Los Fiesteros Of Olvera Street: Constructing An Imagined Spanish Heritage For Los Angeles

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In September 2008, *Time Magazine* named Olvera Street, the recognized birthplace of Los Angeles, the seventh most popular tourist destination in Los Angeles.[1] Modern-day Olvera Street resembles a Spanish-style open-air marketplace where vendors and restaurants offer visitors a snapshot of a long forgotten Spanish California. Lined with sombreros, colorful clothes, piñatas, and souvenirs, Olvera Street attracts Angelenos and visitors who embody feelings of nostalgia for Spanish culture. Olvera Street also hosts various annual religious and community events, such as Dia de Los Muertos and Blessing of the Animals. Olvera Street grew from a quaint pueblo to a popular tourist attraction in the late 1920s and early 1930s. During the 1930s, Olvera Street became a place where people produced an idyllic, yet modern, public memory of the city. Through a series of concerts, festivals, and parades in Los Angeles and around Olvera Street, a historical preservation association called La Fiesta Association, also known as Los Fiesteros, created a modern image of the city and ultimately redefined its public memory to present the city's narrative of progress.

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[1] Joel Stein, "Los Angeles: 10 Things to do," *Time Magazine*, September 24, 2008, 8.

Many historians have examined the history and development of Olvera Street, analyzing how it became a conflicted landscape of cultural and political tensions. Some scholars focus on segregated and exploited Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. Among them are Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez who investigate how the Great Depression directly impacted the Mexican American community.[2] By analyzing the 1931 immigration raid at the Los Angeles Plaza, their work reveals how the Plaza and Olvera Street became a space of contestation between individuals of Mexican descent and city officials. Natalia Molina examines public health in Los Angeles from 1879 to 1939 and shows how Olvera Street and other immigrant communities became labeled unsanitary. As a result, Olvera Street became a site of the discriminatory practices of public health officials.[3] George Sanchez demonstrates how Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants adapted to life in the United States through places of cultural reaffirmation such as Olvera Street.[4] Thus, Olvera Street represented a site where the Mexican community was targeted and simultaneously celebrated.

In contrast, scholars such as Phoebe Kropp and William Estrada discuss Olvera Street in terms of tourism. Kropp and Estrada explain how Olvera Street became and continues to be a popular tourist destination that represents a romanticized history of early Spanish California history. They examine the physical landscape used to attract tourists looking for an authentic representation of Spanish California.

A third group of scholars has written about Olvera Street in regards to public memory. Dolores Hayden uses the concept

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[2] Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 75.

[3] Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 129.

[4] George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 180.

of public space to interpret and understand the past.[5] According to Hayden, preserving historical spaces creates public memory. Kropp also explores the development of public memory by examining how Olvera Street transformed into an economic and themed space that idealized and romanticized a Spanish past.[6] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also addresses how displays of public memory transmit meanings through festivals and other tourist attractions.[7]

These studies of Olvera Street as a site of immigration, tourism, and public memory ignore how the historic site and the activities of Los Fiesteros demonstrate a larger interrelated story of progress for the city of Los Angeles. On the surface, these factors may not seem to fit within a story of progress. This article argues that Olvera Street and the activities of Los Fiesteros, initially created to organize the 150th Anniversary Celebration of Los Angeles, tell a larger story as part of a discourse on progress. I explore how Los Fiesteros altered the city's public memory and used the image of Los Angeles to demonstrate its growth. Through the organization's activities, they visually represented a timeline that marked the city's foundation beginning with an early Spanish past. Los Fiesteros used anti-modern and modern ideals to establish Los Angeles' discourse on progress. They defined anti-modern as pre-industrial and used imagery through their activities to illustrate the nostalgia of quaint, simple, and romantic Spanish days. Los Fiesteros recreated the picturesque early Spanish landscape to establish an idealized and harmonious image of early Los Angeles that they used promote a discourse on progress. They defined modern as industrialized, set with government institutions, and marked by technological innovations. By tracing

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[5] Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban landscape as Public History*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 47.

