Reconsidering Peralta

Luis María Peralta (1759 in Sonora, New Spain – August 26, 1851) received one of the largest of the Spanish land grants, named Rancho San Antonio. It was about 45,000 acres, a plot that encompassed most of the East Bay. The name Peralta is widely known in our communities, likely because of its association with our community college district. Historically, the name represents the Spanish crown's gift of land to another Spaniard.

Of course, what we know today is what the native peoples of this region have known (and tried to tell everyone) all along: this land was never Spain's to give. The land— what we call the East Bay— according to people who are *actually* native to the region, was originally home to roughly 50 native communities, or tribes, and together they form what is commonly referred to as Ohlone. After the arrival of the Spanish into this region in the late 1700s, it was the Peralta family who "received" this land, as one of the largest land grants given by the Spanish crown in New Spain. Until Mexican independence in 1821 (1822 in Alta California), Luis Maria Peralta essentially ruled this land. In fact, it was he and his fellow settlers who founded the Presidio, Mission Santa Clara, and el pueblo del San Jose. Thus, in a sense, the Peralta family was largely responsible for three aspects of the violent colonialism that plagued native communities in the late 18th and early 19th centuries: religion, settler colonialism, and the omnipresence of the military. Indeed, some of the stories told in our more dated history books describe Peralta's violence against native bodies as triumphant: "he led the full garrison from the fort at San Francisco into the San Juaquim Valley in pursuit of the Indians."[1]

As a historian, associating a community college district dedicated to equity, diversity, and justice with the name Peralta is beyond problematic, bordering on offensive. Much like the falling monuments to colonialism, imperialism, and the confederacy, the name Peralta must not be associated with our administration, faculty, staff, or students.

The American Historical Association notes that rather than being history, the monuments we see in our town plazas, parks, or outside of city buildings are not history so much as they are decisions by a community to showcase its values in a specific moment in time. Put another way, statues are not simply art, but rather a statement made, often by a small group of community members, about who is a part of a community/city/town/village, and who is not. It is no surprise then, that the majority of monuments to confederate soldiers throughout the south were created and erected in moments when there were significant gains in civil rights for people of color in the mid-twentieth century— a racist backlash to be sure. Yet, years later, as we are relieved to see the monuments memorializing confederate soldiers, colonizers, and progenitors of genocide fall, it is also important to remember that monuments celebrating racism, colonization, and genocide are not just physical— they are also in the names we give to our institutions.

On January 20, 1964, the Board of Trustees for the Northern Alameda County Community College District renamed themselves "Peralta Community College District," honoring Luis Maria Peralta. In the words of a former history professor at Merritt College, it "is historically

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[1] Phyllis Filiberti Butler, *The Valley of Santa Clara: Historical Buildings, 1792-1920, Second Edition.* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1975; p. 133.

significant, easy to spell and to pronounce…and it encompasses in the original grant the sites of the present communities with make up the new college district."[2] Indeed, like I do with a lot of mainstream history written in this period, I look at these comments and cringe. Perhaps Peralta is easy to spell and pronounce, but geographic convenience is hardly a legitimate reason to name a district, especially naming it after a leader of a colonizing force that played a part in the decimation of the native population in what we now call California. Historians have made worse mistakes, but as an instructor in this community college district, I find this one harder to swallow.

The essence of history is argument and critique; our field changes as our practitioners become more diverse, enlightened, and thoughtful about their interpretations of evidence. But because of the ways in which historical interpretations change, it is all the more important to be considerate, careful, and thoughtful to the names we give our institutions— especially those with the mission of educating and nurturing students. Therefore, as a professor of history at College of Alameda, and after speaking with other historians, ethnic studies faculty, and faculty who do work on memory/memorialization, I ask that the trustees, chancellor, and faculty immediately form a committee to speak with local Native American leaders and other community groups to consider how we might permanently change our community college district's name from Peralta Community College District to something that is inclusive and truly encapsulates the history of the region, while also honoring those who have earned it.

Thank you for your time,

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[2] "Junior College is Named 'Peralta'," *Oakland Tribune,* Jan 21, 1964, E5.