2023 Southwestern Anthropological Association (SWAA) Conference

“The Global City”
April 7-8, 2023
Long Beach Hilton

Saturday banquet speaker
Dr. James Diego Vigil (UC Irvine)

James Diego Vigil is an urban anthropologist whose publications include A Rainbow of Gangs and Chicano High Schoolers in a Changing Los Angeles. He received the American Anthropological Association’s Solon T. Kimball Award for Public and Applied Anthropology in 2022.

Abstract deadline: 10 March 2023. Additional conference and registration details are available on SWAA’s Facebook page and the revised SWAA website.

We look forward to seeing you in April
2023 SWAA Conference

We look forward to seeing you at the 92nd annual conference of the Southwestern Anthropological Association at the Hilton Long Beach on April 7-8, 2023.

Register for the Conference:
To attend the conference, or to submit an abstract [paper, poster, film] use this link or see the SWAA website at http://swaa-anthro.org. Abstracts are due by March 10, 2023.

Book Your Room:
Given the high rate of inflation that has affected the hospitality industry we are very pleased to have been able to negotiate a room rate of $179/night for either a King-size bed or 2 Queen-size beds, plus taxes. Please make your reservations as soon as possible.

Click here to book your room at the SWAA rate: Southwestern Anthropological Association

Parking at the Hotel:
We were also able to negotiate the overnight parking rate to $18 per day [down from their regular rate of $38/day], and for local attendees who don’t require a hotel room a daily parking rate of only $10/day [down from the regular rate of $17/day].

Reception:
As always, all full conference registrants will be able to attend our Friday, April 7th 6-8pm cocktail reception with a cash bar plus an assortment of appetizers courtesy of SWAA.

Banquet:
Our Saturday, April 8th, 6:30-10pm banquet with invited speaker will be buffet style, with vegetarian and vegan plated options [menu forthcoming]. SWAA provides white and red wine for the banquet. Invited speaker is Dr. James Diego Vigil.
We are honored to have Dr. James Diego Vigil as our invited banquet speaker for this year’s conference. A selection of his works are pictured below.
Anthropologists have been among those who cast a critical, scholarly eye on the tourism industry, and on museums as trophy rooms of imperial looting. Seen from the top down, such critical perspectives seem warranted. The potentially destructive environmental, cultural, and economic impact of mass tourism in the form of giant cruise ships, or large crowds trampling through sensitive sites that have profound importance to countries and their populations is becoming increasingly evident. But what perspectives should we adopt to understand the occasional trips taken by ordinary folk on an individual level?

Individual travel is much more the norm these days than it was fifty years ago. How do we make sense of the now-mundane leisure (and work) experiences that people all over the world are having and then posting on social media? I have Tibetan-speaking friends from the Himalayas who post on Facebook about their winter travels in the plains of India, as well as Somali and Indian friends who seek potential mates on Facebook from a global diasporic pool, and Hawaiian-born friends of varying ethnicities who post their African safari pictures on Instagram. Some “trips” are embedded in the mediasphere itself in a kind of parallel geography. A charming example are Maasai brother-and-sister TikTok performers, Kili and Neema Paul from rural Tanzania, who famously lip sync and dance to popular Bollywood tunes [at right].

