

Walter Wheeler

*Community Builders:
Mexican-American Women and Olvera Street
in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*

ABSTRACT: This article examines the role of Mexican-American women in the Olvera Street/Plaza area of Los Angeles, California, during the twentieth century. Based on a combination of newspaper articles, photographs, and oral history interviews from the period, as well as existing scholarly research, it focuses on the response of Mexican-American women to the encroachment of Anglo tourists and business interests into their existing community. The article demonstrates how Mexican-American women protected and facilitated the growth of their community over time.

KEYWORDS: modern history; United States (U.S.); American West; California; Los Angeles; Olvera Street; Plaza; Mexican-American women; cultural displacement; ethnotourism

Introduction

On Easter Sunday 1930, Olvera Street in Los Angeles opened as a Mexican marketplace modeled on California's Spanish colonial past. The project enjoyed resounding commercial success by creating a Mexican-themed oasis in the city's old downtown district marketed toward Anglo tourists and locals. For Anglos, Olvera Street offered a Mexican cultural experience without the need to travel south of the border. As an imagined landscape, Olvera Street fits the romantic Spanish vision popularized during the 1920s and 1930s in California. Olvera Street's connection to California's past serves as the point of departure for my research. The location's compelling story stems not from its financial success but from the Mexican-American community's spatial, social, and political relationship with the attraction's Anglo boosters, benefactors, and visitors. More specifically, my study examines the reaction and response of the Mexican-American community to the construction of Olvera Street. Ultimately, my article reveals the pivotal role Mexican-American women played in building a strong community despite the challenges posed by the encroachment of Anglo Angelenos.

The story of Olvera Street and the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles derives itself from California's complex colonial past. In her 2018 monograph, *Colonial Intimacies: Interethnic Kinship, Sexuality, and Marriage in Southern California, 1769–1885*, Erica Perez delves into the cultural and interpersonal realities brought on by the shift in control over California from indigenous groups to Spain, Spain to Mexico, and Mexico to the United States. As a central theme, Perez examines how “Californios and Native peoples in the nineteenth century” as well as “twentieth century Mexican Americans...faced challenges in preserving the integrity of their culture.”¹ The cultural displacement, through both overt and subtle methods, of the conquered by the conqueror played

¹ Erika Perez, *Colonial Intimacies: Interethnic Kinship, Sexuality, and Marriage in Southern California, 1769–1885* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 244.

a central role in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. While colonial laws and edicts certainly impacted people's lives, the strength of Perez's analysis lies in a focus on the impact of cultural colonialism on communities. In examining Olvera Street and the Mexican-American community, I apply a similar framework by centering my analysis on the community itself rather than the broader political and social realities of California.

While William D. Estrada's 2008 study, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space*, provides valuable context and background information,² the existing scholarship lacks a gender-oriented and community-based approach. In a similar vein, Phoebe Kropp's 2006 monograph, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place*, offers a compelling analysis of the broader statewide obsession over California's Spanish and Mexican past,³ but does not present Olvera Street as a story of gender and cultural resilience. Meanwhile, William Deverell's 2014 work, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past*, examines the whitewashing of Los Angeles' history by Anglo elites.⁴ My study aims to break new ground by using gender and community as the analytical framework to guide my research. In order to dig deeper, I rely on a collection of primary sources, including historical photographs, newspaper articles, interviews, and sociological studies. In addition, Elizabeth R. Escobedo's 2013 study, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front*, successfully highlights the impact of Mexican-American women in Los Angeles.⁵ Taken together, the evidence tells the significant story of Mexican-American women on both Olvera Street and in broader Los Angeles.

