Public interest anthropology, political market squares, and re-scripting dominance: from swallows to 'race' in San Juan Capistrano, CA

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Online publication date: 15 June 2011

To cite this Article Adams, Kathleen M.(2011) 'Public interest anthropology, political market squares, and re-scripting dominance: from swallows to 'race' in San Juan Capistrano, CA', Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events, 3: 2, 147 — 169

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/19407963.2011.555457
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2011.555457

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Public interest anthropology, political market squares, and re-scripting dominance: from swallows to ‘race’ in San Juan Capistrano, CA

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(Received November 2009; final version received March 2010)

This article explores a disturbing irony of certain touristic festivals and heritage sites: although these festivals and sites tend to draw heavily on the language of shared heritage and community, the dominant narratives and cultural symbols embodied in these venues sometimes celebrate more traditional and problematic ‘racial,’ ethnic, and gender hierarchies. Via a case study of the annual swallows festival held in the California Mission town of San Juan Capistrano, this article offers an illustration of the value of embracing a public interest anthropology (PIA) framework for identifying and addressing the hidden racisms underlying some heritage tourism sites. Moreover, the article suggests that the political market square metaphor for conceptualizing tourism festival management could be productively reframed and paired with a PIA approach to facilitate more inclusive, color-blind approaches to developing tourism policy.

Keywords: public interest anthropology; political market squares; inclusion; tourist sites; festivals

Resumen

Este artículo explora una inquietante ironía de ciertos festivales turísticos y lugares históricos: aunque esos festivales y lugares tienden a recurrir fundamentalmente al idioma de la herencia compartida, las narrativas dominantes y los símbolos culturales incorporados en estos puntos de reunión algunas veces celebran más jerarquías tradicionales, étnicas, de género y racialmente problemáticas. A través de un caso de estudio del Festival anual Swallows que tiene lugar en la Misión California de la ciudad San Juan Capistrano, este artículo ofrece una ilustración del valor de adherirse a un marco antropológico de interés público para identificar y dirigir el racismo escondido bajo algunos lugares históricos-turísticos. Además, el artículo sugiere que la metáfora del mercado político para conceptualizar la gestión del turismo de festivales podría ser eficazmente reconstruido y unido con la aproximación de la Antropología de Interés Público para facilitar el desarrollo de una política turística más completa y no sesgada racialmente.

Palabras claves: Antropología de interés público; Mercados políticos; lugares turísticos, festivales

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Résumé

Cet article explore l’ironie dérangeante de certains festivals touristiques et sites historiques : bien que ces festivals et ces sites aient tendance à exploiter abondamment l’idée du patrimoine et de la communauté partagés, les narrations dominantes et les symboles culturels ancrés dans ces lieux célèbrent parfois des hiérarchies «raciales», ethniques et de «genre» plus traditionnelles et problématiques. Grâce à une étude de cas du Festival annuel de Swallows, qui se tient dans la ville californienne de San Juan Capistrano, cet article offre une illustration de l’intérêt d’englober un cadre de l’anthropologie de l’intérêt public afin d’identifier et de s’occuper des racismes cachés sous des sites de tourisme historique. En outre, cet article suggère que la métaphore de la place du marché politique utilisée pour conceptualiser la gestion des festivals touristiques pourrait être utilement recadrée et associée à une approche de l’Anthropologie de l’Intérêt Public, afin de faciliter des approches plus inclusives pour développer les politiques de tourisme.

Mots-clés: anthropologie de l’intérêt public; place du marché politique; sites touristiques; festivals