[6] Phoebe S. Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 225.

[7] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 53.

the transformation from a pueblo to a modern city, Los Fiesteros showed how the city advanced into a modern urban center. Modernity represented the high-rise sky-scrappers that outlined the city's horizon as well as the transformations in transportation.

Documents and photographs from the Marion Parks Collection reveal Los Fiesteros' efforts to create a public memory of Los Angeles. Marion Parks served as secretary of Los Fiesteros and as a committee member for numerous other historical associations. These sources provide insight into Los Fiesteros' activities, the preparations of their pageants, events, and how they promoted Los Angeles to the public. The letters are especially important because they reveal the relationship between committee members and other Angelenos. The documents transmit ideas, beliefs, and the concerns of Los Fiesteros in constructing a new image of Olvera and Los Angeles. Collectively, these sources provide a glimpse into the set of values and ideas Los Fiesteros believed and permanently instilled in Los Angeles.

In addition to the documents published by Los Fiesteros, the Marion Parks collection also includes numerous articles from the *Los Angeles Times,* which reveal how the media received the work of the association. Newspaper coverage of the construction of Olvera Street, Los Angeles' 150th anniversary celebration, and other events demonstrate how reporters portrayed and championed the work of Los Fiesteros. The *Los Angeles Times* supported the efforts of historical society because Harry Chandler, who served as president and publisher of the newspaper, also served as a board member for Los Fiesteros. With Chandler's influential power, the newspaper covered the activities of Los Fiesteros extensively.

Public memory of Olvera Street embraced pre-industrial or anti-modernist notions of romanticism and charm, while simultaneously promoting LA's modern image. While it may appear that Los Fiesteros embraced the anti-modernist movement to portray an idyllic past rooted in the nostalgia of early Spanish California, they commodified the Mexican culture and developed the city's tourism. By organizing and planning pageants, parades, concerts, and speeches and publishing

literature, Los Fiesteros created an atmosphere of amusement and entertainment that neglected to showcase the complexities of Los Angeles's settlement. In the process, Los Fiesteros presented LA's story of progress that inherently glorified an idyllic past and excluded the Mexican American community to promote a modern future, which showcased the city's developments and tourism. While celebrating early Spanish California, Los Fiesteros found negative cultural stereotypes to be antithetical to their narrative on progress.

Prior to its restoration, Olvera Street suffered from the surrounding filth and desolation. Los Fiesteros portrayed Olvera Street as a "miserable, forgotten place, with roofs sagging, walls disintegrating, for lack of protection fronting upon a mean and filthy alley."[8] Angelenos depicted Olvera Street as a "crime hole of the worst description …bootleggers, white slave operators, dope peddlers all had headquarters and hiding places on [Olvera] street" which undermined its purported historical importance.[9] The troublesome image of this public space changed when Christine Sterling, the founder of Olvera Street, announced to "take over the entire little street on which the historic adobe stands and convert it into a beautiful, sanitary Mexican market."[10] A large Mexican community, heavily concentrated around the Los Angeles Plaza, presented a problem to Olvera Street's restoration. City health officials viewed the Mexican community as a threat to the sanitary and healthy image renovators wanted, rendering it as a contested space. They supported Olvera Street's preservation because they believed that the Mexican community, especially Mexican immigrants, carried diseases and contributed to the unsanitary conditions already present at the site. Promoting a sense of fear that germs and epidemics transferred by the Mexican community, city health officials supported the preservation of Olvera Street to

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[8] Marion Parks, *Doors to Yesterday: A Guide to Old Los Angeles*, La Fiesta Association, 1932.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Christine Sterling, *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles: Its History and Restoration* (Los Angeles: Mario Valadez, 1947), 12.

transform the image of Los Angeles into an ultramodern city.[11] The overall filthy and unsanitary conditions at Olvera Street provided support to transform and preserve the historic site. After the completion of Olvera Street's restoration in 1930, the historical site became a contested space. Olvera Street and the surrounding plaza became a central meeting location for people and served as a platform for social and political demonstrations for Los Angeles residents.