The element of travel “show-and-tell” in social media posts is an echo of practices past, when the primary social medium for ordinary travelers was postcards. The Cultural and Natural History Collection at the University of La Verne, which I have written about previously in this column, recently mounted a large wall display of vintage postcards at one entrance to the Hoover Building (which houses the anthropology program). Some of these postcards are over a century old [see right]. Curator Anne Collier recalled that before photography (and especially color photography) became as ubiquitous as it is today, most people did not carry personal cameras (good ones being far too expensive and cumbersome). Pre-digital film photo processing was too costly and time-consuming for rapid sharing of the sights travelers were enjoying. Hence, an entire industry arose out of stock photographs and graphic art mass printed on small, postable cards, to be purchased and sent to the traveler’s chosen recipients through the mail (what we now call “snail mail.”) The point of the image was not originality, but rather the depiction of special (or even iconic) attractions of “exotic” locales that gave some pleasure to both the sender and the recipient. Postcards in the past did not offer the option of posting a “selfie,” underlining the power differential between the photographer and the person/s being photographed in that medium. Cartoonish graphics magnified that power differential. Examples of this are quite evident in the La Verne exhibit, and intentionally so. (See illustrations from the exhibit below.) Indeed, some of the postcards in the display could be considered patronizing, appropriating, exoticizing, and even mildly offensive, sexist or racist today by many people. A quick visit to any local stores carrying postcards in your neighborhood will demonstrate that questionable imagery and representations are still available today. To many people, that potential edginess is part of the draw of postcards and online posts. Anyone with a passing familiarity with the internet knows the same is true in that part of the mediascape as well. Contemporary meme production and online posts are another extension of that. In fact, the past and present uses of imagery are clearly connected.
Throughout my years of research in East Africa, I acquired numerous postcards with images of relevance to my research interests, few of which I ever mailed because my purpose was more to document the kinds of imagery of African cultures that were popular in that market. Being an anthropologist, I mainly collected postcards depicting people. Many of those were labeled not with people’s names, but with captions describing them generically as representing “typical” or “traditional” members of various cultural communities. Perhaps not surprisingly, I encountered a few local people who were mildly wary of my taking their pictures until they ascertained whether I would be marketing them in the form of postcards or illustrations in books. In Kenyan communities frequently visited by tourists, some would-be models charged a fee for agreeing to be photographed. Reactions to such postcards from people who live in the communities depicted can vary. Postcards of people and sights from neighboring Somalia, which experienced much less tourism than Kenya and suffered prolonged, destructive civil conflict, have in recent years become popular among Somali people throughout their global diaspora. The older postcards are now posted online as evidence that their homeland once enjoyed a proud period of prosperity and peace after colonialism. Many of these same vintage postcards that I possess are prominently exhibited on websites maintained by and for Somalis. (See, for example, www.somalipostcards.blogspot.com, or this Pinterest page: https://www.pinterest.com/thisworldismajestic/somalia/)

Our memories, sense of history, and hopes for the future can be influenced by imagery contained on postcards (vintage and current) and by posts we view and share on electronic media. Contemporary “influencers” online quite consciously hope that images and words they post on social media will have a “viral” impact on their circle of friends and beyond. Digital imagery has expanded the possibilities manifold. As we gaze at the postcard display at La Verne, we are challenged to consider the difference between the vintage “then” and the digital now. How have the images in the postcards (or ones like them) influenced how we see the world? How do posts on social media today build on what came before?

The purpose of this current exhibit at La Verne is to remind us that postcards were the “original posts” before digital photography and electronic social media put “posting” into the hands of ordinary individuals all over the world. As you can see from the signage in the center of the exhibit, it is hoped that the display will evoke thought and discussion about a variety of topics. In the fall semester, when the exhibit opened, I assigned the questions raised in the display signage to students in my class on Language and Culture as part of their class participation grade. Their responses are being shared with the curator and director.

Exhibit Signage explains the purpose of the display and poses questions for viewers to answer, providing a QR code and social media cues to encourage further engagement.
Some examples of postcards in the exhibit (slightly enlarged replicas of the originals) are included below. Perhaps you might choose different postcards to share or comment on. Please feel free to stop by Hoover Building on the University of La Verne campus (doors open between 8 am and 10 pm) and see the display for yourself. (Short-term parking is free on the streets that line the campus grounds.) You may email me (hilarie.kelly@gmail.com) or the Director of the Cultural and Natural History Collections, Dr. Felicia Beardsley at fbeardsley@laverne.edu with your feedback.

I photographed some of the postcards that really caught my eye in the display because of their use of imagery and strong themes. I sorted those into categories. Themes of travel, the unusual and the “exotic other” were prominently on view. The items in the La Verne postcard collection derive from a variety of sources and were acquired for a variety of purposes.

The earliest postcard on display that I could easily date is this one, from the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, for which anthropology’s Franz Boas and museum professionals provided leadership. This image, like some others in the collection, is colorized and retouched to the point that it looks like a painting, a process that anticipated contemporary photo editing and manipulation. (For more on the event, see https://peabody.harvard.edu/video-all-world-here-anthropology-display-1893-chicago-world’s-fair and the blog essay https://empiretimber.wordpress.com/2017/12/28/research-trajectory-4-the-chicago-world-fair-franz-boas-and-the-dokis-first-nation/)

Many of the “exotic” locales depicted in the postcard exhibit are nearby attractions right here in Southern California, highlighting the multiculturalism and tourism that has long characterized the development of the greater Los Angeles area.
Other early postcards included a few with cartoons that were critical of the drive for women’s suffrage, ratified in the United States in 1920 in the form of the 19th Amendment. The influence of gender conventions on postcard production and distribution are a factor to consider.