Introduction

Over the past few decades heritage sites have been mushrooming at seemingly everaccelerating rates.1 As Lowenthal observed in 1998, ‘All at once heritage is everywhere—in the news, in the movies, in the marketplace … it is the chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure of tourism. One can barely move without bumping into a heritage site’ (p. xiii). With the growth in popularity of heritage-sites as leisure destinations, we have witnessed an array of activities, performances, celebrations, conflicts, and debates emerge in such settings (cf. Ashworth & van der Aa, 2002; Kreamer, 2006; Magnoni & Cable, 2008; Porter & Salazar, 2005; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Winter, 2007). Anthropological and sociological analyses of heritage tourism destinations have yielded a variety of insights which have implications for practitioners and policy-makers concerned with the ways in which such sites might function more effectively for the promotion of cultural diversity, social justice and inter-group respect. In keeping with this special journal issue’s push to challenge value-neutral, color-blind approaches to tourism and tourism policy, this article embraces a public
interest anthropology (PIA) approach. More specifically, in this article I suggest ways in which the PIA approach might be productively paired with the recent political market square (PMSq) metaphor for conceptualizing tourism festival management (cf. Larson, 2000, 2002, 2009) in order to facilitate more inclusive, color-blind approaches to developing tourism policy. To illustrate both the challenges and the potential of such a pairing, this article offers a case-study analysis of hegemonic ethnic/’racial’ discourses (and certain local stakeholders’ attempts to challenge these discourses) in the heritage tourism destination of San Juan Capistrano, a small, yet historically significant southern California city best known for its Spanish mission and its annual festival of the swallows.

This article is organized as follows: It begins by reviewing what PIA entails as well as of some of the insights culled from anthropological and sociological studies of inter-ethnic relations and power dynamics in touristic settings. Next, it outlines the concept of the PMSq, as advanced by Larson (2000, 2009) and Larson and Wilkström (2001), suggesting ways in which this model might be productively paired with a PIA approach to facilitate identifying and addressing the hidden racisms underlying some heritage tourism sites. Drawing on these two frameworks, the article turns to examine the case study of San Juan Capistrano. In keeping with PIA, this section highlights some of the historical processes whereby the California Spanish mission history of racial oppression, cooptation, and coercion of native labor was romanticized and ultimately incorporated into the prevailing touristic imagery of San Juan Capistrano today. This section highlights also several ethnographic vignettes (Dumont, 1992) that serve to illustrate (1) how touristic performances and displays constitute a particularly potent arena for both replicating and challenging dominant racial, ethnic, gendered, and class hierarchies and (2) how an adapted version of the PMSq model presents new possibilities for privileging the voices of marginalized communities in tourism-related projects. Via these vignettes, the potential insights to be gained from a fusion of the PIA and PMSq frameworks will be illustrated. Finally, the article closes with reflections on what this preliminary study of San Juan Capistrano offers for policy-makers interested in addressing underlying hegemonic discourses in local tourist sites.

PIA places an emphasis on racial harmony, social justice, human rights, equality, and well-being (cf. Basch, Saunders, Sharff, & Peacock, 1999; Sanday, 1976, 2003). Analytically, PIA stresses examining reasons for intergroup conflict, spotlighting disparities in power, including unequal access to resources, and making constructive interventions to address these imbalances. As some scholars have stressed, an important dimension of PIA is participatory action research, where one acts as both researcher and public advocate, ‘aggressively investigating the reasons for conflict, presenting findings to all parties, and participating—when invited—in consensus building’ (cf. Hemment, 2007; Porter & Salazar, 2005, p. 363). In other words, PIA goes beyond simply vocalizing minority concerns and mapping out competing regimes of power in our research sites – it advocates our active engagement in the promotion of equality. It should be noted that although only recently articulated as a model for anthropological research and action, PIA’s roots go back to the early days of American anthropology, as exemplified by Franz Boas’ celebrated use of his research to combat racism (1940; Also see Stocking, 1996). As currently articulated, PIA entails the marriage of problem-solving and conflict resolution with theory development (Adams, 2005; Sanday, 2003).

It should be noted that PIA (and participatory research, in general) is not without limitations or paradoxes. As some have observed, in terms of actual practice, there can be a disconnect between the now-trendy discourse of local stakeholder
‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ and what ultimately transpires when decisions are made (cf. Cook & Kothari, 2001; Hemment, 2007; Jordan, 2003). In addition, as Hemment (2007) notes, some may find the participatory methods advocated by PIA ‘riskier than conventional ones’ as they ‘bring us into close, often intimate proximity with research participants’ (p. 304). It may also be more challenging to move from an analytical appreciation of embedded inequities to arrive at constructive interventions in settings where the diverse stakeholders do not share any over-arching community-wide sensibilities.

