

Newsroom

NATION, WORLD + SOCIETY

UC teams with Indigenous scholars to recast history of the California missions

UCLA-led critical mission studies program creates a new model to understand the past, present and future

Jessica Wolf | October 11, 2021

“If you ask California Indians what they want, one response would likely be that we want to speak for ourselves and share our perspectives and knowledge,” said Jonathan Cordero, executive director of the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone of the San Francisco Peninsula.

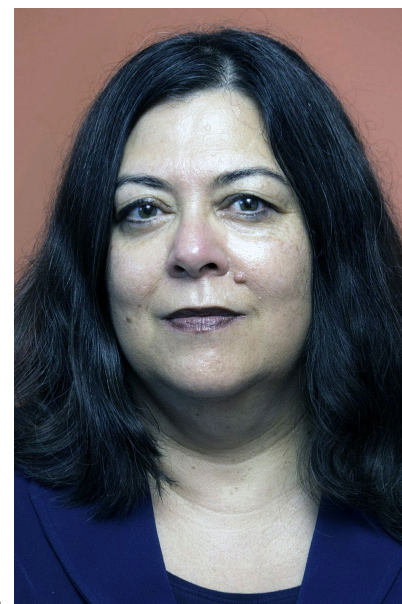
As part of a UCLA-led grant program called critical mission studies, Native scholars and community members are bringing their lived experiences and ancestral histories to bear on a project that is rewriting the history of California’s missions.

They seek to shine a light on the brutality and inhumanity experienced by Native people at California’s missions during Spanish colonization and beyond. To tell truths about trauma, enslavement, genocide and abuse. The truth around centuries of intentional obfuscations. Truth about the ongoing impact of settler colonialism.

The truth about what it means now to be Native from California, which in part means seizing every opportunity to share their truths, Cordero said.

“We want our truths, our stories to be told from the perspective of the average California Indian, from the perspective of the elder who may have even more traditional knowledge,” said Cordero, who is also visiting professor at UC Hastings. “We want it to be told from the perspective of people involved in education, from allies, from those of us with master’s degrees or Ph.D.s. We want all of those perspectives to contribute to the knowledge that we have about the mission period without privileging one kind of knowledge over another.”

Based in UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center, and launched in 2019, critical mission studies has created opportunities for that knowledge sharing by way of a grant from the University of California Office of the President’s Multicampus Research Programs and Initiatives.



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The program operates with a four-member board of California Indian research partners who approve and direct projects that are part of the grant: Valentin Lopez (chairman of Amah Mutsun Tribal Band), Yve Chavez (Tongva), Stan Rodriguez (Santa Ysabel/Kumeyaay) and Cordero.

They collaborate frequently with four scholars from across UC who serve as grant administrators: Charlene Villaseñor-Black, UCLA professor of Chicana and Chicano and Central American Studies; Renya Ramírez (Ho-Chunk/Ojibwe, enrolled Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska), UC Santa Cruz professor of anthropology; Jennifer Scheper Hughes, UC Riverside professor of history; and Ross Frank, UC San Diego associate professor of ethnic studies.

Together they guide [knowledge production](#) related to the California missions, building a body of literature that critically analyzes the mission period in California and Spanish colonialism in the Americas.

“We have been dealing with the fantasy heritage, the romantic myth of the mission period for a very long time,” Cordero said.

Everything happens with transparency — and with deference to the California Indian research partners, to the California Indian advisory board, and ideally to the communities they represent, something that’s not always been the case in the history of the UC system or scholarly work around Indigenous peoples, Cordero said. The advisory board includes representatives from many California Indian communities.

The project has a prescribed protocol for interacting with tribal communities, including guidelines for ensuring that scholars ask for and receive appropriate permissions, that Native community members retain intellectual property rights and cultural materials, and that they have oversight in the use and distribution of any newly created digital or printed materials.

Advancing new methodology

Critical mission studies is furthering what has been referred to as “California Indian studies” and “mission studies” and will add breadth and depth to American Indian studies in general. Critical mission studies focuses on the perspectives, experiences and cultures of California Indians, using approaches that interrogate conventional scholarship, said Cordero, who is also a visiting scholar at the University of Southern California.

Chavez, an assistant professor of history of art and visual culture at UC Santa Cruz, is contributing to that body of work in her book that highlights instances of Indigenous agency from 1769-1936 via case studies and examples of Native art, architecture and visual culture. Her work-in-progress manuscript has been supported by a grant from critical mission studies program. Chavez is also one of the first Tongva [women to receive a doctorate](#) from UCLA.

Chavez said she believes she might be the first California Indian art historian ever, and the only Tongva art historian. It’s important to her to prioritize Indigenous perspectives in the history of art, especially a new way of looking at Spanish mission architecture.



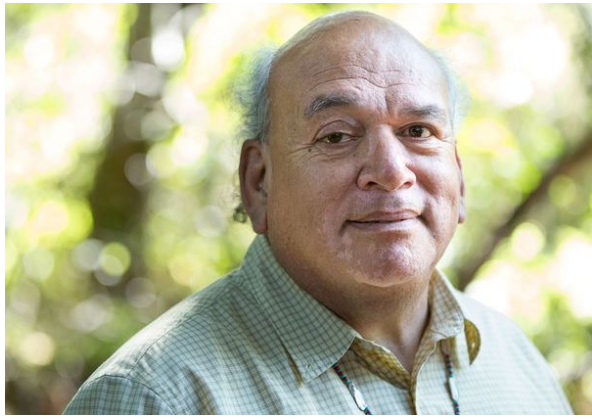
Jonathan Cordero

Courtesy of Jonathan Cordero



Yve Chavez

Courtesy of Yve Chavez



Valentin Lopez

Courtesy of Valentin Lopez

“The missions were built by Native people, and my priority has been to educate others about that history,” she said. “I’m looking at ways in which my writing can be used in the classroom at the university level, but also to educate the public and to make this work accessible to the California Indian community.”

Providing access to information is a big part of the impetus of critical mission studies, she said. The group is working on a handbook that would be available to anyone who wants to educate themselves about the missions and the experiences of Native people.

Revealing unheard histories

In 1769, long before California was a state, the Spanish ordered the missions built to convert hundreds of thousands of native inhabitants to Catholicism and use them as labor. By 1833, when the missions were closed, and California was part of Mexico, 21 missions spanned 600 miles, and the Indigenous population had dwindled because of disease and exploitation.

“The truth has never been told about our history,” said Lopez, who is working on his own book that refutes the narrative that California Indians went to the missions willingly. “A lot of university and younger folks, they just learned the history that is taught in history books. And let me say that when those books were written, they never went to tribes, they went to Franciscans or the Catholic church to find out that history. We just want the truth to be told.”

By the time California became a state in 1850, the narrative of the missions as expressed by the Catholic church dominated. After statehood and as more white settlers arrived, Native Californians faced perilous decades of [state-sanctioned genocide](#), which Gov. Gavin Newsom [officially acknowledged](#) for the first time in 2019.

To this day, images of the missions on state flags and seals, the Father Junípero Serra statues and his beatification serve as painful symbols of the destruction and domination of California Indians, Lopez said. “They try and present it as a proud, wonderful, glorifying history, when it is nothing but slavery, incarceration, rape, murder, torture and destruction, destruction of cultural knowledge, destruction of Native spiritualities, Native environment and Native Indigenous knowledge,” he said.

Beyond the truth being told about the brutal impacts of the history of the missions on California tribes, Lopez said he also hopes the critical mission studies project will highlight “the absolute need for perpetrators to acknowledge and be accountable for that history.”