Olvera Street became a site of social and political tension during the early 1930s. The Great Depression, the implementation of the Repatriation Act, the 1931 immigration raid at Olvera Street, and the overall negative racialization of the Mexican-American community threatened the livelihood and created anxiety among Angelenos. The Great Depression displaced between fourteen and fifteen million individuals nationwide and in response to this crisis, the Communist Party and the Trade Union party organized a campaign known as Organize the Unemployed.[12] The organizers protested on March 6, 1930 to raise awareness of the growing financial crisis with one of the demonstrations taking place at the Olvera Street Plaza. Approximately ten thousand people gathered at the Olvera Street Plaza area, where they encountered police brutality.[13] In 1931, Mexican-American Angelenos became the targets of violence, as immigration officials entered Olvera Street to deport United States citizens of Mexican descent. The raid produced widespread fear and anxiety among the Mexican American community.[14] Immigration officers and local police authorities closed off the two entrances into Olvera Street and asked the crowd of approximately four hundred individuals to line up and provide legal documentation to prove his or her citizenship. Those who could not prove their citizenship risked forced deportation. The raid, part of a larger effort by the federal government to deport illegal Mexican immigrants, became an effort to deport individuals of Mexican descent, regardless of

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[11] Molina, 129.

[12] William D. Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 165.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Balderrama and Rodríguez, 57.

their citizenship.[15] Olvera Street, so far removed from the reality of the economic and political problems confronted by average citizens, represented the complex relationship between the romantic image Los Fiesteros created and the daily challenges faced by the citizens of Los Angeles.

Against the economic and political upheaval of the early 1930s, Los Fiesteros developed and promoted the restoration of Olvera Street. Los Fiesteros, was comprised of an elite group of approximately twenty-five individuals who worked to create a memory of Olvera Street. Initially, they organized Los Angeles' 150th Anniversary Celebration; however, after its success they continued to plan events and activities, remembering and celebrating early Spanish California. They advertised and promoted events through the radio, newspaper, magazines, and speeches.[16] They wrote letters asking for fee waivers and donations for costumes and props.[17] Additionally, they organized re-enactments of past events and hired impersonators to play historical figures.[18] Their interest in preserving and restoring Olvera Street stemmed from their desire to establish LA tourism. Los Fiesteros spearheaded one of the city's greatest events, Los Angeles' 150th anniversary celebration in 1931. Rallying for public support, they gave over 200 addresses using various media outlets, including the radio.[19]

Los Fiesteros defined romanticism as the "golden days of pueblos and ranchos."[20] Los Fiesteros created a nostalgic atmosphere where men on horseback and señoritas spent dreamy afternoons strolling in the pueblos listening to the sounds of a Spanish guitar. On the weekends, they hosted musical

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Marion Parks to Mrs. Hodges, January 1930, Marion Parks Papers 1909-1940.

[17] Marion Parks to Mrs. Otts, 1931.

[18] "Senora with La Fiesta Cake" Photograph, La Fiesta Association, 1931.

[19] Marion Parks, "La Fiesta de Los Angeles---Retrospect," *Out West Magazine*, 1931, 11.

[20] Marion Parks, The Southwest Museum *Masterkey*, La Fiesta Association, 1931.

entertainment by the Jose Arias orchestra.[21] The enchanting melodies of the Spanish guitar and dreamy lyrics created a sense of longing. Elaborate props, performers, "magnificent horses, the gaily costumed riders, the quaint carriages, and their charming occupants" worked to create an idealized Spanish image.[22] The pageant titles, carefully crafted, captured the nostalgia of "golden days."[23] One show called the "Departure of Transportation," traced the progress of transportation in Los Angeles and began with Spanish caballeros entering on horseback and dressed in Spanish costumes.[24] Los Fiesteros hired performers to impersonate the people of Spanish California, but in the process excluded Mexican actors from impersonating characters because they did not fit the racial image the association wanted to maintain.