The above limitations notwithstanding, given that tourism destinations have sometimes become sites of conflict over stakeholders’ differential access to tourism resources (including the ability to have a voice in the community’s touristic representations), a PIA approach can be a useful tool for spotlighting and addressing these concerns. In applying a PIA approach to touristic sites, two primary steps are essential: (1) attentiveness to the multiple and sometimes conflicted meanings of these sites and (2) mapping out the regimes of power connected to tourist destinations and performances. In keeping with a PIA approach, this article examines the conflicted meanings of the destination and its key icons to different groups residing within the community.

I turn now to review the PMSq model recently advanced in event management circles. As laid out by Larson (2000, 2009) and Larson and Wilkström (2001), the metaphor of the market square, where various parties enter, circulate, and interact, can be usefully employed for conceptualizing the dynamics at play in different event networks. The PMSq model has the promise of offering insights into the relationship-building processes in tourism arenas, processes that have tended to be under-explored in the both event planning and PIA literature (Larson, 2009, p. 394). Partially for this reason, I suggest that a slightly modified version of the PMSq model can provide an avenue for achieving PIA’s sometimes elusive goal of enabling constructive interventions that can address problematic ‘racial,’ ethnic, and gender hierarchies in touristic settings.

One key aspect of the PMSq model that meshes well with the PIA approach is its attentiveness to politics and asymmetrical power relations, particularly its recognition of the shifting nature of power structures, alliances, and relations. As in a market square, tourism planning networks bring together a diverse array of stakeholders with shifting interests, different levels of access, and different types of interactions. The PMSq model highlights three key variables at play in this politically charged arena: access (which can be open or closed), interaction (which can span a range from harmonious and collaborative to conflictual), and change dynamics (ranging from turbulent to stable). Larson’s (2009) most recent refinement of the model outlines three types of PMSq dynamics: (1) an institutionalized ‘garden’ model of touristic event management, where access to the event planning network is closed, the main actors have similar interests, and decision-making processes tend to be harmonious, (2) a dynamic ‘park’ model of touristic event management, where access to the event planning network is more open, yet controlled via some gate-keeping, and interactions are more dynamic, as actors interests are sometimes shared and sometimes opposing, and (3) a tumultuous ‘jungle’ model, where access to planning processes is completely open, interactions tend to be conflict-laden, and there is much turbulence. Clearly, for tourism planners interested in optimizing inclusion of heretofore marginalized minority stakeholders, fully open-access event planning models are most desirable. Yet, goal-oriented tourism planners are unlikely to embrace a model that will produce tumultuous, conflict-laden and turbulent planning processes, as suggested by the gatekeeper-free ‘jungle’ model. The San Juan Capistrano case, however,
suggests a new kind of PMSq ‘coffee house’ model that has the advantages of being open-access, yet also surprisingly convivial. However, before directing attention to the case study, it is essential that recent anthropological and sociological insights pertaining to identity and power dynamics in tourism settings are reviewed, as these findings both foreground and complement the frameworks employed in this article.

Over the past two decades, anthropologists and other social scientists working in touristic settings have enhanced our understanding of the power dynamics underlying many tourist destinations (cf. Cheong & Miller, 2000) and the ways in which ethnic, ‘racial,’ class, and gender inequalities are part and parcel of these leisure settings. Perhaps one of the earliest tourism scholars to underscore these themes with regard to ethnicity and ‘race’ was Pierre van den Berghe. In his pioneering 1980 study of Cuzco, Peru, van den Berghe highlighted the ways in which tourism tends to be superimposed on local systems of ethnic relations and can have profound ramifications for those indigenous ethnic/racialized hierarchies (van den Berghe, 1980). This article takes van den Berghe’s classic observation as its starting point and seeks to explore the ways in which tourism to San Juan Capistrano was superimposed on a complex legacy of ethnic and racial hierarchies.

