

**Project Overview: Santa Bruta—Home of El Indio Muerto: The Colonial-Carceral City's  
Attempt to Eliminate the 'Mexican Problem'**

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This project examines the settler-colonial legacies and racialized policing practices that criminalize Mexican/Chicano individuals, particularly self- and/or state-identified gang members, in Santa Barbara, California. Known to locals as “Santa Bruta,” the city’s historical and contemporary dynamics reveal systemic racial and colonial violence that disproportionately impacts the Mexican/Chicano community, especially during annual cultural celebrations like “Old Spanish Days Fiesta.” The festival celebrates a romanticized version of Indigenous, Mexican, and Spanish heritage, while in practice, law enforcement targets and arrests Mexican/Chicano gang members in the weeks leading up to the event to appease white anxieties. These contradictory actions demonstrate how the legacies of colonialism persist in the criminalization and dehumanization of Mexican/Chicano individuals.

The research utilizes a decolonial and carceral studies framework to explore how the criminal legal system and local law enforcement forge racialized punitive mechanisms to control Mexican/Chicano gang members. The project also investigates the role of infrapolitical cultural practices such as tattooing, Mexican/Chicano gangsta rap, and lowriding among gang members, analyzing how these practices serve as sites of resistance against racialized governance and carceral domination.

**Research Accomplished**

Over the past fourteen years, the research has involved multiple qualitative methods, including participant observation, informal and formal interviews, oral life histories, and archival

analysis. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in the Eastside of Santa Barbara, where I was deeply immersed in the everyday lives of the Mexican/Chicano gang members and their families. Interviews with gang members and their families revealed the far-reaching impact of carceral institutions and policing on their social and material conditions.

Additionally, the research includes analysis of historical archives to compare the experiences of the Chumash people and the Mexican/Chicano/a community under settler-colonial rule. Visual sociology has played a significant role in this project, with tattooed bodies serving as archival sites, preserving stories of colonial domination and resistance. These cultural markers provide insight into the ways Mexican/Chicano gang members navigate their identities in a context shaped by racialized policing and social control.

Currently, the project also focuses on documenting the experiences of deported Mexican/Chicano gang members and their efforts to reconnect with family, friends, and the gang culture from their new lives in Tijuana, Mexico. This transnational dimension highlights the ongoing challenges faced by undocumented individuals navigating a dual existence between the U.S. and Mexico.

### **Student Researcher's Role**

The undergraduate research assistant (URA) has played an integral role in supporting the various stages of this project. The student has actively participated in fieldwork, including observing community events, attending cultural festivals, and engaging with Mexican/Chicano gang members in the Eastside of Santa Barbara. The URA has assisted with data collection, conducting semi-structured interviews, and compiling oral histories with community members and stakeholders.

In the archival research phase, the URA has gathered historical documents and legislative archives that provide context to the settler-colonial foundations of Santa Barbara. They have also contributed to the transcription and translation of interviews, ensuring the nuanced cultural and linguistic elements of the Mexican/Chicano experience are accurately captured. This has been especially important in analyzing how tattooing practices among gang members represent acts of defiance and cultural preservation.

The student has also contributed to the literature review, summarizing key academic sources and helping to develop an extensive bibliography that connects carceral studies with decolonial theory. In the analysis phase, they have been involved in coding qualitative data, identifying patterns in the interviews, and working with the researcher to synthesize findings into thematic categories.

Furthermore, the URA has supported the dissemination of findings, participating in the preparation of research reports and helping to create visuals for academic presentations and helping build a strong team of undergraduate students to further develop different dimensions of the book project. Their work has provided a unique opportunity to develop skills in qualitative research methods, data analysis, and academic writing, contributing meaningfully to both the academic and local community.

The URA's contributions have been essential to advancing this project and will continue to shape the final book, "Santa Bruta—Home of El Indio Muerto." This research stands as a testament to the resilience of the Mexican/Chicano community and their enduring resistance to racialized oppression in Santa Barbara.