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Praxis, Persistence, and Public Archaeology: Disrupting the Mission Myth at La Purísima Concepción

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Abstract

This article introduces a model that harnesses praxis as a powerful tool for critique, knowledge, and action within the realm of public archaeology. The adopted framework focuses on persistence as a middle-range methodology that bridges the material past to activist and collaborative-based projects. Recent research at Mission La Purísima Concepción in Lompoc, California, shows the effectiveness of this model and its real-world application. Visitors to California missions encounter the pervasive “Mission Myth”—a narrative that systematically overlooks and marginalizes Indigenous presence while perpetuating ideas of White hegemony and Eurocentrism. Archaeological excavations in the Native ranchería and collaboration with members of the Chumash community help resist notions of Indigenous erasure. By activating notions of persistence through public archaeology, this study contributes to dismantling entrenched terminal narratives, paving the way for a more accurate representation of the past and fostering a more inclusive archaeological practice.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un modelo que aprovecha la praxis como una herramienta poderosa para la crítica, el conocimiento y la acción en el ámbito de la arqueología pública. El marco adoptado se centra en la persistencia como una metodología de alcance medio que vincula el pasado material a los proyectos basados en el activismo y la colaboración. Las investigaciones recientes en la Misión La Purísima Concepción, en Lompoc, California, ofrecen un ejemplo de la efectividad de este modelo y su aplicación en el mundo real. Los visitantes se encuentran con el omnipresente mito de la misión, una tesis que sistemáticamente pasa por alto y margina la presencia indígena mientras perpetúa las ideas de eurocentrismo y el monopolio de los blancos. Las excavaciones arqueológicas en la ranchería indígena y la colaboración con los miembros de la comunidad chumash ayudan a oponer las nociones de borrado indígena. Al activar las nociones de persistencia a través de la arqueología pública, este estudio contribuye a dismantelar discursos terminales arraigados para abrir camino a una representación más precisa del pasado y para fomentar una práctica arqueológica más inclusiva.

Keywords: praxis; public archaeology; activism; persistence; heritage interpretation; settler colonialism; Indigenous studies; California missions

Palabras clave: praxis; arqueología pública; activismo; persistencia; interpretación del patrimonio; colonialismo de poblamiento; estudios indígenas; misiones de California

Archaeology is constantly evolving as we find new ways to make meaningful contributions to the study of humanity. Although discipline-wide change is often slow to take shape, there are times of such crucial transformation that many of us are left reckoning with archaeology’s place in the world and how to improve it. After broader global conditions led to the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, as well as the enactment of Indigenous rights through legislation such as CalNAGPRA, rapid change is occurring, and it has grasped archaeology with a “pre-apocalyptic feel” (Rosenzweig 2020:2; see also

Flewellen et al. 2021; Laluk et al. 2022; VanDerwarker et al. 2018). As we confront archaeology's colonial and imperialist foundations while at the same time seeking meaningful solutions to societal problems, questions about how we can salvage the discipline or rebuild the field anew are becoming more prominent.

Public archaeology connects to this broader discourse because it is a democratizing practice that involves sharing archaeological research and engaging with local communities. Unlike other sciences, public archaeology has a degree of openness that makes it a vehicle to collaborate, educate, and raise awareness of sociopolitical issues (Moshenska 2017). Its ability to reach many publics is a powerful reminder that archaeology can promote deep and powerful understandings of the past. Yet, public archaeology's enactment in the real world exposes it to modern-day social, political, and economic challenges (Little 2002; Merriman 2004; Moshenska 2017; Moss 2022; Okamura and Matsuda 2011; Potter 1994; Richardson and Almansa-Sánchez 2015). As a result, public archaeology can be a tool to promote a more critical understanding of the past and confront the past's representation in the present. Archaeologists have tapped into its power for activism and social justice by advocating for inclusive narratives, investigating historical injustices, and engaging with activist communities (Barton 2021; Battle-Baptiste 2011; Gadsby and Barnes 2010; Little 2023; McGuire 2008; Sabloff 2008; Stottman 2010; Westmont, ed. 2022).

Critical praxis is one integrative methodology through which public archaeology can be effectively explored. It does not solely involve an interchange between theory and practice; it also engages with critique, shapes how knowledge is produced, and facilitates positive transformations (McGuire 2008; McGuire et al. 2005). Although critical theory is linked to critical praxis, they are not the same. The former has been used in archaeology to analyze broader social structures, systems of oppression, and power dynamics (Leone et al. 1987; Westmont 2022). In contrast, critical praxis serves as the vital nexus through which critical theory is actualized in the real world; it is a driving force to effect change. Similarly, even though critical praxis and activism share commonalities, they do not always operate the same way. Both can be used to create social and political change for the betterment of the future (Barton 2021; Stottman 2010), but critical praxis uses organized principles to critique the world, produce knowledge in the world, and act in the world; thus, it is less ambiguous than activist-oriented approaches.

As a conceptual tool, praxis helps bridge the gap between theoretical ideas and their practical applications, but it lacks a framework through which action takes place. To address this, I turned to recent research in the archaeology of postcontact North America to examine how Indigenous communities navigated the tumultuous currents of colonialism. Persistence has emerged as a valuable lens that not only foregrounds the survival and endurance of Native communities but also acts as a link between theorists and activists (Neitch 2019). It recognizes the violence inflicted on Indigenous communities stemming from war, disease, displacement, and genocide, and it acknowledges the institutionalized efforts aimed at erasing Indigenous identities (Law Pezzarossi and Sheptak 2019). In the material record, persistence can look like adopting new materials within existing cultural norms or reinterpreting precontact traditions to accommodate new colonial conditions. The key focus is not on the change but on the internal dynamics of how transformations facilitate continuities (Panich 2013). Persistence is a manifestation of Indigenous presence, which is intended to prioritize the enduring role of Indigenous communities in archaeology through fieldwork, laboratory analysis, scholarly discourse, and public understanding (Schneider and Panich 2022).