More recently, scholars have spotlighted how heritage sites may showcase particular versions of history, often of privileged social groups (cf. Handler & Gable, 1997; Souther, 2007; Waterton, 2009). Other researchers have examined the ethnic or racial negotiation, struggles and attempts at resistance at play in touristic or heritage spaces (cf. Adams, 1997, 2006; Ashworth & van der Aa, 2002; Bruner, 1996; Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994, Schiller, 2008). As Picard and Robinson (2006) have observed, both tourism and festivals entail performances and rituals ‘with attendant discourses that are contested, negotiated, and re-negotiated and that generate their own social realities’ (p. 3). In keeping with this body of research, this article teases out some of the ways in which dominant group narratives of history are subtly given primacy in San Juan Capistrano’s festivals. In addition, I extend the work on ethnic and racial negotiation at heritage and tourism sites via an exploration of instances when minority stakeholders have creatively re-scripted or challenged the overarching and romanticized touristic and heritage narratives at San Juan Capistrano. I wish to underscore here that these historical, racial, and ethnic hierarchies underlying this heritage tourism site are rarely deliberately embraced by dominant group stakeholders in San Juan Capistrano (many of whom view themselves as accepting of racial and ethnic diversities). In most instances, these dominant narratives are simply unwittingly or playfully replicated in today’s touristic performances and community pageants.

Methodology
This study is qualitative in nature and based on data collected during seven months of anthropological field research initiated in San Juan Capistrano in 2002, with followup fieldwork in the summer of 2004 and in the spring of 2006. This research entailed a mixed-method approach (Bernard, 1998), with four major components: (1) focused observation (Jackson, 1987), (2) participation in formal and informal community activities, with a special concentration on heritage tourism events and planning gatherings (Agar, 1996; Pelto & Pelto, 1981), (3) qualitative interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2004), (4) collection, documentation, and analysis of archival materials, touristic brochures, guidebook accounts, blog postings, local museum displays, newspaper articles, and other documents pertaining to San Juan Capistrano.
During the fieldwork period, I conducted participant observation (Ellen, 1984) at a wide array of public and private San Juan Capistrano gatherings, ranging from lunches and dinners in community members’ homes to casual conversations in cafes and bars and more public events. I attended and documented an annual round of the town’s touristic festivities and community meetings, ranging from mission-focused heritage events to community-based fairs, planning commission sessions, local business-community meetings and social events, public meetings at City Hall, weekly community-wide ‘coffee house chats,’ three annual swallows’ festivals as well as other formal and informal gatherings that brought together members of the community.

My early stages of observation and participation enabled me to identify an initial pool of individuals to interview. This purposive sample of 20 individuals was drawn from members of locally identified communities within San Juan Capistrano: longterm residents of San Juan Capistrano who self-identify as ‘old San Juan Capistrano families’ (Anglo, Native, and Californio families); affluent and predominantly Anglo newcomers residing in newer homes on the hillsides above the town; retirees of modest income residing in the town’s apartments, condominiums and trailer parks; members of the indigenous Acjachemen Nation; mission leaders; community business leaders (particularly those with businesses catering to tourists); and tourists. Unfortunately, due to a variety of obstacles, more recently arrived Mexican labor migrants were not as well represented in this sample. Snowball sampling (Heckathorn, 1997) led to subsequent interview subjects. These taped interviews entailed qualitative life histories as well as a range of open-ended questions concerning these residents’ engagement with their town, their perceptions of community issues, and their involvement with the mission- and swallows festival-related events. In the interviews, particular attention was devoted to the frequency and context of respondents’ invocation of imagery pertaining to mission heritage, swallows, and ‘Old California.’

This largely qualitative research was supplemented with photographic documentation of the community and local events, archival research in the mission, and historical society documentation of displays at the mission and at the Acjachemen Nation’s local museum, and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) of historical archival materials, local stakeholders’ public speeches, tour guides’ narratives, news items, and postings on the community’s Internet-based discussion group. Critical discourse analysis was particularly salient to the aims of this study, as its premise is that ‘certain discourses are more powerful than others [and that these dynamics] can be revealed in the grammatical, semantic, and visual construction of texts and images’ (Waterton, 2009, p. 46).