At a time when the Mexican community was stigmatized for their unsanitary lifestyle and lazy work ethic, Los Fiesteros refused to cast Mexican people in the festivities.[25] According to Los Fiesteros, the Mexican period, 1821 to 1848, became marked by passivity and fruitlessness. Deemed as dirty, ill equipped to learn English, and lazy, Mexicans became stereotyped and marginalized during the early 1930s.[26] The image of the "lazy Mexican" sleeping under a cactus tree became part of an ethnic stereotype that forced the Mexican community to the margins of the image of modern Los Angeles. To capitalize on the "lazy Mexican," Los Fiesteros incorporated the stereotype to show how Los Angeles progressed from a "slumberous" and "dreamy" environment when "the drowsing pueblo and the sleeping hacienda only aroused to the bustle of an

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[21] Associated Press, "Los Fiesteros Plan Night Revel," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1932.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Parks, *Masterkey.*

[24] Marion Parks, Letter Request of Captain Shaler portrait, La Fiesta Association, 1931.

[25] Molina, 129.

[26] Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Ango-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 109; Estrada, 103; Sánchez, 699.

occasional fiesta or rodeo."[27] Los Fiesteros also portrayed an unproductive period when "instead of black smoke of the steamers, leaving its long trail over the waters, only the white sails of the hide droghers…broke the stretch of the sea."[28] It was not until the American period starting in 1848 that Los Angeles developed into a productive and modern metropolis. In the "naturally happy and hospitable temperament flowering…" of Los Angeles, "swift changes" took place that transformed the "slumberous" pueblo into a bustling American city.[29] Los Fiesteros described LA's Mexican period in negative and stereotypical characteristics to highlight the transformation of the pueblo into a charming modern city.

In response to the negative portrayal of the Mexican past, Los Fiesteros hired Anglo actors and dressed them in Spanish costumes to partake in the pageants, parades, and reenactments during the festival. Photographs document the role of impersonators and their importance in creating an image of Los Angeles's past based on early Spanish California. One of the most prominent photographs depicts a young woman, dressed in an elegant traditional Spanish dress, posed next to a three-tier cake. The cake features the Los Angeles city emblem and "La Fiesta, 150th Anniversary Celebration" written on it. The woman, playing the role of a young señorita contributed to the construction of the anniversary's spectacle and embodied Spanish romanticism.



Figure 1[30]

[27] Parks, *Doors to Yesterday*.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] "Photographs of the Los Angeles Celebration, La Fiesta 1781-1931," *Marion Parks Photographs*, Online Archive of California. www.oac.cdlib.org (accessed December 1, 2011).

Los Fiesteros wanted visitors to embrace the leisure and simplicity of a Spanish past through the "dons living in the independence and ease of grandees."[31] Los Fiesteros use these ideals to provide people with feelings of autonomy and leisure in order to counter the problems wrought by the Great Depression. Americans craved the sense of freedom exuded by the caballeros (Spanish horsemen) and beautiful señoritas strolling the pueblos. The Spanish image meant that the "doorways [opened] upon a golden yesterday of romance, leisure, and simplicity as refreshing as a morning of spring."[32] Emphasis on "leisure" and "simplicity" created an atmosphere that allowed Angelenos to cope with their daily lives. Nineteenth-century California represented a time when "prosperity ruled the land [and] fiestas graced the town," rather than the "hurried and harassed era of sophistication."[33] Los Fiesteros' efforts reflected a belief in what Charles Fletcher Lummis had called Hispanophilia, a love for all things Spanish.[34] Other Southwest historians, most notably, John Nieto-Philips, have claimed that Hispanophilia "was born of a desire to return to a simpler way of life…a yearning to experience either through text or through tourism an age of adventure that was far removed from the present-day ills of industrial society."[35]