I. Political and Social Circumstances

During the early twentieth century, Los Angeles rapidly industrialized. Industrial growth brought with it a drastic need for labor to fuel continued economic development. At the time, the general area surrounding what would eventually become Olvera Street went by the name of "Sonoratown," while the specific future location of Olvera Street was generally referred to as "the Plaza." For the city's Anglo leadership and business interests, the people living in Sonoratown formed the backbone of the industrial labor force.⁶ Furthermore, racial issues and conflict

² William D. Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

³ Phoebe S. Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁴ William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

⁵ Elizabeth R. Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

⁶ Isabela Seong Leong Quintana, "Making Do, Making Home: Borders and the Worlds of Chinatown and Sonoratown in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 1 (2014): 47-74, here 53.

played a major role in early twentieth-century Los Angeles and the Sonoratown neighborhood. Isabela Seong Leong Quintana's 2014 article, "Making Do, Making Home: Borders and the Worlds of Chinatown and Sonoratown in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles," details the segregation of Chinese and Mexican Americans in Sonoratown.⁷ For Anglo Los Angeles, the city's "image was based on an ideal of a white city maintained through segregation, commerce, and public services."⁸ Racial segregation combined with increased immigration brought on by industrialization resulted in a high concentration of working-class Chinese and Mexican-Americans packed into Sonoratown.

In Sonoratown, Chinese and Mexican-Americans struggled to "make do" with their less-than-ideal circumstances. As Quintana has shown, Plaza residents repurposed the large villas of former *Californio* elites into house courts containing large numbers of families and single-male industrial laborers.⁹ Within these house courts, residents typically lived in very close proximity to one another, with individual rooms partitioned for each family or individual. In 1906, the Sanborn Map Company produced a fire insurance map depicting the layout of the large Buena Vista/New High Street house court.¹⁰ This map conveys the stark contrast between the home lives of Sonoratown's minority residents and the traditional nuclear family-based housing constructed for Anglos. In addition to house courts, many denizens of the Plaza resorted to living inside multi-family shared railroad boxcars provided by their industrial employers.¹¹ Life in boxcars closely mirrored the experiences of house court residents.

The inherently tight quarters in these house courts and boxcars posed challenges to everyday life. Spatial constraints, poverty, and a lack of resources resulted in a lack of privacy, scarce access to clean water, and exposure to disease.¹² However, Plaza life did result in the formation of community connections, primarily through forced interaction. As Quintana explains, Mexican-Americans living in house courts relied on shared space to access water, bathrooms, and fire pits for cooking. Further, these communal spaces provided a place for women to bond and assist one another in laundry, gardening, and shared

⁷ Quintana, "Making Do, Making Home," 53.

⁸ Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 54.

⁹ Quintana, "Making Do, Making Home." See also the historical photograph "Adobe House Court in Sonora Town" (ca. 1890), Security National Bank Collection, Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁰ See the historical Sanborn Fire Insurance map, depicting each unit of the Buena Vista/New High Street house court (1906), Sanborn Map Company, Insurance Maps, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California, Volume 3 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1906), sheet 338.

¹¹ Quintana, "Making Do, Making Home," 58.

¹² Dana Cuff, "The Figure of the Neighbor: Los Angeles Past and Future," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 559–582, here 563.

childcare.¹³ While men worked industrial jobs during the day, Mexican-American women had little choice but to interact with their neighbors and fellow community members. Community bonds and networks formed during the years preceding Olvera's development would later help facilitate the development of a strong Mexican-American community in the Plaza area.

The problems in the Plaza area only served to reinforce negative racial stereotypes propagated by powerful Anglo institutions in the city. The overcrowding of the Plaza area combined with poverty and crime resulted in what Anglo Los Angeles described as an unsanitary and dangerous slum.¹⁴ Violence, sickness, and dilapidation in the Plaza area served as a punching bag for elite institutions such as the *Los Angeles Times* and provided a useful scapegoat for the city's ills. Certainly, the real issues facing the denizens of the Plaza did not stem from stereotypes but rather from a concerted effort to cram impoverished working-class minorities where they could remain out of sight and out of mind. Although the *Times* provides numerous examples to select from, one of the most revealing articles describes testimony in a court case surrounding a potential ban of vehicular traffic on Olvera Street in 1931 after the completion of the renovations. This article, titled "Olvera No Rose Garden: Historic Street Strewn with Dead Dogs and Cats Before Rehabilitation, Witness Declares," discusses the juxtaposition between old and new photographs of Olvera Street.¹⁵ In court, "[t]he photographs showed the old Olvera [S]treet, with rubbish heaps and broken walls, contrasted with the later pictures of the gay, clean Paseo."¹⁶ The witness testimony speaks to the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the Plaza in the years preceding Olvera Street. Overall, the presentation of the Plaza area to the *Times'* Anglo audience communicated the need to address the city's "Mexican problem."