Sanitizing history in San Juan Capistrano: from race to swallows

San Juan Capistrano is an ethnically and economically heterogeneous community of 36,078 located near the Southern California coast, midway between Los Angeles and San Diego. For scholars interested in the dynamics of ‘race’ and ethnicity in tourist settings, San Juan Capistrano presents an interesting case for study. In many ways, with its growing population of working class Hispanic immigrants, its established community of largely white retirees on fixed incomes, and a more recent influx of upper income bracket residents, San Juan Capistrano is undergoing transformations and experiencing tensions typical of socioeconomically and ethnically diverse midsized communities throughout the USA. San Juan Capistrano’s mission-based history puts a unique touristic spin on these dynamics. Contemporary tourism to San Juan Capistrano is superimposed on an array of historically based racial, ethnic, and class tensions. As this
article will illustrate, the romanticized touristic imagery of San Juan Capistrano, as an agrarian mission-based community that annually celebrates the return of its migrating swallows, is one that is embraced, negotiated, and mobilized in different ways by different sectors of the community. In short, this overarching touristic imagery is imbued with different meanings by different community stakeholders and serves as the basis for building both boundaries and bridges between different groups with differing agendas.

The early history of San Juan Capistrano is entwined with the Native American Acjachemen community whose villages once speckled what later became known as the Capistrano Valley. With the official 1776 founding of Mission San Juan Capistrano by Junipero Serra and his party of Spanish Franciscan missionaries, the community began to experience its first dramatic transformations (Haas, 1995; Hallan-Gibson, 2001; Sanders & O’Sullivan, 1998). Although tourist brochures and most mission tours and performances tend to focus on the hardships and accomplishments of the mission’s founding padres, as well as on the daily lives of the early soldiers and indigenous converts to Catholicism who chose to make their home in and around the mission, in actuality the mission’s relationship to indigenous peoples was far more complex. California missions, such as San Juan Capistrano, were de facto lynchpins in the Spanish colonization strategy, serving to transform sometimes resistant indigenous peoples into subservient Christians and skilled laborers in the colonial expansion project. As California historian Haas (1995) underscores,

Violence towards the Acâgchemem … was a constant element of this society. The missionaries came with soldiers, who used force to put down any overt resistance to their presence. Soldiers raped Indian women and committed other atrocities that created fear … and engendered multiple revolts against the missions and presidios. (p. 14)

In discussing the overall pattern of southern California mission development, Kropp (2006) observes,

Attracting Indians with food and European goods, missionaries housed anywhere from hundreds to thousands of ‘neophytes,’ as they called their followers. These converted Indians lived in sex-segregated, dormitory housing and performed mandatory labor. Once they came to live at the mission, their lives were under strict surveillance; escape was punishable and discipline, in keeping with early modern standards, was often severe. Because of, or perhaps despite, the harsh regime, mission Indians became the primary productive force for the Spanish colony, as they … accomplished all manner of work on these extensive plantations. (p. 24)

In short, despite the romantic portraits of early California missions promoted in popular literature, films, and mission tours, the founding and early years of San Juan Capistrano entailed not only forced religious conversion and devotion but also racial and economic exploitation and coercion.

Already by Southern California’s ‘booster era’ (1885–1925), mission myth and ‘thinly veiled racialism’ had become interwoven into the overarching imagery of the region (Starr, 1985, p. 76). As historian Davis (1990) underscores,

The mission literature depicted the history of race relations as a pastoral ritual of obedience and paternalism: ‘graceful Indians, happy as peasants in an Italian opera, knelt dutifully before the Franciscans to receive the baptism of a superior culture, while in the background the angelus tolled from a swallow guarded campanile’ … Any intimation
of the brutality inherent in the forced labor system of the missions and haciendas ... was suppressed. (p. 26)

It is useful to underscore Starr’s observations about the emergence of these sorts of mission myths during southern California’s ‘booster era;’ he notes, these sanitized images neatly played into these new Californians’ identities and images of their own ideal society, one based largely on Protestant values of order and the work ethic (Starr, 1985, p. 89; also see Bremer, 2000, p. 429).