Women’s bodies that represent idealized types or their antithesis also appear as subjects in postcards, both in photographic and cartoon format, a convention that continues to this day.
Some of the cartoon postcards reference American class stereotypes harkening back to the rural-urban and class divide that advanced across the USA in the late 19th and early 20th century, predating J.D. Vance’s popular but critically flawed 2016 book, *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance 2016) and its rebuttal (Harkins and McCarroll 2019.)
Four colorized or painted postcards depicting African American rural life in America seemed rather dated, although no information that might have been on the back was visible in the display. According to the US Census, a large percentage of the African American/Black population still does live in the South, but how those lives might have been and might still be photographically depicted is certainly not limited to images like these, which do seem very stereotypical. [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb11-cn185.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb11-cn185.html)

The work of famous African American photographers Gordon Parks and Ernest Withers comes to mind as probably being more ethnographically reliable, recent, and representative, but have their photographs been made into postcards? One postcard in the La Verne display reminded me of a scene in the comedy film “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” (2000), a film which was intentionally referencing, in satirical form, an early 20th century period of acute racial and class injustice. In the film, however, it is the white Southern residents who are being baptized in the river, and whites also live under the heavy and thuggish control of police and local elites. The postcards in the La Verne display reminded me that iconic images from the past can be used in a variety of ways, all of which deserve context to determine their meaning. Images on postcards are generally not contextualized much, except (perhaps) by the sender and receiver. Imagery posted on social media is often similarly decontextualized. How are those images then stored in our memories, and how do they affect our frame of reference later?
Because I teach a class on Peoples and Cultures of Mexico, I was especially attentive to photos I might be able to use in teaching. One shows the Mexican national flag and explains the eagle eating a snake in the center as an Aztec "good omen." (In class, we discuss the symbolism and history much more deeply.) Two postcards date from around 1914, during the Mexican Revolution. One, titled “Zapata’s Rebels destroying R.R. bridge” exclaims that Zapata “threatens to hang Huerta and his Cabinet when he captures Mexico City” and is a reference to Zapata’s revolutionary push for substantial land reform and the opposition to that program by Mexican elites. Is it celebrating or deploring Zapata, who is still regarded by many in Mexico as a revolutionary icon and hero? A postcard titled “Our Boys on the March in Mexico” represents the USA swaggering over their armed invasion of Mexico, approved by Pres. Woodrow Wilson, as part of the “Mexican Border Wars” that took place during the revolution, when US troops sparred against Pancho Villa and others in this tumultuous historical moment. The militarization of the USA/Mexico border has a long history.

A series of three sepia cartoon postcards advertising a 1950s-era hotel in Mexico slyly trade in ethnic/national stereotypes, poking more fun at American tourists than at rural Mexican peasantry who occupy much of the imagination of urban-dwellers on both sides of the border. I enjoyed the element of self-awareness; it reminds me of the work of cartoonist Gary Larson. One final cartoon postcard that belongs in this category is a vividly colored scenario of shocked, besuited white man approaching a Navajo dwelling from his parked car and overhearing the words, “Ugh – Here comes pale face – we ambush um and scalpum!” but not realizing that the words are coming from a radio inside the hogan, to which the two Navajo inside are listening with some delight. This could be a mildly offensive reference to much-criticized stereotypes, but the cartoon is reminiscent of Gary Larson’s famous one depicting rural “natives” in grass skirts rushing to hide their televisions and other appliances from approaching anthropologists. How many of us have posted that very cartoon outside of our office doors or on our syllabi and LMS pages? How do we explain the layers of meaning?
Two Final Notes

In a future column, I will describe items on display at the renovated Mission De Oro Hotel in Santa Nella, California, as well as the unusual history of the hotel itself. Of particular interest to many anthropologists might be a small collection of California Indian basketry, a fascinating and tightly-packed wine museum, and a surprising link to Tepoztlán and the Mexican Revolution. The story raises some interesting issues regarding how art, architecture, and object displays play a role in how we remember the past…or sometimes selectively forget it.

Meanwhile, if you are in Southern California any time soon, then please consider visiting the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach, California, where two worthwhile exhibits will be ending in March 2023, before our SWAA Conference on Easter weekend, April 7-8, 2023.

References Cited


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is published quarterly in Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter by the Southwestern Anthropological Association.

We welcome your submissions!
Submissions should be sent to: beerickson@fullerton.edu or to Barbra Erickson at CSU Fullerton, 800 N. State College Blvd.
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Authors, please include a brief statement describing your interests and affiliation.

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