In 1926, Angeleno voters approved Proposition 9, laying the groundwork for the destruction of old Chinatown in order to build Union Station.¹⁷ While the demolition of Chinatown targeted and displaced Chinese-Americans living adjacent to the Plaza, the bulldozer also presented an appealing solution to the Plaza problem for many Anglo Angelenos. The urge to demolish served as the backdrop for a well-to-do socialite from San Francisco named Christine Sterling. Sterling, who went by Christine Hough at the time of her arrival in Los Angeles, brought with her an understanding and appreciation for Mexican art and culture

¹³ Emily S. Bogardus, "The House-Court Problem," *The American Journal of Sociology* 22, no. 3 (November 1916): 391–399, here 393.

¹⁴ Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*, 108, 126.

¹⁵ "Olvera No Rose Garden: Historic Street Strewn with Dead Dogs and Cats Before Rehabilitation, Witness Declares," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 1931, Los Angeles Times Historical (1881–1987) [database].

¹⁶ "Olvera No Rose Garden," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 1931.

¹⁷ Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 179.

as well as the expectation for a romantic Spanish experience.¹⁸ Upon her arrival in Los Angeles, the ramshackle condition of the Avila Adobe¹⁹ dismayed Sterling.²⁰ Sterling's early efforts to preserve the Avila Adobe launched her overall campaign to preserve Olvera Street and construct the romantic Spanish oasis she had initially expected to find. Through her campaign to save the Avila Adobe, Sterling found support from some of the city's largest power brokers.

As publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* and one of the wealthiest men in the city, Harry Chandler wielded significant influence. Sterling's Mexican marketplace project not only offered an alternative to the bulldozer but also a fantastic commercial opportunity for businessmen and property owners. Further, "the creation of a colorful tourist attraction undoubtedly appeared to be a novel solution to fighting labor unions, communists, and other enemies of free enterprise who continued to gather at the city's Hyde Park."²¹ Sterling successfully framed her Olvera Street project as an effort to save Anglo Angeleno heritage by positing the Avila Adobe at the center of a triumphant Anglo founding narrative.²² Together, Chandler and other mainly Anglo boosters raised the necessary funds to bring Sterling's vision to life.

While Olvera Street served as an attractive location for Anglo Angelenos to spend an afternoon, many Mexican-American Angelenos called the Plaza home. In 1920, the social reformer G. Bromley Oxnam conducted a survey projecting shifts in the Mexican-American population on behalf of his church (i.e., the Methodist Episcopal Church). Oxnam noted, "It is quite likely that the Mexican[s] now situated around the Plaza and in the Macy Street District, will be forced to go to other parts of the city."²³ By the time of Olvera Street's grand opening in 1930, "the Mexican population within the Sonoratown-Plaza area was mostly displaced," bearing out Oxnam's earlier prediction.²⁴ The removal of Mexican-Americans from Olvera Street and the broader Plaza area dramatically impacted Mexican-Americans by forcing them into Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, Belvedere, Maravilla, and Watts.²⁵ Writing on both Chinatown and Sonoratown, William D. Estrada has noted the resulting paradox whereby the people who found their neighborhoods destroyed were the very same people who were

¹⁸ Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 184.

¹⁹ Located on Olvera Street, the Avila Adobe is the longest standing home in Los Angeles. The Avila Adobe served as American General Robert Stockton's headquarters in 1847 during the Mexican-American War.

²⁰ Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 185.

²¹ Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, *Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times, Its Publishers, and Their Influence on Southern California* (New York: Putnam, 1977), 152.

²² Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 195.

²³ G. Bromley Oxnam, *The Mexican in Los Angeles: Los Angeles City Survey* (San Francisco: California Interchurch World Movement of North America, 1920), 23.

²⁴ Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 180.