Ultimately Los Fiesteros defined romanticism through images of leisure and simplicity; however, they worried about LA's movement into a modern period because industrialization, the interactions between immigrants, and racial tensions created anxiety. The political and economic demonstrations of the early 1930s, as well as the financial crisis, produced heightened levels of concern for Angelenos. Their anxiety resonated with the nation's growing apprehension over the use of railroad transportation during the early twentieth century. Fearful of accidental injury, nervous shock, and racial segregation,

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[31] Parks, *Masterkey*.
[32] Parks, *Doors to Yesterday*.
[33] Parks, *Masterkey*.
[34] Charles Fletcher Lummis, *The Spanish Pioneers* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1914), 113.
[35] John Nieto-Philips, *The Language of Blood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 147.

Americans learned to adapt and maneuver within new private and public spaces.[36] Similarly, Los Fiesteros expressed concern over the racial and social tensions in Los Angeles. The effects of the Great Depression and the Mexican Repatriation movement caused Los Fiesteros and other Angelenos much trepidation. With a desire to control and provide stability, Los Fiesteros found a way to reconcile their preservation process and simultaneously promote a modern future.

Los Fiesteros embraced anti-modern notions of romanticism and charm to preserve and provide an alternative to the encroaching "material progress." [37] Like many other historians and preservationists, Los Fiesteros "reject[ed] twentieth-century urbanism, mass production, and perceived cultural homogeneity."[38] Firmly against having the early history of Los Angeles "submerged in the tides of thoughtless modernism and superficial progress," Los Fiesteros pledged to preserve the "important historical buildings…that have been long forgotten, overlooked, and imperiled by neglect." [39] However, in the preservation process, Los Fiesteros simultaneously accepted notions of modernism by transforming Olvera Street into a modern historic site for Los Angeles tourists. They believed that the "high contribution [of] a knowledge of the past confer[ed] [an] enriched understanding of the present, and sounder preparation for the future"; therefore, they found a way to promote "the future," using pre-industrial notions that valued romanticism and simplicity.[40]

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[36] Barbara Young Welke, *Recasting American Liberty: Gender, Race, Law, and the Railroad Revolution, 1865-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 70.

[37] T.J. Lears, *No Place for Grace: Anti-modernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 5.

[38] Stuart D. Hobbs, "Exhibiting Antimodernism: History, Memory, and the Aestheticized Past in Mid-Twentieth Century America," *The Public Historian* 23, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 39-61.

[39] Marion Parks, *The Fractional Value of Romance*, La Fiesta Association, 1931.

[40] Ibid.

Los Fiesteros' speeches and announcements at local booster clubs reveal how they worked to simultaneously promote a romanticized view of the past and constructed a modern future for Los Angeles. Prior to speaking at a local booster club. Marion asked, "What type of talk on early California would you like to hear? General, romantic, specialized?"[41] Depending on the audience, Los Fiesteros tailored their speaking engagements to meet the expectations of their audience, who expected to hear stories of quaint Spanish pueblos and the leisure of the Spanish days. The historical association revived feelings of nostalgia and retold stories of California settlement that created a modern image of Los Angeles. By appealing to a sense of adventure and anti-modernist ideals, Los Fiesteros' efforts supported Los Angeles' tourism and promoted the city's modern image. Los Fiesteros also continued to promote a romanticized past and showcased Los Angeles' new modern image through published tour guides.

