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Los Angeles is a melting pot of a city with many multicultural villages where people have access to experience food, entertainment and the history of that culture. One can find Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Koreatown, Little Bangladesh, Little Armenia, but there is one village that holds a special place in Los Angeles history and that is Olvera Street or *Little Mexico*. Olvera Street Plaza, or more commonly known as *La Placita Olvera* in Spanish, is a street in downtown Los Angeles with a rich history that is the first village which sprung the growth of the rest of the city. Founded in 1781 as a small village with adobe and brick houses, it has become a plaza that is a whole block wide with commercial vending. Also, it is the birthplace of Los Angeles, it was where settlers traveled from Northern Mexico to establish land for the sake of the Spaniards' reign in the New World (Discover Los Angeles, 2021). Nowadays, it is a well-known tourist attraction with Mexican-owned restaurants, little artisan pop-up shops, cultural businesses, museums and even holds events for Mexican holidays like Cinco De Mayo parties. Also, the street provides a sense of home for the Mexican American community in L.A. as a place where they can find a piece of their culture while living in the United States. The plaza is a great place to find a sense of community and brings tourists from all over to enjoy things such as free events for the public like performances from Mexican musicians, Aztec dancers, folkloric dancers and admire things like Mexican artisans, folklore and delicious food. However, the name of this street in Downtown Los Angeles holds a lot of historical significance to the birth of the city, the people who settled there, and who it lacks to acknowledge in its preservation. The historical context is important to understand in regards to who lived there before the settlers, how

the village cultivated the city, the rebirth of the village, and how recognition and ownership is a vital part to grow as a community.

In 1781, the Spaniard King, King Carlos the Third, wanted to expand his territory so he sent Mexicans, and company, to travel from current-day Northern Mexico to current-day Southern California and establish a new village with the goal of occupying more land which ultimately led to the genocide of Indigenous people of that land. (Tausch, n.d.) It wasn't until 1848, that the land became a part of The United States of America. Before then, the land was lived in by the Tongva Nation as was much of the greater Southern California area. The Spanish King felt threatened by Russia's western expansion in Alaska so he advanced orders to establish territories in California. He had his military commanders enforce the orders to establish missions all over California to convert Native Americans to Catholicism, make the military presence, and develop agriculture practices in order to cultivate a settlers village. (Masters, 2011)

Disregarding the livelihood of the Natives, several Mexican families, Spanish settlers and others, resided in what is now central Los Angeles with the plan of absorbing all the land resources for themselves. On September 4th, 1781 they officially named their village *El Pueblo De Nuestra Señora La Reina De Los Angeles* which translates to The Town of Our Lady the Queen of The Angels. Along with Mexican families, the “original 44 settlers were Spaniards, African Americans, Indians and mestizos” (Rasmussen, 2005) They established the city's first catholic church named *La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora la Reina De Los Angeles* which translates to The Church of Our Lady the Queen of The Angels. The connection with the first town's name is seen in the city's name of Los Angeles. The first adobe house in Los Angeles was founded in Olvera Street in 1818 by L.A. 's mayor, Don Francisco Avila. The house was very lived in through the decades as many people called it home and even an established restaurant at one

point before it was restored. The house is now known as the Avila Adobe home and is now a museum in which people can see how the first families lived and established the city.

The street went through its development and was originally named differently, the community also chose to rename the street to something that would represent honor and justice. While the street is famously known as Olvera Street, it was not always named that way. At first, it was established as Wine street in 1823 as there was a vineyard owned by an Italian immigrant not too far from the street. (Rasmussen, 2005) However, different history maps show the street as Wine or Vine as there was confusion in which first letter was the correct one (Tausch, n.d.) In 1877, the street's name was changed from Wine (or Vine) to Olvera Street to honor the first county elected judge that lived in the village, Agustin Olvera. Agustin Olvera was a well respected man in the Los Angeles area for his role as a Mexican officer in the resistance from the U.S. army in the Mexican American war. However, when the Mexicans were losing the war, Olvera turned sides in order to negotiate terms of agreement with the land overturn. Thus created the 1847 Treaty of Cahuenga, which gave the state of California and Los Angeles to The United States. (The Los Angeles Almanac, n.d.) After the war, Olvera was appointed first judge of Los Angeles by U.S. military governor of California, General Bennet Riley. (Hernandez, 2019) Yet, his career did not end there, he went on to become a member of Los Angeles' city council and practiced private law after his work in the city's community development. (Hernandez, 2019) Olvera died in 1876, and in 1877 the city renamed the street to honor his dedicated work to his community and his home. His house can still be found on the far south side of Olvera street.