²⁵ Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 180.

necessary to bring the simulated neighborhoods, which replaced their own, to life.²⁶ Examining how the Mexican-American community reacted and responded to their physical and cultural displacement reveals the role of women in this community.

II. Women and Community in Olvera

Although Olvera Street originated as a decidedly Anglo-led project, the site ultimately stands as a center for Mexican-American Angelenos. Through business involvement, activism, and community networking, Mexican-American women resisted the influence of Anglo Los Angeles over their community. While scholars and community members often disagree on generalized final takeaways from the Olvera Street project, the importance of Mexican-American women to their community remains clear.

Attempting to place the contributions of Mexican-American women into the traditional historical categories of economic, political, and social impacts illuminates the interconnectedness of each aspect when using a “bottom-up” social history framework. On an individual and community level, the aforementioned categories do not fully encapsulate the role of women and only serve as a loose guide for the following analysis. Economically, women played a critical role in the imagined landscape of Olvera Street through their participation, production, and entrepreneurship. Politically, Mexican-American women used their voices to advance the labor movement and push for civil rights. Finally, Mexican-American women formed female networks, supported their community in times of need, and seized opportunities to advance in society. Together, Mexican-American women made possible the reclamation of Olvera Street as a center of Mexican-American business, activism, and culture.

While men like Harry Chandler reaped the financial benefits of Olvera Street’s commercial success, Mexican-American women also played a distinct role in the Mexican marketplace. Sterling’s vision for Olvera Street necessitated and encouraged the participation of Mexican-American workers to staff the attraction. In *California Vieja*, Phoebe Kropp details the importance of the Mexican *señorita* in creating Sterling’s desired atmosphere at Olvera Street. Kropp writes, “[n]ot only had the *señorita* become Los Angeles’ mascot, but she had long stood at the center of Anglo yearnings for Spanish romance.”²⁷ Sterling recruited a significant number of Mexican-American women to both dance for and serve Olvera Street’s visitors.²⁸ In a broad sense, the influence of the *señorita* as a symbol and the prevalence of actual Mexican-American *señoritas* on Olvera Street “challenged the notion that Mexicans existed only as a memory,” and demonstrated how

²⁶ Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 181.

²⁷ Kropp, *California Vieja*, 247.

²⁸ See, for example, the historical photograph “Local Color” (ca. 1935), depicting two women dressed in typical *señorita* attire, Automobile Club of Southern California, University of Southern California Digital Archives, Los Angeles, California.

“Mexicans in Los Angeles refused to become simply part of the city’s colorful atmosphere.”²⁹ Ultimately, Mexican-American *señoritas* played an important part in preventing the full Anglicization of Olvera Street through their strong presence.

Additionally, Mexican-American women used their skills and labor to support their families and community. In her correspondence, Sterling urged vendors to “do more than just sell Mexican souvenirs” and instead “demonstrate traditional crafts in action.”³⁰ While both Mexican-American men and women engaged in economic production on Olvera Street, thrusting the work of women into the spotlight bore significance. Although Mexican-American women had long engaged in the production of pots, baskets, blankets, clothing, and other products, Olvera Street made women and the products they produced a visible attraction.³¹ In this way, the economic engagements of Mexican-American women not only provided an additional means to support their households but also a means to preserve their own culture within the confines of Olvera Street. Therefore, the presence of Mexican-American laborers and *señoritas* paradoxically enabled both the initial creation as well as the eventual reclamation of Olvera Street.

During the initial planning phase, Sterling expressed a desire to “give the Mexican people one place which is really and rightfully their own.”³² As Kropp notes, Sterling’s “seeming willingness to allow them to fashion their own presentation broke markedly from the traditions established by her forerunners and caused concern among her potential Anglo supporters.”³³ Although Anglos owned most of the businesses in operation at the time of Olvera Street’s opening, Sterling did facilitate entrepreneurial ventures for Mexican-American women. For instance, Consuelo Castillo de Bonzo owned a popular café on Olvera Street named *Casa La Golondrina*. Through her ownership, de Bonzo “used her resulting stature on the street to sustain an independent Mexican agenda.”³⁴ De Bonzo’s restaurant served as a community gathering place where Mexican-Americans discussed pressing social issues such as the deepening racial divide in Los Angeles. Further, de Bonzo organized fundraising and volunteer efforts to assist community members in need as well as victims of natural disasters in Mexico.³⁵ Through her commercial success on Olvera Street, de Bonzo strengthened community bonds and uplifted other Mexican-Americans. Moreover, she

²⁹ Kropp, *California Vieja*, 260.

