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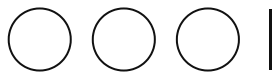
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OPINION // OPEN FORUM

# The secret, not-so-saintly history of Junipero Serra statues

Katherine Moran

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The statue of Junipero Serra is pulled to the ground by protestors in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, Calif., on Friday, June 19, 2020.

Jungho Kim / Special to The Chronicle

Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, the leader of the Catholic Church in San Francisco, stood at an empty pedestal in Golden Gate Park last month and said a prayer of exorcism. He was declaring that the toppling of a statue of Junipero Serra, a saint in the Church, was “an act of the evil one.”

But the fate of San Francisco’s Serra statue was not unique. Over the past few weeks, Serra statues have been toppled or removed all over the state, from Sacramento to Los Angeles.

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If Serra is literally being pulled off pedestals, it is worth asking how he got up there in the first place.

Just as a Confederate monument means something specific when we know that it was erected in the service of Jim Crow segregation and white supremacy,

monuments to Serra bear the traces of their origins.

Beginning in the 1880s, increasing numbers of mostly white, Protestant settlers from the East and Midwest streamed into southern California. Some of these new arrivals — a cadre of boosters and writers — joined forces with Catholic elites and the Catholic hierarchy to celebrate California's mission past. They preserved and restored mission buildings, raised monuments and wrote mission-themed poetry, fiction and plays.

This was a remarkable moment of Protestant-Catholic collaboration during an era of intense American anti-Catholicism. It was driven in part by a craving for local historical romance, and by a knowledge that such romance would sell. Railroads sold mission tours, promoters held mission events and mission images graced advertisements for citrus fruit, department stores and housing developments. By the 1920s, the missions were a regional myth, and a profitable brand.

California mission promoters also were rewriting the U.S. origin story. They compared the Franciscans to the Puritans and Pilgrims, arguing that they were all co-founding fathers of a continent-spanning nation. Junípero Serra was elevated to the status of national hero.

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It was a newly expansive approach to U.S. history, but one with significant blind spots and elisions. It brought together English and Spanish, Atlantic and Pacific, Protestant and Catholic. It also ignored the North American history of interimperial conflict, the diversity of indigenous peoples and polities, and a war of conquest with Mexico.

It was part of an Anglo affection for a putatively disappearing Spanish European past, even as these same Anglos brought about an often violent displacement of actual Spanish-speaking Californians.

Finally, the elevation of Serra was a celebration of white supremacy and empire. Against those who might locate the roots of the nation in an anti-colonial rebellion against the British monarchy, mission promoters and their allies argued that U.S. history emerged out of parallel projects of European conquest and conversion of indigenous people. They cast those projects as noble and heroic — minimizing the suffering and violence they entailed.

The timing of this new myth was important, too. This was an imperial origin story for an avowedly imperial nation.

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It captured the popular imagination during an era when the U.S. was consolidating recently conquered territory in the Western states, forcibly acquiring overseas colonies and territories, and remaking itself as an industrial nation of global reach.

Monuments to Serra are artifacts of this rewriting of the U.S. past and purpose. Catholics and Protestants came together in California to celebrate a Catholic missionary as a founding father, but their ability to do so relied on the imperial fantasy of a common white Euro-American Christianizing and “civilizing” mission.

Today, if we attend only to the history of the saint — and not to the logic of his rise to public prominence — we will leave half our work undone. We will waste an opportunity to wrestle with California’s imperial pasts, and fail to understand the anger many Californians feel about the state’s numerous monuments to Serra.

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