The Avila adobe home had many different owners and witnessed several societal changes. In the 1800's and early 1900's, the Avila adobe home was used for several reasons. First it was a home for L.A.'s Mayor Don Francisco Avila who first built it and as it was passed down

to his family, it was also used by others. In 1847, it was temporarily used as a post in the Mexican American war for the U.S. military that planned to invade current-day North America. (Olvera Street, n.d.) Once Avila's family moved out of the house, it had mini occupations such as a restaurant, a boarding house, and a hotel, until it was finally vacant due to poor conditions. The lack of repair and care for the home made the City of Los Angeles' Health Department condemn it for demolition in 1926 (Olvera Street, n.d.) along with other buildings on the same street of Olvera.

Olvera street was in the process of being demolished for the purpose of building a gas station as the few first cars began roaming the city. (Olvera Street, n.d.) However, a lady by the name of Christine Sterling rediscovered the history of the abandoned street and saw the importance of preserving the historic birthplace of Los Angeles. Sterling was a person of wealth with connections to people with power and she used that to advocate for the preservation of Olvera Street. She protested the sign that said the buildings were in the plans to be demolished and began to inform the public of the historic value of the street. (Hernandez, 2005) Historians could examine what was happening at the time because she wrote in her diary of her journey and challenges to save the street from oblivion. She proposed to have the street closed off from vehicles and only permit foot traffic with the purpose of opening a Mexican style market that would serve as a tourist attraction and a way to stimulate the economic status of the neighborhood. People with interest in the area were afraid that closing the street would be costly to their business. It took her two years from 1826 to 1828 to overcome the fears of the neighboring businesses and landowners in order to see her vision. (Hernandez, 2005) After gathering enough public attention, she had friends and public officials donate money, time and materials to restore the iconic buildings. Even an officer volunteered incarcerated people to do

construction labor on the property. (Creason, 2013) Sterling went on to work on the progress of other cultural villages like Chinatown which is only a couple blocks away from Olvera Street. Although her work with Olvera Street was successful, her work in Chinatown didn't directly stem from her ideas but she definitely helped it move forward. Sterling then resided in the Chavez Ravine, however, the city took charge of the property to build what is today the Dodgers Stadium. After failing to save her home, she chose to reside in the Avila Adobe home until her death in 1963. She is immortalized in the Olvera Plaza as the Mother of Olvera Street (Hernandez, 2005)

In the 1930s, David Alfaro Siqueiros, a Mexican painter, was commissioned to paint a mural at the Olvera Plaza. He was told that the vision for the mural should be an utopian idea of America, meaning it should portray a peaceful and bountiful land. However, as Siqueiros was politically aware of the injustice done to Mexican Americans and Native Americans, he decided to depict another image. He finished his artwork in 1932, called *America Tropical*. His artwork showed "a scene of Mayan ruins, with a central, crucified [Native American] figure" (Rainer, n.d.) The city and Sterling were not pleased with the painting as it depicted the side of the story that they did not want to remember. At the time of the Depression, Mexicans were being deported (Rasmussen, 2005) so it was not a time of glee for everyone as Sterling wanted to portray. So upset officials ordered the painting to be whitewashed. The painting was neglected for almost three decades (Rainer, n.d.) until the 1960's when the Getty Conservation Institute and the City of Los Angeles stepped in to reestablish the piece. It now rests, restored, where it was painted on top of a downtown L.A. building called the Italian Hall that overlooks Olvera Street.