My goal is to activate Indigenous persistence in the realm of public archaeology so it can become a platform for meaningful change. Using a case study at Mission La Purísima State Historic Park in Lompoc, California (Figure 1), I employ a critical activist praxis using three integrated methods to examine the world, generate knowledge in the world, and take action in the world: the goal is to build a deeper understanding of how local groups navigated missionization while at the same time correcting misguided perceptions of Indigenous erasure. Within the guided tour experience at Mission La Purísima, visitors encounter the restored church, padre's quarters, and industrial areas. Yet the Native village was never reconstructed, leaving a gap in both the physical and interpretive dimensions of the mission space. This deliberate omission reflects a revisionist history rooted in the romanticized revival of California's "Golden Age" that promoted a White settler narrative that pacified and excluded Native Americans—this is the so-called Mission Myth (Rawls 1992).



Figure 1. Mission La Purísima Concepción in the Chumash homeland.

This study disrupts this prevailing narrative by turning the tables on the portrayal of missions representing Spanish California to spotlight the Native American towns they actually were. Indigenous persistence takes center stage as an active force of change through praxis at Mission La Purísima. Integrating insights from archaeological discoveries and the perspectives of the local Chumash community, this approach unveils the agency, resilience, and cultural continuity inherent in the Native narrative of this mission space. The ultimate objective of this project is to correct historical inaccuracies and to pave the way for a more inclusive understanding of the past.

Critique, Knowledge, and Action in Public Archaeology

Over the past 30 years, public archaeologists have used critique, knowledge, and action in varying ways. Yet, the field has experienced an identity crisis for some time (Richardson and Almansa-Sánchez 2015). Indeed, some scholars avoid using the term “public archaeology” and instead prefer “community archaeology.” However, I embrace the former term because public archaeology encompasses the diverse ways in which the public and its various constituents are affected by the practice of archaeology (McManamon 1991; Tushingham and Fulkerson 2021). Despite its ambiguous aspects, public archaeology has outgrown K–12 outreach, site visits, and mock excavations (McDavid and Brock 2015). I explore three significant ways in which the field has evolved from its previously presumed noncritical state to the proactive and analytical discipline it now embodies. My approach centers on critique, knowledge, and action, which I integrate within a conceptual framework using a case study of Mission La Purísima Concepción.

Critique

Public archaeologists have used sociopolitical critique as a platform for analysis, often through a critical theory framework (Leone et al. 1987; McDavid 1997; Potter 1994; Roller et al. 2020; Westmont, ed.

2022). Critical theory involves the application of interdisciplinary perspectives to examine and challenge prevailing assumptions, power dynamics, and underlying ideologies that play out in the contemporary world and are perpetuated in research, interpretation, and presentation (Calhoun 1995). In archaeology, critical theory produces reliable knowledge of the past by exploring the social and political contexts of its production (Leone et al. 1987:285). It serves as a crucial tool by drawing attention to marginalized aspects of the archaeological landscape, challenging conventional narratives, and fostering critical reflections about history (Westmont 2022).

Critique has influenced diverse facets of archaeology such as feminist and Indigenous archaeologies and has shaped the integration of critical race theory. In an exploration of feminist approaches, Alison Wylie (2007:98–102) delineates five strata of critique: “critiques of erasure” expose the tendency to overlook narratives about the past, “critiques of distortion” address warped narratives that align with prevailing discourses, “critiques regarding political resonance” critically evaluate the alignment between historical accounts and current entrenched political interests, “critiques regarding the politics of objectivism” address the value-neutral character in research, and “explanatory critiques” analyze how the internal dynamics of archaeological practice shape research trajectories and outcomes. Those who embrace an intersectional approach in public archaeology have emulated these critiques, which dovetail with issues of race. Battle-Baptiste (2011:46–49) elucidates how such critical inquiry was instrumental in crafting a Black feminist theory that explores challenging questions in the material and documentary record. Critical race theory connects to this broader discourse and functions to counter systemic racism (Fong et al. 2022; Minkoff et al. 2022).

Knowledge

As the barriers between archaeology and the public have broken down, there is debate about the appropriate amount of leverage to grant to others in contributing to knowledge-building. For example, the proposed “democratic model” developed by Holtorf (2007), like the “multiple-perspectives model” developed by Merriman (2004), encourages and supports people of all backgrounds, regardless of their education, profession, or training, to pursue their own interests in archaeology. Fagan and Feder (2006) hold a contrasting opinion, arguing that this approach could promote pseudo-archaeology and undermine the field’s scientific credibility. González-Ruibal and colleagues (2018) further point out that reactionary populism—characterized by nationalism, racism, and anti-intellectualism—makes the multivocal model no longer a viable option.

Rather than adopting an anything-goes approach or giving up control entirely, collaborative methodologies can advance shared objectives and mediate nuanced understandings of the past (Flewellen et al. 2022; Lau-Ozawa 2019; Supernant et al. 2020). This holds especially true when working with Indigenous communities (Atalay 2006; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Watkins 2000). These communities offer traditional sources of knowledge that produce better-informed narratives of the past and provide more meaning that can contextualize scientific data (Acuto and Corimayo 2018). Complementary to collaborative methodologies, storytelling serves as a channel for knowledge transfer and helps shape archaeological understandings through the lens of descendant communities (Acebo 2021; Bauer 2016; Kretzler and Gonzalez 2023).