Mexico’s 1821 independence from Spain signaled another shift in local ethnic relations. The Mexican government initiated a mission secularization program aimed at not only liberating indigenous peoples from the missions’ heavy hands, but also freeing up for settlement the vast swaths of the land missions had appropriated from California’s original inhabitants. Much of this land went to California governors, who ultimately released it to private individuals via the land grant system (Hallan-Gibson, 2001, p. 25). By 1826, Jose M. Echeandia, the first native Mexican governor of California had issued a proclamation of native emancipation, announcing that all qualifying California Indians could become Mexican citizens. According to the plans, half of Mission San Juan Capistrano’s lands were to be returned to the mission’s indigenous neophytes and the other half to be ‘administered for the public good and support of the church’ (Hallan-Gibson, 2001, p. 25). What transpired under this Indian Pueblo system, however, was quite different. Many of the neophytes abandoned the area altogether, as they found that they were obliged not only to continue tending to mission property, but also to government officials. Ultimately, by 1841, the San Juan Capistrano Indian Pueblo was declared dissolved, and local parties were invited to make their land claim petitions. Although a few ‘free Indians’ numbered among the San Juan Capistrano land claimants, the vast majority of new landowners were Californios of Hispanic descent (Haas, 1995, p. 4). By the mid 1800s, only 500 Native Americans remained in the San Juan Capistrano region (Bancroft, 1888); most of them were now obliged to work as manual laborers for the rancheros (land grantees) on their cattle ranches, although a few chose instead to survive by raiding the cattle ranches that had sprung up on their ancestral lands.

The Mexican American War added yet another layer to the saga of native coercion, as California’s shift to American hands in 1848 ushered in a new shuffle of land ownership and introduced a new theme of discrimination against Mexicans. Landowners were required to prove their claims to American authorities, and these claims were frequently overturned (Hallan-Gibson, 2001; also see Haas, 1995). In addition, the end of the Civil War brought a wave of new Anglo settlers to the region. Largely farmers, some squatted on lands that had been held by Mexicans whose deeds could not be confirmed, while others were beneficiaries of the Homestead Act. By 1850, a government-affiliated school was established in San Juan Capistrano, and the shift from a Spanish-dominated community to English had begun. The arrival of the railroad in San Juan Capistrano in 1887 brought a new land boom, the cementing of Anglo-cultural dominance in the community and the avenue for the birth of mission tourism (Hallan-Gibson, 2001).5

Tourism and swallows in San Juan Capistrano

By the 1920s, the California mythology had firmly taken hold, and affluent American tourists were traveling west on comfortable railway cars, lured by railroad travel
posts, tourism brochures of the era, and popular literature (DeLyser, 2005). The region’s spectacular scenery and images of welcoming, traditionally clad natives were featured prominently in Southern Pacific Railway and other travel posters of the era, as were some of the more photogenic missions and their tranquil gardens. By the early 1930s, the ‘mission aura of history and romance’ had surpassed sunshine and film industry cache in selling Southern California (Pohlmann, 1975, p. 385 as cited in Davis, 1990, p. 27). In contemporary San Juan Capistrano’s dominant tourism narratives and performances, the continuation of this deeply rooted history of romanticization and sanitization of race relations is maintained.

In the early 1900s, San Juan Capistrano had become an agrarian farming and ranching community with sizable residual Mexican population and a much smaller Native American community. The mission (in ruins at the time) also drew a steady stream of tourists and religious pilgrims. It is from this period that the imagery of swallows first becomes associated with the mission and community of San Juan Capistrano. As swallows eventually come to overshadow natives in the touristic imagery of San Juan Capistrano, we turn now to trace their accretion to the dominant San Juan Capistrano imagery. This detour is essential to understanding contemporary tourism dynamics in San Juan Capistrano, as I will suggest that the focus on swallows further serves to conceal the more problematic dimensions of native coercion in the Spanish mission history. Moreover, it is also swallows and swallow imagery that are often strategically drawn upon by contemporary minority groups acting in the touristic arena to refocus attention on their experiences of historic erasure or contemporary misrepresentation.