Although the plaza shows a tribute to those early Mexicans who traveled to the region and established their home, it doesn't show tribute to the Tongva tribe who resided there

originally. After years of Olvera Street being neglected, it was restored to what it is today. A brick street with a church, food stands, restaurants and a park section where people can enjoy a day of learning and absorbing the culture of the first Mexican Americans in Los Angeles county. As the Spaniards were practicing Catholics, they converted many indigenous people and others into the religion which can be seen in Olvera Street's highly symbolized Catholic culture. They ignored the fact that Tribal Nations were also forced to convert to Catholicism and that is only one of the aspects that the colonizers brought to the land. Native Americans succumbed to laborious work, diseases, cultural cleansing, and raping of their women. The lack of representation of Native Americans in the birthplace of Los Angeles has failed to educate the public about the people that came before them. Without the acknowledgement of the Tongva Nation in the Olvera Plaza, it is erasing that part of history and the cruelty that caused them to diminish their population.

In the United States, there began an awakening movement in the 2020 that resorted to civilians tearing down statues of significant people in U.S. history with hopes to bring light to their heinous past towards minority groups. In 2020, a group of vigilantes went to the Olvera Plaza and roped down a statue of Junipero Serra, a man who is responsible for leading the expansion of Catholic Missions in California. In previous years, Serra is regarded as one of the founders for expanding modern California, however, the reality of the situation is that he led a genocide of Native Americans, their livelihood, and their culture. His statue is found all over California and several of them are coming down by vigilantes that are demanding change and justice to honor their slain ancestors.

After researching, it is to be concluded that the mainstream history of Los Angeles is actually very obscure in regards to its establishment and their relationship with the indigenous

people. According to historian Nathan Masters, the olvera street plaza's settlers were dated to have moved into the region previous to the date the town was founded. It is known that families walked together from the Northern state Mexico, Sonora to the valley that is known as present-day Los Angeles. It is also known that The Mission of San Gabriel Arcángel was established in 1771 in the valley of San Gabriel as a result of the Spaniard King's plan to expand his territory. The Mission was founded by Junipero Serra. The indigenous people living in Southern California were the Tongva. The Spanish renamed them to Gabrieleños because they were subjected to the Mission of San Gabriel Arcángel. (Los Angeles Almanac) The Spaniards really liked the land because it's agricultural potential with a river we now know as the Los Angeles River.

The treatment of what Indigenous people were subjected to were horrible acts that ultimately lead to their genocide at the hands of the colonizers. While the land was being occupied, the new government was making legislation that didn't include the Indigenous people and their rights. Instead, the very first governor of California, Peter Burnett, view the Indigenous people as invasive and agreed that the genocide of the natives would be a "sad inevitability" (Meares, 2016) The governor encouraged settlers to kill natives and even offered money to whoever would murder them. (Blakemore, 2017) However, they did not think about how the act of colonizing the land not only took resources from the natives but forcefully took their culture as they were put into missions to learn the new legal religion.

The obscurity and vagueness of the history of Southern California fundamentally lacks the knowledge to educate the public of the truth and as a result, it only acknowledges the clean vision of history. The clean version could be considered the peaceful enactment of establishing new land and joining different cultures that makes Angelneous who they are today, however, it reeks of lies. In reality, Indiegnous people were stripped of their land, their humanity, their culture and forced to assimilate. That is what the statue of Junipero Serra symbolized at the

entrance of the Placita Olvera; a time period of assimilation and bloodshed for those who bear the weight of generational trauma. The statue was taken down and never replaced. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti is now in plans of changing another nearby parks' name from Father Serra Park to La Raza Park. So reparations are in the small steps of being made but it goes to show how much Olvera Street fails to recognize a big portion of its history and it's original founders.

Revisions:

I first revised my introduction paragraph to have a main argument of recognizing and reclaiming a place by its symbolism. I also mention a little order to what my essay was going to cover such as the establishment of the settlers colony and how it came to be today but also why it is important to see how it fails to acknowledge the Indigenous people. Next, I revised the topic sentences for my paragraphs to actually be topic sentences that relate to the main argument. Finally, I researched more into the history of L.A.'s land and the story of how the Indigenous people were killed and driven out of their territory. I added paragraphs explaining the injustices and honestly, there are so many to write about. It was saddening to know that it isn't really explained at the Placita Olvera and I would consider it a forgotten history because as an L.A. native, I was never taught that and until this paper, I discovered what actually happened. I ended my essay differently by explaining why the statue of the priest was torn down and what it symbolized as it stood. I added more citations to my list as I had new information from the research.

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