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Santa Ana, California

Santa Ana is a city in Orange County, California that has a rich history and cultural community. Santa Ana is home to the historic Calle Cuatro downtown, the artists village, and several historic districts. It is the second most populated city in the Los Angeles metropolitan area (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Santa Ana city, California, 2021). Its population demographic is made up of over 80% Latinx, primarily of Mexican descent (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Santa Ana city, California, 2021). It is also home to many people with roots to El Salvador and Guatemala. This makes it one of the largest immigrant and Mexican-America communities in Orange County. The city has a rich history and deep connection to these roots, making it a beautiful display of the Latinx diaspora experience. It also makes it a prime target for displacement and gentrification, as it is historically home to working-class, immigrant families. These demographics are rapidly changing and the cultural imprint that was before such as a strong marker of Santa Ana has begun to slowly change. However, it is still a city strongly rooted in Mexican American culture and identity, with many Latinx owned businesses and cultural events in celebration of Mexican roots. As someone who spent much of my life living in the city as my grandmother has lived in Santa Ana since she arrived in this country as a child, I have personally witnessed the changes and shifts the city has undergone. This paper will be an

exploration of those changes and how they fit into a larger context of power, movement, and migration.

Early History

As with any exploration of land, geographies, and migration, it is important to note the original communities and caretakers of the land. Santa Ana sits upon unceded Tongva, Payómkawichum, and Acjachemen land, and possibly many other Indigenous people that have not been recorded (Middlebrook 2015). When Spanish settlers arrived, the city derived its name from Spaniard Gaspar de Portola, named after the Saint Anne (Santa Ana). In 1769, it began as Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana and was primarily used for cattle grazing and farmland and eventually became a town site, positioned between the Santa Ana Mountains and Santa Ana River. Forward to the 1800s, the city became an urban center to primarily middle-class white, Orange County residents (Gonzalez & Sarmiento 2017).

It is important to note the racial histories and power dynamics that have shaped the continued histories in Santa Ana. Prior to the 1900s, Mexicans in California due to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo racially organized Mexicans as an intermediary group with a close proximity to whiteness (Almaguer 2008). They were often granted citizenship, and Mexicans of more European, Spanish descent were even often members of Ranchero elites, and seen as “gente de razon” (Almaguer 2008). However, those seen as Indian and dark-skinned poorer Mexicans were still relegated to a subservient status as they were often laborers and servants to elites owning Ranchos (Almaguer 2008). This ushered in a period of paternalism wherein these communities endured horrible working conditions and lack of access to capital ownership yet were seen as essential to the stewardship and development of the land (Almaguer 2008). The social dynamics and relationships between white Anglos and Mexicans were primarily determined by class

differences. The class conflicts between the Mexican ruling class and Anglo capitalists often were the primary determinant of the relationship between the groups, thus overshadowing more racially based conflicts (Almaguer 2008). While Ranchero Mexican elites were often well-integrated into society, accepted, and capable of becoming members of the capitalist class through land ownership, working class Mexicans were not afforded these privileges (Almaguer 2008). Furthermore, as class antagonisms between Mexican elites and Anglo landowners intensified with a struggle for control over farmlands, these elite Mexican ranchero class slowly dissolved (Almaguer 2008). By examining these larger historical trends and the precedents set for relations between Anglo and Mexican settlers in the United States, we are better able to examine the more recent developments of shifts and demographic changes in Santa Ana, as it is primarily Mexican American.

During the WWII era, massive influxes in industry brought about migration to this area of Orange County. White immigrants arrived to pursue jobs in the growing defense industry and consequential housing boom. The city remained a white majority for decades, but demographics began to shift when the Bracero Program brought over an influx of Mexicans to Southern California in order to pursue work opportunities (Gonzalez & Sarmiento 2017). White flight to the suburbs in response to these growing influxes of immigrants during the 1960s shifted Santa Ana to a Latinx majority city (Gonzalez & Sarmiento 2017). These shifts led to the establishment of Santa Ana as a Latinx working-class identified community. However, it is important to note that this establishment of a primarily Latinx identity did not happen without the systematic erasure and exclusion of other immigrant groups. In 1890, Santa Ana was home to over 200 Chinese American residents and business owners who were subjected to continued racist harassment, physical attacks, and were even pressured by city officials to leave the town as anti-

Chinese sentiment proliferated in America during that time (Arellano 2021). These racial tensions culminated until 1906 when a man named Wong Woh Ye was alleged to have contracted leprosy. Health officials named him and the neighborhood a hazard to public health and found a reason to justify destroying the small developing Chinatown that served white members of the community (Arellano 2021). The Santa Ana Chinatown was burned to the ground, Ye died due to lack of treatment, and the existence of a Chinatown in Santa Ana ever occurring has been since erased from public memory.

In tracing, the geographies and shifting developments of Santa Ana this adds a layer of complexity and unforgetting to Santa Ana's history. While all residents here virtually have always thought of it as a Latinx serving community, these lineages and the brutality of this history have been erased. This can be viewed through the lens of Roberto Lovato's idea of unforgetting as immigrant communities and people of color positioned within violently white supremacist geographies of the United States are often removed from their own histories and unaware of their ancestral connections to land and displacement (Lovato 2020). The dominant narratives of Santa Ana do not include any mention of the AAPI community within its city borders, thus illustrating the erasure of narrative and of the implications of this history. This occurrence is not commemorated by the city and has only been brought to light in the midst of the recent surge of Anti-Asian violence and discrimination in the U.S. These hate crimes have emerged the public conscious and have cause that nation to confront the histories of Anti-Asian discrimination, causing us as a collective nation to unforget and reconcile with our robust history of racism and violent erasure of a multitude of ethnic groups.