The first recorded mention of swallows dates to 1911 and is found in a passing observation made in an Overland Monthly article. The author describes the haunting ruins of the mission (an 1812 earthquake destroyed much of the mission) and recounts the tale of Pepita Arrequa, a local Acjachemen who believed that although swallows were the only current residents of the weed-choked mission, it would one day be restored to its former state (Wright, 1911). Although the article drew a few additional tourists and bird watchers to the site, the swallow observations went largely unnoticed.

In the second decade of the 1900s, however, Father St. John O’Sullivan arrived in San Juan Capistrano, sickly with tuberculosis and charged with tending to the long-neglected mission. As he recovered, he set about restoring the mission and in the process collected local legends in a bundle of notebooks. In 1930, when these tales were published in the romantically titled volume Capistrano Nights, O’Sullivan’s name became permanently enmeshed with the mission, and swallows became a part of the mission’s lore. Capistrano Nights opens with recollections by Charles Saunders (O’Sullivan’s co-author) of his first visit to the mission prior to its restoration. As Saunders wanders the ruins at dusk, admiring the purple shadows playing on remnants of carved arches, he pauses to observe the rows of swallows’ mud nests high up under the fractured eaves of the nave. As he records in Capistrano Nights, the sight of these swallows’ nests prompted his vision of them as an allegory ‘set in confidence and surety upon foundations consecrated to the divine.’ He then reflects on Lanier’s ‘The Marshes of Glynn’ and offers a quote intended to cement the imagery of swallows and their nests as alluding to God and religiosity: ‘Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God.’ (Saunders & O’Sullivan, 1930, p. 5). The final tale in Capistrano Nights further underscores this theme of a linkage between swallows and devotion. As O’Sullivan recounts, some years earlier he had come upon a town merchant
destroying swallows’ nests under the eaves of his building. Horrified by the birds’ terror, Father O’Sullivan invites them to take sanctuary at the mission. The next morning he reports that he found the swallows industriously constructing new mud nests under the recently restored mission church dome. As chronicled in *Capistrano Nights*, Father O’Sullivan later learns from the mission’s Native American bell-ringer (Acú) that the swallows religiously return to the mission each year on 19 March for the Feast of St. Joseph. As Acú tells him, at the summer’s end they fly off to Jerusalem, where they winter, returning again to the mission on St. Joseph’s Day. Subsequently, Acú’s claims about the swallows are reinforced when Father O’Sullivan observes the birds fluttering into the mission church, just in time for mass on St. Joseph’s Day.

Published nationally, *Capistrano Nights* and particularly its tale of devoted San Juan swallows intrigued a number of luminaries, including the editor of the Los Angeles Times, Ed Ainsworth. Each March, Ainsworth’s column heralded the return of the swallows to the mission (Hallan-Gibson, 1976/2001, p. 102). In 1936, his column reportedly attracted the attention of an international radio broadcaster who announced his intention to ‘broadcast to the world the return of the swallows’ (Hallan-Gibson, 1976/2001, p. 102). That year, on 19 March, in the shadows of broadcasting equipment, 2000 people watched the skies for the return of the swallows. Once the broadcaster boomed on the international airways that ‘the skies were blackened with swallows,’ the imagery took root, both locally and abroad. San Juan Capistrano’s swallows quickly became headline material in local papers as well as fodder for newspapers in distant cities like Chicago and New York (Hallan- Gibson, 1976/2001, p. 104).

Several years later, the tale of the swallows was further amplified by the songwriter Leon René. Hearing a 1939 broadcast on the swallows’ impending return, René penned the celebrated song ‘When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano’ (Hallan-Gibson, 1976/2001, p. 104). The record sold three million copies, and the melody became part of the public romance with San Juan Capistrano. (Today, the mission has designated one of its sealed galleries the ‘Leon René Music Room.’). Soon, even Bugs Bunny was crooning the René ode to the swallows. By the late 1930s, the St. Joseph’s Day festivities included a play celebrating ‘The Miracle of the Swallows’ and a small school carnival honoring the birds’ return. Around this time, the first swallow trinkets and swallow-themed postcards begin to be hawked in local shops. In the 1940s, the mission’s summer pageant was switched to St. Joseph’s Day, drawing still more people to congregate with the returning swallows. The 1950s saw additional propagation of the swallow imagery, as awareness of the potential for tourism marketing grew. In 1956 an advertising campaign launched a series of roadside billboards urging drivers to ‘Follow the swallows to Capistrano,’ and by 1957 the town had expanded a school carnival into an equestrian parade to celebrate the swallows’ homecoming. San Juan Capistrano achieved cityhood in 1961, ushering in a period of rapid growth. Over the next few decades, as orange and walnut groves were uprooted for shopping malls and split level homes, the festivities and events surrounding the swallows’ homecoming continued to expand (even as the number of swallows returning began to dwindle).