Furthermore, the language used by archaeologists stands out as a powerful mediator in perceptions of historical and cultural landscapes (Wainwright 1962): it is crucial to actively cultivate a fitting and mutual language that bridges different knowledge systems (Atalay 2012).

Action

Public archaeology has moved beyond involving the public to addressing current social challenges. This transformative approach seeks to shape a more promising future by emphasizing the relevance of archaeology in the contemporary world (Sabloff 2008; Stottman 2010). This approach has propelled archaeology into the realm of activism, where archaeologists harness the tools of their trade to lend support to causes or issues that can catalyze change that means something to the people who are directly affected (Atalay et al. 2014; Gadsby and Barnes 2010; Little and Zimmerman 2010; Stottman 2014). This intersection of archaeology and activism takes on many manifestations,

encompassing race and racism, responding to mass disasters, addressing homelessness, and grappling with the ramifications of global warming. Barton (2021:3) argues that the diverse approaches adopted by archaeologists under the banner of activism empower the public to contemplate the past and the present critically and to form independent viewpoints.

Archaeology not only acts as a catalyst for activism but is also shaped by activism, which serves the quest for a “usable past” (LaRoche 2011). Movements like the occupation of Alcatraz Island drew attention to the oppression of Indigenous peoples, marking a precedent for a new era of Indigenous activism and political visibility (Smith 2019). The canonization of Junipero Serra in 2015 sparked another wave of activism that more recently resurfaced with the toppling of statues across the nation, including those honoring Serra. In archaeology, these activist movements provide a platform to address the historical and ongoing impacts of the mission system on Native individuals, shedding light on how they persisted in the face of obstacles posed by the processes of missionization (Panich 2016). Collaborative efforts with tribal colleagues to identify protest sites not only strengthen connections between the Native past and present but also serve as an educational tool for the public (Beisaw and Olin 2020).

Archaeological and Activist Approaches to Persistence

Public archaeologists often work in historic-era sites that have unsettling histories of the postcontact era. These endeavors have been particularly useful in addressing issues of enslavement and racism (e.g., Brock et al. 2022; Leone et al. 2005; Minkoff et al. 2022). Only recently have public archaeologists studying Native American sites gone beyond stewardship-based education to engage in more activist agendas (Watkins 2021:225–233). However, public archaeology has not been used to confront the challenging narratives of Indigenous communities and their portrayal in the modern world. Within this void, persistence emerges as a powerful tool capable of countering misconceptions of Indigenous erasure and building relationships with local communities. It holds considerable potential for praxis-based public archaeology by harnessing the three dimensions of critique, knowledge, and action.

As Panich (2013) explains, archaeologies of persistence examine Indigenous practices through three interrelated concepts: identity, practice, and context. Drawing on social reproduction and agency-oriented approaches (e.g., Dobres and Robb 2005), as well as change and continuity debates (Lightfoot 1995; Silliman 2009), the concept of persistence demonstrates how individuals in the past adapted to evolving social conditions based on their own internal meanings and understandings in the world, which often involved the pragmatic choices they made in certain historical situations. In the context of Indigenous–colonial relations, which have long focused on assimilation-based tropes, persistence shifts the narrative to the diverse ways in which local groups navigated the impact of colonialism on their own terms and over successive waves of colonial policy and foreigner entanglements (Ferris 2009; Law Pezzarossi and Sheptak 2019; Lightfoot and Gonzalez 2018; Panich 2020).

The study of persistence serves as a crucial reminder of Indigenous presence in archaeological narratives, and it underscores how collaborative research can actively center the enduring essence of tribal nations today (Schneider and Panich 2022). This is especially important to consider within heritage sites that have favored “nice histories” (sensu Hayes 2019) and disregarded underrepresented perspectives and Indigenous histories (e.g., Arjona 2016; Crocker 2020). However, archaeologists have made considerable progress in uncovering subaltern voices, bringing to light some of their enduring practices in colonial establishments, Native neighborhoods, and beyond (e.g., Brown 2018; Hull and Douglass 2018; Noe 2023; Reddy and Douglass 2018). These studies have helped us go beyond the traditional understanding of missions as confined spaces to thinking of them as broader landscapes that remain important to Indigenous worldviews and practices (Schneider et al. 2020).

Persistence is not just the study of the past. It calls attention to the unbroken trajectory that results from a “determination to persist” as the central dimension connecting living descendants and their ancestors (Joyce 2019:203–204). It aligns and coexists with Gerald Vizenor’s (2008) notion of survival by locating behaviors that are self-asserting and self-affirming. Persistence also holds considerable potential in activist spaces and transnational adaptation to characterize the diversity of Indigenous experiences across national, temporal, racial, and gendered boundaries (Neitch 2019:437–438). Rather than focusing on a singular, genuine “precolonial” identity that remains unchanged over

time, persistent frameworks place value on processes instead of origins, challenging the notion of culture as pristine or untouched. Doing so reshapes perceptions of authenticity and recognizes the entangled histories of descendant communities and the diverse landscape that exists today (Law Pezzarossi and Sheptak 2019). Persistence can validate Indigenous communities by countering essentialized discourses and legal frameworks that promote timeless continuity, particularly concerning the federal recognition process and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (Pezzarossi 2019:58).

