Unmonumenting and Cleansing Space

(Yaangna) In this moment of shifting, reconciling and healing it is important to remember that Racial Justice and Indigenous Sovereignty are inexplicably linked to one another. We honor the Peoples of the original villages, our Tongva, Tataviam, Chumash, and Acjachemen relatives, the longtime stewards of this territory.

As monuments are removed from our public spaces through cathartic action some impose a narrative of violence onto these actions but in reality, the violence occurred long before that and continues today. The violence has been memorialized in these objects. The violence occurred through the installation of these symbols of domination and dehumanizing actions. Today this communal moment is a ceremonial cleansing of this space, a step forward in returning balance to these lands.

So much of the conversation this country has about racial justice and race relations happens on the backs of the Indigenous Peoples of this place currently known as the US. Racial Justice in any form that does not simultaneously address the theft of lands & waters from the 574 federally recognized Nations and the 460 Non-Acknowledged Tribes, Bands, and Nations that includes Los Angeles County's Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, and San Gabriel Band of Gabrieleno/Tongva, and various tribal Communities their individual and collective sovereignty, leaves an overarching dominance of white supremacy. As statues of Columbus and confederate monuments come down it is critical that these actions don't overwhelm other histories. Here, in what is currently known as California, the legacy of slavery was operationalized by and linked to the Mission system.

Mass incarceration began with the Missions. There's a direct lineage between the overcrowded missions which increased the spread of illnesses and diseases leading to the death of many Native Peoples and the current crowding of the Immigration Detention Centers and the Prison Industrial Complex. Here in LA County, the carelessness with which the Sheriff Department has ignored calls to protect incarcerated people from COVID-19 mimics that mission system. To ignore this legacy for the prettier and softer side of Serra's actions is to accept gifts from an abuser.

Serra himself saw conversion by any means necessary as his calling and so in his own words, "That spiritual fathers should punish their sons, the Indians, with blows appears to be as old as the conquest of these kingdoms [the Americas]; so general in fact that the saints do not seem to be any exception to the rule," he wrote in a 1780 letter to Felipe de Neve, then-governor of the Californias, "...

If supporters of Serra can't accept his role in the atrocities performed by the Mission project, they cannot deny his complicity in the ethnic cleansing of Native Peoples and the eventual genocide of them as well. Upon his canonization in 2015, author and poet Deborah A. Miranda an enrolled member of the Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation of California wrote,

"I have a responsibility to my Ancestors and to my own descendants to speak up and try to create a clearer understanding about why Junipero Serra's canonization would be another historical flogging of California Indians. No, Serra was not the only one involved. Yes, he was part of an intricate machine run by the Spanish Crown's political desires, the Spanish military's might, and the Vatican's multiple ambitions to convert and acquire both souls and wealth. But Serra was also a man who, like many before him, was faced with a choice: go along with the program, achieve his own personal goals, and ignore the larger crimes – or take a stand against inherently inhumane and unchristian acts against a people who were obviously vulnerable to diseases and technologies far different from their own.

Serra made his choice. "

We've learned from Germany that reconciling with the past means doing so in the most authentic way possible. Any part of that history that isn't 100% accurate creates doubt in that any small percentage that might be slightly off, and the slightest doubt in one aspect of history creates an opportunity for the totality of it to be questioned. The legacy of Serra is a part of history that has been pacified to create a more palatable retelling of the Missions. The legacy of Serra in itself is gaslighting in the truest definition of that word.

As we stated, it is time for reconciliation and with that, it is time for the WHOLE truth, all sides of the history need to be told. Not just for us, but for future generations. We need to understand the impact of slavery, brutality and historical genocide.