**(Re)Presenting Paradise: The Hawaiian Imaginary in Las Vegas**

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Unbeknownst to most visitors, Las Vegas is home to a unique niche tourism: it is overwhelmingly the vacation destination of choice for residents of the state of Hawai’i, even affectionately termed the “Ninth Island.”  It is estimated that 1 in 10 residents of Hawai’i visit Las Vegas at least once per year. While travel magazines and news outlets, such as the *Los Angeles* *Times,* have chalked up this obsession to the “well-known affinity of Asians for gambling,” such racially deterministic explanations fail to take into account that these Hawaiian tourists span the spectrum of diversity in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic class, and age. They also fail to explain why 80% of Hawaiian visitors to Las Vegas stay at one particular venue, The California Hotel (nicknamed “The Cal”), an unassuming facility several miles from the Strip, with Gold Rush themed murals on its exterior.  Most Hawaiian visitors to Las Vegas frequent neither the infamous buffets, nor the ubiquitous shows available in the city.  Instead they stay at The Cal, eat the same food they eat at home (Hawaiian plate lunch and other local delicacies), meet and mingle with other Hawaiians, and gamble (preferentially playing craps and slot machines).  In 2012, more than 40 high school classes from the island of O’ahu held their reunions at The Cal rather than on the island itself.  We believe that the answers to why Las Vegas looms so large in the Hawaiian cultural consciousness lie in neither racially deterministic, nor primarily economic, explanations but rather in the imaginary of Hawai’i embodied at The Cal.  Over the past 40 years, the interior of The Cal has transformed into a Disney-esque, sanitized reinterpretation of contemporary Hawai’i that has an intense gravitational pull for its people, comparable to an addiction.  Whereas in Hawai’i, an idealized native past with coconut bras, ukuleles, and seductive, smiling native hosts, is presented for tourists’ consumption, the built environment of The Cal embodies a different Hawai’i, equally a fantasy, but in this case a fantasy of the multi-cultural present, unburdened by the inconvenient truths of either the real past (e.g., imperialism, genocide, plantation servitude) or the real present (e.g., ethnic tension, gross economic inequalities, sovereignty struggles).  Using both the semiotics of its built environment and the voices of its patrons, we explore the tensions in and around the “tourist bubble” created for/by Hawaiians at The Cal, how the discourse of the Vegas imaginary affects their lives at home, and the implications of these narratives for the politics of Hawaiian identities.

Cynthia L. Van Gilder: Cynthia earned her MA and PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, where she researched the sociopolitics of Polynesian archaeology, ethnic identity, and narratives of cultural heritage.  Since joining the Anthropology faculty at St. Mary’s College of California, Cynthia has published on gender and household archaeology in Hawai’i, the use of practice theory in archaeology, and mentorship/learning in academia.  Our current “Hawai’i Vegas” project builds on her long-standing interests in how narratives of the past (real or imagined, hegemonic or countering) are used to construct identity in the present, particularly in ethnically diverse Hawai’i.

Dana R. Herrera: Before joining the Anthropology faculty at St. Mary’s College of California, Dana earned her MA and PhD from the University of California, Davis, where she conducted ethnographic research on the intersections of race, gender, and religion with political affiliation in the Philippines.  Since, her research has included identity construction in online gaming communities, first generation to college students, and the Filipino diaspora in Central Europe.  Our current “Hawai’i Vegas” project builds on her long-standing interests in the economics of tourism and globalized patterns of ethnic migration/movement, particularly among ethnically diverse Asian communities.