The Mission Myth

The Mission Myth refers to the romanticized portrayal of California missions as idyllic and peaceful places where Spanish missionaries selflessly civilized and converted Native peoples into loyal subjects (Rawls 1992). The idea that missions represent a simpler, more romantic time arose with the publication of *Ramona* by Helen Hunt Jackson in 1884. This novel not only raised awareness of the racial and cultural tensions between Native Americans and White settlers that existed in the mid-nineteenth century but also created nostalgia for the earlier Spanish days by glorifying the Spanish missions and the original Californios. Today, the central focus on the manicured gardens and bell towers highlights this bygone Spanish legacy (Kryder-Reid 2016), whereby Indigenous voices are supplanted by narratives of White hegemony and cultural dominance (Panich 2022).

The Mission Myth is problematic in two ways: (1) it perpetuates the idea that Indigenous people either did not survive Spanish colonialism or assimilated to such a degree that there is no true element to their cultural identity today, and (2) it reinforces the notion that California missions were Spanish towns where mainly Spanish peoples lived. Thus, this myth may contribute to why the broader public does not recognize living contemporary Indigenous communities or the historical trauma they face. For example, in a survey conducted by the *Great Falls Tribune* in 2018, 40% of respondents believed that Native Americans no longer exist or are not discriminated against (Inbody 2018). The denial of Native American histories, cultures, and identities, which is entrenched in many aspects of society and education, leads to flawed understandings of Indigenous presence in North America.

Archaeology is well positioned to reveal the Indigenous side of the story in California missions. It can uncover spatial layouts, including areas that were never reconstructed but remain intact and hidden in plain sight. Archaeologists working in plantations have more recently highlighted such approaches to the landscape, revealing the domestic modes of everyday life in households and trash deposits (Minkoff et al. 2022; Westmont 2022). Because archaeological projects often take years of planning, their development can become a catalyst for building relationships with local community members. The power of archaeology also lies in its popularity and subtlety. It possesses the potential to attract tourists while also serving as a tool for highlighting subaltern narratives. Even at the most superficial level, a praxis-based framework compels the public to participate in new ways of thinking about the world.

A Critical Archaeological Praxis at Mission La Purísima Concepción

This section describes an ongoing collaborative effort at Mission La Purísima Concepción with members of the Chumash community, students from the University of California Santa Barbara, and employees and tourists of California State Parks.

Traditionally, the Chumash occupied the territory in south-central California that now spans from San Luis Obispo to the north and Los Angeles County in the south and includes the Northern Channel Islands—San Miguel (Tuqan), Santa Rosa (Wi'ma), Santa Cruz (Limuw), and Anacapa ('Anyapax) Islands. DNA and linguistic evidence confirm that the Chumash are among California's oldest tribal nations, living in their home range for at least 8,000 years (Johnson and Lorenz 2006). Mission La Purísima Concepción is in the north-central area of Chumash territory in the city of Lompoc. Four other missions were established in this area: Mission San Buenaventura (1782), Mission Santa Barbara (1786), Mission La Purísima Vieja (1787), and Mission Santa Inés (1804).

A Chumash community lived at Mission La Purísima Concepción until the mission fell into disrepair and remained neglected for almost a century. In the early 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt

implemented measures to revive the struggling US economy during the Great Depression. More than three million young men enlisted in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as part of these efforts, and one of their assignments was to preserve Mission La Purísima Concepción. The CCC excavated virtually the entire mission complex, identifying various structures such as the church, workshops, soldiers' quarters, and the residences of the padres (Hageman and Ewing 1991). On the eastern side of the mission complex, they uncovered evidence of Native habitation, including a series of adobe buildings believed to have served as neophyte barracks—which housed newly converted Christianized Indians—and as the Native infirmary. Even though the Chumash neighborhood was identified, it was not considered significant enough to be reconstructed.

Today, Mission La Purísima State Historic Park is under the ownership of the State of California. Drawing more than 200,000 visitors each year, it serves as a popular destination for recreation and offers an opportunity to explore the history of California. It is considered a “complete and authentic reconstruction” in a “traditional” rural setting (Hageman and Ewing 1991:ix). This status imparts a significant responsibility to the mission to serve as a focal point for the public seeking a connection to the past and for students eager to understand and appreciate California's heritage through firsthand experiences. Additionally, missions across California retain a special significance for Native communities today as places directly connecting them to their ancestors, adding an extra layer to them of cultural importance and historical resonance (Gomez 2023).

Setting a Framework for Public Archaeology at Mission La Purísima Concepción

I was introduced to Mission La Purísima Concepción while working as an archaeological specialist at California State Parks. In that capacity I conducted an intensive survey of the mission grounds, gaining a more comprehensive understanding of activity areas, midden deposits, and village boundaries. I also explored the mission using the self-guided tour provided by the New Visitor Center. It quickly became evident that the narrative presented to the public diverged significantly from the archaeological narrative: there was a stark absence of Indigenous presence in interpreting this historically significant site. Working at California State Parks alongside Native monitors and tribal representatives, I gained insight into the contemporary aspects of Native Californian communities and came to appreciate the significance of archaeological work that amplified Indigenous stories. This project was inspired by these experiences: I wanted to design an archaeological excavation that not only highlighted the presence of the Native Californians with whom I collaborated but also have a transformative impact on the public perception of the mission.