Los Fiesteros published tour guides, most notably, *The Doors to Yesterday: A Guide to Old Los Angeles*, which promoted a romanticized, yet modern image of Los Angeles. *The Doors to Yesterday* showcased Los Angeles's progress. The published pamphlet served as a self-guided tour for Los Angeles and through its descriptions and images, told a story of progress. The guide's narrative begins with a period of settlement when "the primitive inhabitants of Los Angeles welcomed the first white men with friendliness, gifts of fruits and seeds, [and] danced strange dances for them." [42] The peaceful imagery highlighted the smooth encounters with Spaniards within a "benign climate" and in "a smiling land."[43] Los Fiesteros created a nostalgic and overly exaggerated representation of LA's early days. Los Fiesteros presented the pueblo de Los Angeles as a "metropolis from the seed [the Yang-na Indians] planted."[44] Los Fiesteros romanticized the experiences of the first inhabitants and glorified the primitive days of the pueblo. To solidify and

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[41] Marion Parks to Mrs. Hodges, January 1930, Marion Parks Papers 1909-1940.
[42] Parks, *Doors to Yesterday*.
[43] Parks, *Masterkey*.
[44] Ibid.

promote the city's progress into a modern period, Los Fiesteros concluded the tour guide with descriptions of modern institutions.

Los Fiesteros labeled modern institutions historical landmarks to further enhance LA's image as a romantic yet, modern city. Los Fiesteros highlighted Los Angeles City Hall and explained that its erection demonstrated a step towards modernity. They explained that the structure "lifted Los Angeles out of the village class."[45] Prior to the development of civic institutions, Los Fiesteros considered Los Angeles a "village class" and believed that the development of such institutions inherently gave Los Angeles a push towards further developing a modern city. Other civic buildings, such as the county courthouse, the first public school, and the first federal building also appear in the conclusion of *Doors to Yesterday*. Described by Los Fiesteros as a "historic seaport of Los Angeles," the San Pedro Harbor graced the last entry in *Doors to Yesterday*. [46] The port, discovered by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, who "dropped anchor [there] 395 years ago," served and continues to serve as a gateway to transport and deliver goods to other countries. Los Fiesteros reminisced how in the pueblo's early days "transportation to the pueblo provided first by riding horses and ox-carts" gave way to ships that transported goods across the seas.[47]

Los Fiesteros' activities created an idyllic yet modern public memory of Los Angeles, which represented the city's story of progress. Aside from solely creating a modern image, Los Fiesteros, constructed a permanent memory of LA's development in the early 1930s. Memory, represented "with the help of landmarks that we always carry within ourselves," helps support certain beliefs and meanings. [48] Anti-modernist and modernist ideals influenced and contributed to Los Angeles's public memory. Embracing a romantic past, and looking towards a modern future, Los Fiesteros not only produced an idyllic

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 175.

image of Los Angeles, but an everlasting memory of its development. Historical landmarks and recollection of events evoke a certain set of beliefs in the present while trying to reflect on the past.[49] Landmarks such as Olvera Street and the remembrance of the 150th anniversary celebration continue to produce feelings of nostalgia because memory exists through environments. The themed atmosphere of Olvera Street and the spectacle of the 150th anniversary celebration conveyed and still continue to produce powerful socio-political messages that exclude the Mexican community to promote a romantic and idealized early Spanish California past.[50] Los Fiesteros preserved the Spanish culture and simultaneously neglected to represent the Mexican community positively. Excluded from the celebrations, festivals, and pageants, the Mexican community became only welcomed under controlled circumstances. Their image, carefully crafted and designed to fit within Los Fiesteros' romantic and modern framework learned how to adapt within private and public spaces in the city. The memory of Los Fiesteros and their work with Olvera Street's preservation project and the organization of the 150th anniversary celebration have contributed to the legacy of LA's development during the 1930s. What Los Fiesteros claimed "gave Angelenos a new vision of their city," really was a Californian past based on modern and elite terms.[51]

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[49] Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 47.

[50] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 53.

[51] Marion Parks, "La Fiesta de Los Angeles---Retrospect," *Out West Magazine*, 1931, 11.