inclusive understanding.

<<Audio clip of reading plaque at the Carmel mission and neophyte – 10:34 – 11:03>>

Christina: Serra moved the mission in 1771. To the Carmel River six miles to the south in order to better protect the baptised state of people called neophytes and to take advantage of the better water and agricultural conditions, the Carmel mission became the first headquarters for the California mission system.

Helene: So why is it significant that they moved the mission six miles? Like, what implications did it have? And also, what the hell is a neophyte?

[11:00]

Christina: According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a neophyte is, “a person who is new to a subject, skill, or belief” (Merriam-Webster dictionary, 2023). To place the word neophyte into the historical context of Carmel, we can examine the religious indoctrination that Indigenous people were subjected to. The Christian conversion and the assimilation of Western practices became an integral part of their mission statement. They sought to implement their ideologies until the Indigenous societies succumbed to total domination over the local tribes in the area. We find it crucial to recognize that this conversion process was often coercive, with indigenous peoples facing cultural suppression and a loss of autonomy. Addressing the experiences of neophytes in a relevant historical context can provide a much more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play during the mission period. Walking through the mission, the glorification of the Catholic faith is expressed through the beautiful Spanish style architecture we walk through.

[12:00]

<<Audio clip of entering the Carmel mission garden – 12:05 – 12:43>>

Camille: As we're walking around, I'm thinking how we're doing a project on native genocide, but oh my god, are the buildings pretty, and the architecture, and the plants, and it's really a testament to how erased this history is. There's no remnants of anything brutal here going on at all. It's all just so picturesque.

Helene: I'm also curious, like, all of these missions were seemingly built from the ground up, and it looks like a very luscious garden or like some Hawaiian tropical forest.

Camille: However, despite our initial impressions, as we carried on to the cemetery, the disregard for natives in comparison to Spaniards became more apparent.

<<Audio clip of walking through the cemetery at the Carmel mission. Choir music heard in the background – 12:51 – 14:16>>

[13:00]

Christina: Walking along the Basilica, you'll find a path that leads to the cemetery. On the right-hand side, you'll find the graves with headstones, entitled Harry Downey, Old Gabriel, Catherine Bradley Quinn. These are all graciously cherished and adorned with abalone shells. However, on the other side, you'll find where the Indigenous peoples' remains are. Merely adorned with wooden stakes and countless abalone shells. These symbolic gravesites with abalone shells represent the many hundreds of Indigenous people buried in this graveyard and beyond. The plaque says, may they be honoured, and may we be reminded of their long-term presence, their rich culture and humanity, and the importance that they still hold for their descendants today.

Helene: So, as we see this juxtaposition between the graves, why are some of them in marble adorned with gold details, while others have rotten crosses barely held together by plastic?

[14:00]

Camille: Some of the wooden state crosses are falling apart. One is held together by blue plastic tape, but the horizontal cross is completely fallen off. It goes to show the amount of reverence that this mission truly does hold for the indigenous gravesites.

Christina: So, Helene, now that we've gone through this walkthrough of the mission, I'm going to turn your question back on you. What have you learned about the importance of accurate representation in places like the Carmel Mission?

<<*Sound of water dripping from a fountain – 14:25 – 14:29*>>

Helene: Showing an incomplete or falsely narrated version of history is harmful to indigenous groups, and it helps preserve the real history of both people and places. This also ensures that future generations have access to reliable information about the past. In addition, by having an accurate representation of places like the Carmel Mission, we can better understand how historical events and their consequences, both good and bad, impact our own decision making today. Finally, we should hold people accountable when they only disclose parts of history for their own benefit.

[15:00]

<<*Sound of church bells ringing – 15:07 – 15:12*>>

Helene: Executive producers of the Otterpod are Drs. Sara Salazar Hughes and Sriya Shrestha. Theme music by Eric Mabrey. Research, script writing, hosting, and editing by Camille Herrera, Christina Fultz, and Helene Marie Kristensen. We would like to thank all listeners for partaking in this exploration of narratives and identifying the true history of our local community.

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