The impactful work led by Kent Lightfoot and his cohort of students has left an enduring mark on the field (Mallios et al. 2024) and influenced the framework through which this study was situated. Addressing an array of themes—from enduring cultural entanglements to Indigenous negotiations in successive waves of colonialism, and from expansive colonial landscapes to persistence studies—their contributions played a pivotal role in dismantling antiquated assimilation-based tropes that previously defined perceptions of California missions. Mission La Purísima Concepción offered the opportunity to use this recent wave of research and explore, challenge, and critique prevailing narratives from previous archaeological investigations (Brown and Liguori 2024). Publicly engaged, field-based work can also counter terminal narratives through active engagement with the local community.

I was introduced to members of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians through mentors and committee members, which included the then-educational director; the cultural director and the tribal historic preservation officer; community members with ancestral ties to the mission, and other community members who shared an interest in archaeology. Although I played a leading role in initiating these connections and developing the conceptual framework of this project, the archaeological effort at Mission La Purísima was designed to have an inherent spirit of cooperation. In the field, I worked closely with the tribal monitor to determine the decision-making process for selecting excavation units. While running the field school, I empowered the tribal monitor to address student inquiries and collaborated to find a forum in which both our voices could be heard. Community members also played a pivotal role in steering certain aspects of this project. For instance, the educational director facilitated the inclusion of Chumash youth, reflecting a community-driven approach to involving

the younger generation. The tribal monitor and the educational director additionally helped contribute to the interpretive panel placed at the site for visitors.

Public integration was a crucial aspect of the research design that aimed to maximize the impact of the real-time excavations. Careful consideration was given to selecting a unit location yielding the most significant impact, and so the primary activity area was located along the path of the docent-guided and self-guided mission tour. An interpretive panel featuring maps depicting the potential reconstruction of Indigenous apartments within the mission was positioned at the front of the pedestrian pathway to engage a broader audience. This panel displayed artifacts from previous excavations and a photograph of living descendants standing next to their ancestors whose history was tied to the mission. This project was also designed to have guides discuss the recovered materials with trail users; students took on lead roles in explaining the site's significance to the broader public.

In the following, I explore how critique, knowledge, and action were used and actualized throughout this project. In critiquing the world, I demonstrate how Mission La Purísima State Historic Park visitors had gained a misleading impression of Indigenous cultural loss. In generating knowledge in the world, I show how archaeology and Indigenous knowledge helped recover the silenced narrative of the Chumash community at the mission. Finally, in acting in the world, I illustrate how archaeology can be used to correct misrepresentations of cultural loss and elucidate narratives of persistence.

Critiquing the World

When visitors enter Mission La Purísima State Historic Park, there is a designated path with 10 stops around the mission, as drawn in the self-guided brochure (Figure 2). The tour begins at the New Visitor Center (Stop 1), where a 3D display features Indigenous peoples laboring in the mission. Objects from previous excavations are on display, and there is a panel with photographs of Chumash descendants in the nineteenth century. Compared to other missions across the state, Mission La Purísima includes detailed and reflective interpretive content (Lorimer 2013).

The walking tour of the mission space then begins. First, visitors cross a narrow bridge (Stop 2) leading to the iconic, salmon-colored mission bell tower and church (Stop 3; Figure 3). Visitors then stroll down the colonnade of residential buildings, which include rooms that contain interpretive displays about the mission's industries, such as candle making and metalwork. The next stop on the walking tour is the courtyard (Stop 4) between the residential buildings, with a reconstructed pottery kiln and kitchen. Park visitors then circle back to the front of the mission to view the padre's quarters (Stop 5) and the *lavandería*, or laundry facility (Stop 6). Finally, leaving the mission, a "tule (marsh plant) village" (Stop 7) is marked on the brochure. This space includes the reconstruction of one tule-thatched house in an area not historically associated with the Native village.

There is no additional signage or information once the visitor arrives at this Chumash house.

Visitors then walk across a creek to the neophyte barracks, the building for newly converted Christianized Indians (Stop 8). The path crosses the area where the apartment-style residences for Native families once stood. A series of stone foundations in the ground outline six rooms identified in a previous archaeological investigation. However, the buildings it represents are 165 m (540.5 feet) long and included another 34 rooms. If the actual building had been reconstructed, it would be about two-thirds the length of the church, the padre's quarters, and the industrial area combined, contributing to a vastly different visitor experience of the mission. However, in its place is a grass field and a modern wooden fence that represents an exhibit area used in the 1960s during the Deetz excavation (Figure 4). After departing the barracks, visitors cross back over the footpath to another main pathway in the direction of the New Visitor Center before passing the buildings of the *monjerío*—the building for unmarried girls (Stop 9)—and the infirmary (Stop 10).

Three of Wylie's critiques—erasure, distortion, and political resonance—immediately become evident in assessing the mission space. On its eastern side, the Chumash village—its histories, stories, and people—vanish from the settler narrative. Instead, the structures and workspaces of non-Native colonizers take precedence, contributing to the erasure of Native presence. This intentional removal within the mission's physical space evokes the idea that either Native peoples did not survive, the Franciscan priests had pacified them, or they had assimilated into Spanish lifeways. Simultaneously, this