³⁰ Letter from Christine Sterling to Mr. Wirsching, Board of Public Works, May 22, 1941. Christine Sterling Correspondence File, El Pueblo Archive. See also Kropp, *California Vieja*, 243.

³¹ Kropp, *California Vieja*, 243.

³² Letter from Christine Sterling to Clarence Matson, Trade Extension Department, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, March 29, 1926. Christine Sterling Correspondence File, El Pueblo Archives. See also Kropp, *California Vieja*, 227.

³³ Kropp, *California Vieja*, 227.

³⁴ Kropp, *California Vieja*, 253.

³⁵ “Tampico Relief Fund President Named,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 3, 1933, cited in Kropp, *California Vieja*, 253, 345.

provided a place (among others) where Mexican-Americans gathered together on Olvera Street, thereby drawing a contrast with the mostly Anglo patrons of other establishments.

Throughout the history of the Plaza area, Olvera Street has served as a center for political activism. On Christmas Day 1913, the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) hosted a rally in the Plaza. When the police arrived, the rally turned violent. In the following day's issue, the *Los Angeles Times* lamented the violent riot during a "gathering of the unemployed," wherein "I.W.W. laborites and trouble-makers participated."³⁶ Conflict between Mexican-American union activists and the police continued until 1930 and the founding of Olvera Street. Indeed, the Plaza's history of radical political activism helped generate support for Sterling's project from the city's elite. Certainly, "for Harry Chandler, Olvera Street was a welcome stand-in for Mexico and its people, an ideal place to interact and do business with Mexicans who were safely contained in time and space," compared to his previous encounters with armed revolutionaries.³⁷ Unfortunately for Chandler and his fellow elites, Olvera Street's creation did not quell Mexican-American political activism.

In 1939, the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples (*El Congreso*) held a rally in the Plaza in celebration of its first national convention. At the rally, *El Congreso* "made a dramatic and radical attempt to reclaim the space politically."³⁸ Luisa Moreno, a key Southern California labor activist, helped organize the rally in support of labor rights for Mexican-American workers. The rally's organizers selected a young Mexican-American activist named Josefina Fierro to give the kickoff speech.³⁹ In her speech, Fierro dubbed the rally "a different kind of celebration than Olvera Street has ever seen before. An awakening of Mexican people in the United States!"⁴⁰ The prominence of Mexican-American women like Moreno and Fierro in the labor movement put these women at the tip of the spear in the fight for improved wages and working conditions for their community. Instead of taking a backseat, women like Moreno and Fierro used their skills and connections to bring their community together in a unified call for a better life.

The activism of Mexican-American women like Fierro did not stop with the labor movement. Although working conditions and low wages plagued Mexican-American workers in the Plaza, female activists also advocated for an end to discrimination and civil rights. Historian George Sanchez has observed a distinct

³⁶ "Plaza District Put Under Martial Law," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1913, Los Angeles Times Historical (1881-1987) [database].

³⁷ Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 199.

³⁸ Kropp, *California Vieja*, 257.

³⁹ Kropp, *California Vieja*, 257.

⁴⁰ Josefina Fierro, quoted in John Bright, "Las Mananitas: A New Awakening for Mexicans in the United States," *Black and White* 1 (June 1939): 14-15, here 14.

increase in Mexican-American political activism in Los Angeles during the 1930s.⁴¹ Due to increased repatriation and forced deportation, the population of first-generation Mexican immigrants declined in comparison to a growing population of American-born and American-educated second-generation Mexican-Americans.⁴² This demographic shift opened the door for young reformers like Fierro, who utilized increasingly vocal methods of opposition. As Sanchez notes, “[y]ounger Mexican-Americans proved both willing and able to use American political institutions to demand inclusion in the city.”⁴³ Over time, Mexican-American women continued to use their voice and increased influence to advocate on behalf of their community in the American political system.