Modern Developments in Santa Ana

While the historical formative years of Santa Ana were marked by White flight into the suburbs in response to the growing Mexican American population, the reverse of this phenomena has begun to occur in Santa Ana today. Trends of movement and housing developments have revealed that the middle and upper-income classes that once dominated the suburbs are now returning to urban cities (Urzua 2008). These movements of gentrification are shifts to privileging private developers that can more lucratively invest in luxury condominiums, artists' lofts, and shopping centers. These lucrative developments subsequently increase the capital returns to the city in the form of land value and tax revenue (Urzua 2008). This had made it so gentrification seem like an attractive and practical city planning priority, however these developments come at great costs to residents and frequently displaces communities that have lived there for decades (Urzua 2008).

Santa Ana's recent development and cultural shifts have been perfectly congruent with these noted trends of rising gentrification. Beginning a project of urban renewal, a ten-block Artists Village emerged in Santa Ana and was heavily subsidized by federal community development block grants (Gonzalez & Sarmiento 2017). The Artists Village is home to apartments for university students and artists, art galleries, and an art non-profit (Gonzalez & Sarmiento 2017). Few of the businesses have been Latinx owned and while the art produced in the Artists Village often touches upon Latinx iconography and themes, it is often high-priced art or is not produced by original members of the community who grew up there (Gonzalez & Sarmiento 2017). This can be analyzed through Coco Fusco's idea of the racial fantasy – the Latinx cultural quality of the neighborhood is used as a marketable experience of diversity. It exoticifies the working-class Mexican roots of the city yet distances itself enough from it so that

outsiders feel safe visiting the city. It was not until expensive, commodified Latinx themed art emerged in this subsidized Artists Village that Santa Ana became known for being a cultural hub and attractive to new residents. The art being produced in Santa Ana prior to the Artists Village, such as the historic and iconic murals of Civic Center Dr., were not viewed as culturally valid forms of art that enriched the city. In fact, some murals were painted over by new homeowners and private real estate companies, then repainted by the community. These murals are so beloved by the community and seen as foundational to the Chicanx roots of the city. One community member who attempted to raise funds to preserve the murals and have the city mark them as an historic preservation site noted that “This mural is so significant for us Chicanos and Chicanas in this community, because it was one of the first murals that reminded us that this was our home” (Leopo 2021). This sentiment can be compared to the findings of Cruz Manjarrez’s field work in the Zapotec communities of Los Angeles. While immigrant communities are often displaced from their land and culture, they are not just absorbed by an unwelcoming geography, though they are often met with resistance and attempts at erasure, but instead they reconfigure their position in their new expanses to embody their home culture and values. In these experiences with migration and changing landscapes of cities, migrant communities reterritorialize their positions within an often white supremacist and xenophobic landscape. Santa Ana also hosts one of the largest community run Noche de Altares Día de Los Muertos event in California, signaling this deliberate attempt to honor ancestral and ancient traditions through art and cultural expression. It is clear that Santa Ana was and has been a site of rich cultural history and deep artistic expression long before the Artists Village was built and remarketed Santa Ana as a widely palatable artistic hub for students and transplants.



March 5, 2021. Julie Leopo, Voice of OC.



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Santa Ana's La Cuatro is a historic downtown plaza that is loved by the community and in the 90s and early 2000s was home to Latinx serving and owned business. Family members and friends who grew up in Santa Ana whom I have discussed this paper with recall memories of Spanish language movie theatres, Latinx record stores, small business quinceañera dress shops, and immigrant owned restaurants. Visiting La Cuatro today, I see an "innovation food hall" with kombucha bars, boba shops, and fusion restaurants. What was once a Spanish-language only movie theatre now plays Arthouse films and hosts Rocky Horror Picture Show reenactments. If an outsider who had no prior knowledge of the city's history came to visit La Cuatro today, they would have no idea that until just 10 year ago it was culturally dominated by Mexican American immigrants. Personally, growing up I constantly heard negative feedback about Santa Ana. People would say it looked dirty or poor or would complain that they felt like they were in Mexico while driving through historic 4th street. People would tell me that they did not feel safe visiting Santa Ana, and much preferred to seek entertainment in suburban white cities like Irvine. Now that Santa Ana has changed, La Cuatro is the "hip" and popular place to go on a Saturday night. Clubs that played Banda and rancheras have slowly given way to hip hop and EDM focused clubs. Now Santa Ana is a hub for entertainment and art when it was once a pariah of the Orange County community.

In surveying this deep and complex history of Santa Ana, the wide shifts and changes of this geography are deeply felt and seen even within my short lifetime. I do worry about Santa Ana's future and the identity it will have in the years to come. However, there is also a robust anti-gentrification, affordable housing, and anti-displacement community of activists and resistance, and this reassures me and my community that this city will long live as a deep declaration of the beauty and resilience of our culture.

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