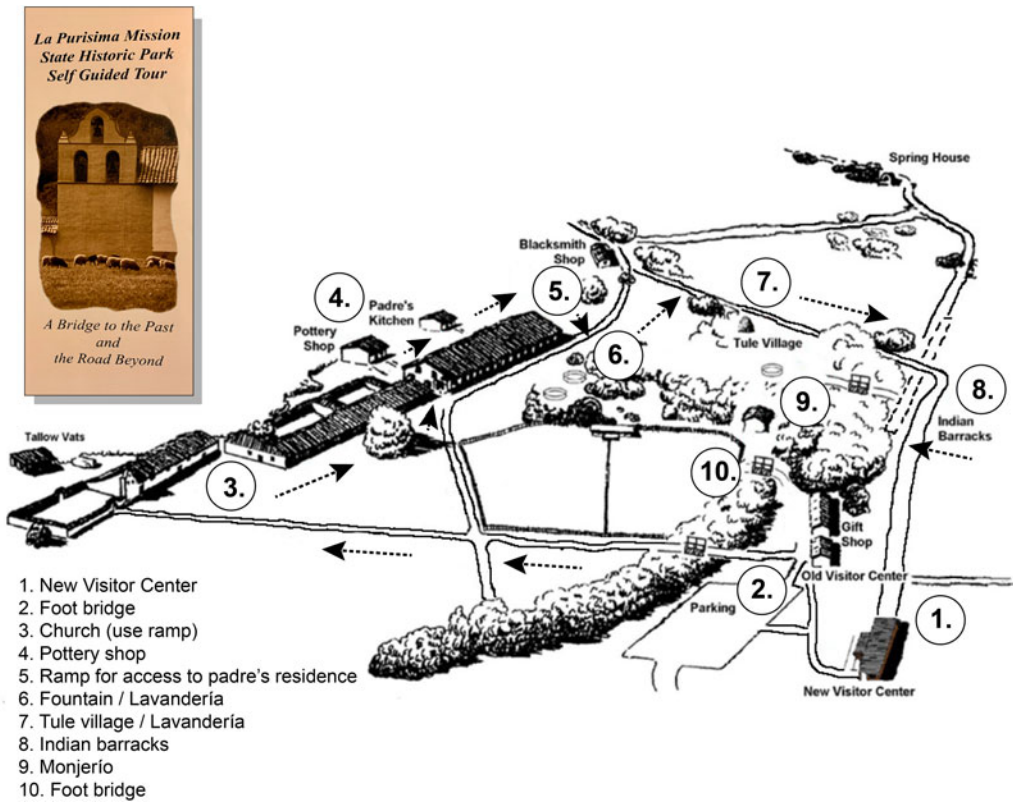


Figure 2. Mission La Purísima Concepción State Historic Park self-guided tour. Image produced by Tsim Schneider.



Figure 3. Mission La Purísima's bell tower. Photograph courtesy of Kaitlin Brown.



Figure 4. Area of the “neophyte barracks” and Chumash rancheria. Photograph courtesy of Kaitlin Brown.

representation perpetuates a romanticized notion of “Spanish California” by portraying missions as idyllic havens of happiness and contentment (Rawls 1992:350). The interpretive tour reinforces the misleading idea that missions primarily housed Spanish-speaking residents, despite their limited numbers, while downplaying the substantial Indigenous community that often numbered in the thousands (see also Dartt-Newton 2011). The interpretation of the “neophyte barracks” sign within the rancheria is also a subject of ongoing debate. The term “neophyte” signifies Indigenous individuals who were newly converted to Christianity, implying a potential loss of identity. However, this characterization oversimplifies how local groups actively engaged with the process of missionization by drawing on their deeply rooted traditions and practices (Hull and Douglass 2018).

Critical theory and critical race theory provide valuable frameworks for examining the mission space today, specifically in addressing issues related to Indigenous presence and the lack thereof. Drawing attention to Indigenous presence necessitates dismantling terminal and distorted narratives and reevaluating knowledge production systems and methodologies (Schneider and Panich 2022). This critical lens highlights the injustice of marginalizing Indigenous voices and underscores the role archaeologists can play in reforming these narratives through collaboration with local communities. Embedding such a critical lens at the outset of an archaeological project can reshape the public experience at the park and present alternate historical narratives. This is another step toward restorative justice (*sensu* Little 2023) by interpreting the significance of missions as Indigenous places and crucial landmarks for present-day descendants (Gomez 2023).

Generating Knowledge in the World

During the preliminary stages of engagement with the Chumash community, the then-educational director Nicolasa Sandoval was joined by her mother Virginia Ortega and Chumash youth in her family for a brief tour of the mission. During our first meeting, I was presented with the *Samala-English Dictionary: A Guide to the Samala Language of the Ineseño Chumash People* (Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians 2007). This comprehensive dictionary is the result of decades of dedicated work to rebuild the Samala language, and it played a crucial role in establishing the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians’ Language Program, which is still active today. Turning to the page in the dictionary that translated Mission La Purísima as *Amuwu* in Samala highlighted the profound significance of this linguistic endeavor. The recorded entries, including this place name, shed light on the

present-day cultural landscape and the community connection to these historical places. The meeting clarified voices telling a different side of the story and the significance of the landscape to the community today.

Formal meetings with the Elders Council of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians were arranged to explain project goals, obtain feedback, and discuss collaboration. During these discussions, Nakia Zavalla, the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, offered a thoughtful perspective: she emphasized characterizing the discovered items at Mission La Purísima not only as “artifacts” but more as “belongings.” The word “belongings” implies ownership, denoting a connection to the Chumash community and fostering a collective sense of identity. In addition to being archaeological remnants, these belongings embody elements of the community’s identity, heritage, and ongoing cultural practices. Recognizing them as belongings emphasizes the relational aspect of the past to the present, and it affirms the ties between Indigenous peoples and their material culture (see also Kretzler and Gonzalez 2023:4). Indeed, for many Native Californians, archaeological and ethnographic materials are powerful symbols of cultural resilience and persistence (Brown et al. 2018; Yamane 2015).