From a social standpoint, Mexican-American women held the community together and preserved Mexican culture. Immigration and deportation efforts served as one of the most salient political and social issues for Mexican-Americans in the Plaza. Throughout the twentieth century, “immigration agents found the Plaza a great target for repatriation.”⁴⁴ On February 26, 1931, federal immigration agents descended on the Plaza in search of “Mexican aliens.”⁴⁵ By the end of the day, the agents had detained approximately four hundred individuals, eventually resulting in scores of deportations.⁴⁶ The raid kicked off an expansive nationwide deportation initiative spurred by the Great Depression and increased anti-immigrant sentiment. Nativist groups successfully argued for deportation in order to open up the job market and increase wages for Anglo workers, resulting in the deportation of more than one million individuals during the 1930s.⁴⁷

While immigration agents targeted both men and women, raids frequently focused on male industrial workers. The oftentimes sudden removal of Mexican-American men left women to decide between following their partners to Mexico and staying in the United States. Additionally, anti-Mexican sentiment and poor economic conditions drove countless Mexican-Americans to leave the United States. In a 2001 article from the *Los Angeles Times* reflecting on the legacy of repatriation, local historian Raymond Rodriguez recalled the day his father left for Mexico.⁴⁸ Although his father pleaded for his family to follow him to Mexico, Rodriguez’s mother defiantly chose to keep herself and her children in the United

⁴¹ George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 226–229.

⁴² Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 226–229.

⁴³ Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 226–229.

⁴⁴ Kropp, *California Vieja*, 258.

⁴⁵ Antonio Olivo, “Ghosts of a 1931 Raid,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2001, [online](#).

⁴⁶ Olivo, “Ghosts of a 1931 Raid.”

⁴⁷ Olivo, “Ghosts of a 1931 Raid.” The mass deportations of the 1930s not only failed to improve economic conditions for Anglo laborers, but in fact further depressed the economy by lowering the demand for goods and services.

⁴⁸ Olivo, “Ghosts of a 1931 Raid.”

States. While Mexican-American men left the United States either by force or by their own volition during the 1930s, women often made the agonizing choice to stay behind with their children. As a result, women had no choice but to deviate from gender norms and assume new roles within their families and communities.

With the onset of World War II, demand for labor and the draft presented Mexican-American women with new economic and social opportunities. As for the Olvera Street area, “[t]he Plaza’s era of radical free speech and mass demonstrations had come to an end—for the time being,” as tensions between labor and industry eased.⁴⁹ Throughout Los Angeles, Mexican-American women leapt at the chance to fill the void and entered the industrial workforce.⁵⁰ During the war, aerospace dominated the Los Angeles defense industry, allowing women of all backgrounds to support the war effort and enter traditionally male-dominated spaces. Defense work enabled Mexican-American women to support their families and increase their economic footprint in Los Angeles. In an interview with the “Rosie the Riveter Project,” Mary Luna recalls her father’s elation upon learning that her new job at Douglas Aircraft would enable their family to get off welfare.⁵¹ Furthermore, supporting the war effort offered a “status of respectability” for their patriotic service as well as the opportunity to cross racial divides in non-segregated workplaces.⁵² Through their employment, Mexican-American women used their improved social status to materially benefit their community (including those serving overseas) as well as to connect with women of different racial backgrounds.

Unfortunately for many Mexican-American women, the conclusion of the war brought with it diminished employment prospects. Although Mexican-American women “believed quite definitively that their wartime experiences had earned them a right to equal treatment,” many found themselves unceremoniously fired the moment Anglo workers became available.⁵³ Sworn affidavits filed with the Los Angeles Committee for Fair Employment Practices (F.E.P.C.) highlight the extent of the discrimination faced by Mexican-American women immediately following the end of the war. According to the women, Anglo workers rapidly replaced them for no other reason than their ethnicity.⁵⁴ In one instance, a coffee shop employee named Guadalupe Cordero recalled the day her employer dismissed all Mexican-American employees only to replace them with “an equal number of girls, all so-

⁴⁹ Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 167.