Chairwoman of the Elders Council, Antonia Flores, shared a story of her ancestor Maria Solares, whose legacy includes saving the Samala language, stories, and Chumash ways of life. Flores explained that Mission La Purísima was a haven during the Chumash Revolt in 1824. A relative had sent their son on horseback to Mission La Purísima to escape the upheaval that began at Mission Santa Inés. This aligns with Solares’s account, who tells the story of Estevan and his wife sending their son Bienvenuto (Benvenuto) on horseback with a blanket of wool tucked around his feet to Mission La Purísima, while his mother and Estevan stayed at Santa Inés. The Purisimeño found Bienvenuto (Benvenuto) and sheltered him, and he was later reunited with his family. Antonia’s account sheds light on Mission La Purísima as a place of disruption, memory, power, and cooperation among families in times of despair.

The Chumash belongings identified during the 2019 archaeological investigations speak to the survival stories that link the deeper past to these conversations with members of the Chumash community. During the mission era, the Chumash community continued to manufacture asphaltum-lined water bottle baskets, to fashion stone into traditional projectile points, and to produce thousands of shell beads that were traded to neighboring communities (Brown et al. 2021). Foreign objects were also integrated into new ways of living. Imported tableware in the Native *rancheria* speaks to distinct practices of presenting foods according to European customs.

Agricultural and carpentry tools depict the daily labor tasks within the mission’s farming and industrial sectors. Interestingly, some foreign materials, such as ceramic and glass, were shaped into traditional-style projectile points, reflecting the entanglements of Indigenous identities (Figure 5).

The insights gained from the tribal leaders contributed to the findings in the material record, showing how the Mission La Purísima community maintained connections to the landscape and broader communities outside the mission and the active social strategies they used under new colonial conditions. Tribal descendants connect to this history through belongings, place names, and oral histories. The language used by the descendant community plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary narratives of persistence. The archaeological record reveals a complex story of entangled practices, where new lifeways were formed under changing conditions and older practices were rearticulated in this new mission space. These changing continuities were often necessary and sometimes required in colonial settings where local groups had to make pragmatic choices and find new ways to persevere (Panich 2013).

Taking Action in the World

Members of the Chumash community were active throughout the 2019 archaeological project. On excavation days, Gina Mosqueda-Lucas, the cultural resource monitor for this project, was engaging, working with, and mentoring the team of students. Project participants learned about Indigenous forms of knowledge and different ways of seeing the world from archaeological discoveries. For example, a whole red abalone (*H. rufescens*) shell was discovered atop an earthen floor in an adobe dwelling that once housed Chumash residents. For thousands of years, abalone served as a vital source of food for the Chumash, and the shells were fashioned into decorative elements such as pendants and beads. The whole shell in a Native dwelling may have symbolized a desired connection to a nostalgic past,

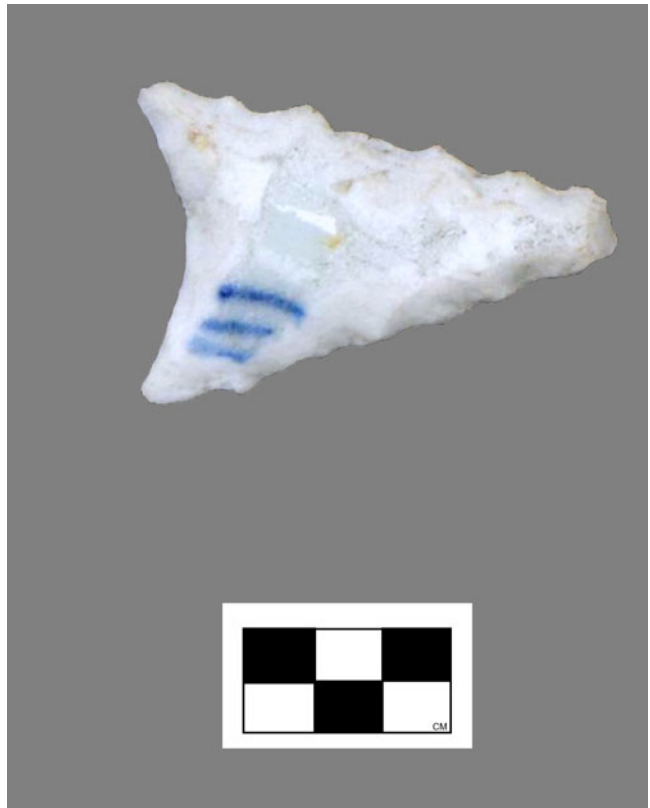


Figure 5. A porcelain ceramic sherd fashioned into a projectile point. Photograph courtesy of Mike Imwalle.

linking the household residents to ancestral coastal settlements (Brown et al. 2021:102). Gina prayed over the shell while students and visitors solemnly watched when it was unearthed for the first time in a century. At that moment, the past became intimately connected to the present and to the different publics (visitors and students) involved in this project. There was a reflective awakening to the shell's significance outside a strictly archaeological sense as new meaning was given to it through a Chumash community member's worldview (Figure 6).