⁵⁰ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 2–3.

⁵¹ Mary Luna, Oral History Interview by Cindy Cleary, Rosie the Riveter Project Revisited, CSULB Visual and Oral History Archive, February 2, 1981, [online](#).

⁵² Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 74–75.

⁵³ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 126.

⁵⁴ Affidavit of Guadalupe Cordero, Emma Acosta, Luisa Martinez, Reina Ramirez, and Agrippina Guillen, Box 852, Regional Files XII, Non-docketable Cases A-Z, FEPC Records.

called Americans.”⁵⁵ While the shifting labor landscape forced Mexican-American women back to the lower paid service and production jobs found in the Plaza, they did not stop striving for a better life for themselves and their community.

In the subsequent decades, Mexican-American women formed alliances with other marginalized Angelenos. In 1947, a diverse group of activists founded the Community Service Organization (C.S.O.) to encourage broader civic participation through voter registration drives and other forms of community outreach.⁵⁶ Additionally, the C.S.O. fought against discriminatory racial covenants in housing and police brutality.⁵⁷ Within the C.S.O., Mexican-American women played a dominant role and used their experience on the home front to inform their activism.⁵⁸ Due to their strong participation and leadership, “Mexican American women played an integral role in the C.S.O. from its inception, quickly becoming the ‘backbone’ of the organization’s coalition.”⁵⁹ Overall, Mexican American women in the Plaza area and beyond made a significant positive impact in their communities.

III. *The Legacy of Olvera*

The study of Olvera Street and the Mexican-American community reveals a complicated cultural past, not unlike the American West as a whole. For scholars and community members alike, Olvera Street elicits divergent conclusions on the marketplace’s legacy and identity. From a skeptical standpoint, Olvera Street stands as an example of Anglo America’s erasure of minority culture and functions as a form of cultural colonialism. Certainly, Sterling’s project provided significant material benefits to the Anglo elites of Los Angeles while relying on Mexican-American labor and participation.⁶⁰ On the other hand, a long-term examination of the evidence indicates the resilience of the Mexican-American community in resisting the encroachment of Anglo political and economic interests.

While Olvera Street and the Plaza fit within the broader Southern California narrative of an Anglo manufactured romantic Spanish past, the space in many ways remained a center for traditional Mexican culture. Further, Mexican-American women led the charge in utilizing Olvera Street as a center for political engagement and as a means to support themselves and their community. Through

⁵⁵ Affidavit of Guadalupe Cordero et al., Box 852, FEPC Records.

⁵⁶ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 135.

⁵⁷ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 135.

⁵⁸ Margaret Rose, “Gender and Activism in Mexican American Barrios in California: The Community Service Organization, 1947–1962,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 177–200, here 189.

⁵⁹ Rose, “Gender and Activism,” 189.

⁶⁰ See, for example, the historical photograph, “Anglo Woman Leans against Automobile while a Mariachi Band Plays” (ca. 1930), Bon Plunkett, Olvera Street 1930s, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

entrepreneurship, activism, and community organizing, Mexican-American women contributed mightily to the preservation of their community and the establishment of a thriving Mexican-American community in Los Angeles. Wherever the ultimate legacy of Olvera Street lies, the influence of Mexican-American women remains clear.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of my research, I did not find an affirmative answer to the merits of Sterling's Olvera Street project. As is often the case in a study of social history, the final perspective rests in the eye of the beholder. At the beginning of my research, I had encountered a quote from historian Kevin Starr that stuck with me throughout my explorations. For Starr, "Olvera Street might not be authentic Old California or even authentic Mexico, but it was better than the bulldozer."⁶¹ Ultimately, without the creation of the Olvera Street marketplace, the Plaza and its history would have faced near-certain total destruction. Instead, Olvera Street successfully evolved over time through the contributions of Mexican-Americans into a center of culture and community in Los Angeles.

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⁶¹ Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 205.