Nicolasa Sandoval was joined by Chumash youth in her family to the archaeological excavation, working alongside field-school students. As a discipline overwhelmingly practiced by people not indigenous to the places they study, archaeological fieldwork involving the participation of Chumash youth "in the trenches" reinforced the idea that this space was and is theirs. Indeed, in tribal nations throughout North America, many elders have worried about youth losing touch with their heritage. Some agree that archaeology could play an essential role in addressing this concern (Brownlee 2008:30). Nika Collison (in Krmpotich and Peers 2013:86) explains the significance of including tribal youth in archaeological work by pointing out that, for thousands of years, the young, middle-aged, and old all traveled, lived, and worked together: everybody's energy was needed to survive. The youth are integral to archaeological projects that aim to build coalitions and relationships with local communities, and participation can also transform their worldview. Their inclusion may lead to a discipline represented by more diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Having members of the Chumash community on the site, participating in archaeology, and gaining new insight into the world increased student and visitor cultural awareness and activated a different understanding of the site. For project participants and visitors to the park, their presence was a "shocking recognition" of the real and untold history not expressed in the mission's present-day landscape (Hayes 2019). Some archaeology students and visitors had to leave their comfort zones to face the complicated and violent history that traumatized Indigenous peoples across the state and nation. They had



Figure 6. Gina Mosqueda-Lucas holds an abalone shell after it was unearthed for the first time in a century. Photograph courtesy of Kaitlin Brown.

to broaden their views on archaeological practice, considering collaborative methods and new ways of thinking about the world that break traditional Western schemas.

Navigating Successes, Overcoming Obstacles, and Forging a Path Ahead

This project has experienced both successes and obstacles, and it is just the beginning of a lifetime of work. Although rooted with good intentions in a commitment to collaboration, public outreach, and the challenging of traditional narratives and power structures, progress has been significant on some fronts but more complicated on others. The ongoing challenge is to navigate the project's future course.

The excavations were highly successful from a broad public perspective, involving constant interaction, social media engagement, and a consistently interested public. Every interaction shared a story of Indigenous persistence and survival in the mission, and the material record contributed to a more nuanced understanding of these Indigenous survivance stories. At a 2021 meeting with the Elders Council of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians and California State Parks, there were discussions on potential ways to move forward, including an updated interpretive panel in the Native adobe

barracks and delineating the adobe features with flat stones or reused adobe blocks. Several complicating factors, such as the increased risk of looting and the need to align with tribal preferences for revealing the village's location in the mission, have added complexity to the process. California State Parks, equipped with rangers and a team of docents, has taken on the responsibility of safeguarding and advancing the narrative of the Chumash village within the public sphere.

Multiple publications and presentations have featured project collaborators from the Chumash community. For example, Nicolasa Sandoval shared the story of her community's cultural resilience (Brown et al. 2022:536–537), and Gina Mosqueda-Lucas has played an instrumental role in laboratory analysis. Yet, one of this project's challenges has been balancing the diverse needs and voices of all Chumash community members and tribal leaders within the context of public archaeology. At times, there appeared to be conflicts with epistemological perspectives on gathering archaeological data (material analysis and excavations) that did not align with tribal leaders' desires or existing knowledge. The issue of conflicting perspectives is addressed by Schneider and Hayes (2020) as it affects archaeology: they advocate for a form of “undisciplining” if the field is to be of true use to Native American tribes. They examine the challenge of such work in academic settings, considering the emphasis on merit-based assessments or the less valid way that community collaborative projects may appear (Schneider and Hayes 2020:141). These challenges were amplified by conducting this project within a doctoral program, which brought strict timelines, the doctoral committee's expectations, a lack of mentorship in navigating tribal relations, and financial responsibilities.

Although the excavation has contributed significantly to understanding Indigenous presence and processes of persistence at Mission La Purísima, this project's future does not include additional excavations at the mission. Instead, it is shifting focus to incorporate Indigenous methodologies, a direction suggested by tribal leaders. In a recent meeting with the Elders Council of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, there was a desire for a greater emphasis on oral histories from the Chumash community, particularly during the Mexican period and the Chumash Revolt. As Blakey (2010) explains, although anthropologists are ethically responsible to many entities, they also have “ethical clients” who are the principal mandates and the ultimate decision makers. In the context of this project, the ethical commitment to community collaboration is vested in the hands of tribal leaders and elders. The next phase of this project aims to document their oral histories, and by moving in this direction, there may be other, yet revealed, contributions to the broader public archaeology initiative.

Conclusion

This article integrated critical praxis as a form of critique, knowledge, and action to uncover the histories of the Indigenous community at Mission La Purísima Concepción. A different side of the story emerges through archaeology and partnership with members of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians. The material record attests to how the Chumash community at the mission navigated colonialism using their own meanings and values. Elders remember this through the cultural landscape, oral histories, and belongings. Public archaeology transformed the physical space of the mission and the subsequent tourist experience. A Chumash monitor contributed to a different understanding of the material record, and youth participation was part of the bigger picture of coalition-building. Moreover, the archaeological excavation forced visitors to confront a more complicated history of Spanish colonial missions by foregrounding narratives of Indigenous persistence.

Although a persistence approach tends to be used in projects that pay more attention to the material past, it can carry over to activist and collaborative-based archaeology projects. Persistence approaches can interweave critique and Indigenous forms of knowledge to transform dominant hegemonic spaces. The versatility of persistence allows for its application beyond an exclusively Indigenous lens, making it adaptable to other descendant, marginalized, and BIPOC communities. Crucially, this project used persistence as an active force for change. It involved confronting existing power structures and promoting dialogue with the broader public. By doing so, this project challenged misconceptions and biases embedded in historical narratives and recast missions as Indigenous places that remain rooted as centers of importance to Indigenous communities today.

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