By 1974, 12 years after its incorporation as a city, San Juan Capistrano boasted a population of 10,000. Over the past three decades, however, neighboring communities’ suburbs have rapidly encroached on San Juan Capistrano, and the city has also developed its own tracts of upscale suburban housing, crowding out the older apartment complexes and trailer homes. Moreover, the city’s vibrancy is boosted by a steady
stream of mission tourists and Old California devotees flowing into the city on a daily basis: over 500,000 tourists visit Mission San Juan Capistrano annually, and some sources claim that the town itself hosts millions of visitors annually (Hallan- Gibson, 1976/2001, p. 9). In the spring, during San Juan Capistrano’s recently expanded three-month long ‘festival of the swallows’ (also referred to as the Fiesta de las Golondrinas), as many as 10,000 tourists stand elbow to elbow with local residents to witness the swallows’ day parade (hailed as the ‘largest non-motorized parade’ in the USA), to visit the ‘Mission Mercado’ and to stroll the gardens of the mission in the hopes of catching glimpses of returning swallows.

Today, swallow imagery is ubiquitous in San Juan Capistrano: even from the I-5 freeway, long before the mission church dome becomes visible, visitors know they are nearing their destination as swallow images decorate the sound-blocking walls lining the freeway as one approaches the city. The city’s primary business strip is home to a swallow cleaners, restaurants called Las Golondrinas and L’Hirondelle, the swallow’s inn bar, swallow gymnasium and numerous souvenir shops featuring every imaginable tourist trinket embellished with swallows (visitors can purchase swallowemblazoned T shirts, ceramic salt and pepper shakers in the form of swallows, swallow shot glasses, swallow-adorned bells, swallow-shaped wind chimes, children’s story-books featuring adventurous swallows, and an array of other swallow goods). Moreover, the city’s official seal features swallows paired with mission bells, as does the local Rotary Club’s seal and the San Juan Capistrano AYSO youth soccer league holds an annual ‘Swallows Invitational Tournament.’ One can purchase a ‘swallow model’ tract home in San Juan Capistrano and swallows embellish mission tiles, bike trail markers, and car dealership plates. In short, the swallow has become part and parcel of the town’s imagery. Due to the felicitous convergence of its status as an inclusive and uncontroversial icon of place (unlike the ‘native’ or ‘western town’ themes embraced by some), its emotional appeal as a graceful creature, media exposure and marketing, the swallow is now San Juan Capistrano’s ‘destination brand’ — a branding that is embraced by both the tourists and the diverse groups that constitute the local community.

For most San Juan Capistrano city officials and merchants, the swallow is not only the community’s beloved icon, but also a necessity for local economic prosperity. Merchants report that their shops generate much of their annual income during the swallows festival, and therefore draw heavily on swallow iconography in their signage and advertising. City officials are prominent at swallow festival events, dutifully sporting western wear and swallow pins during the festivities. As one 63-year veteran city councilman declared with a mixture of seriousness and humor,

The swallows and Swallows’ Day are a phenomenon. So is the mission. I’m not a member of the parish there, but I feel it’s in my blood. It’s the same for a lot of us in this community. We have a deep respect for the swallows—if we didn’t we’d get our tails whipped.

(quoted in Gomez & Hall, 1990)

The swallows have become so sacred an icon in San Juan Capistrano that the city declared itself a bird sanctuary in the mid-1970s, following a public outcry when some residents were spotted knocking swallows’ nests from their homes. Local conservationists, who had lobbied to protect the birds, expressed their relief that San Juan Capistrano would continue to treasure and defend its swallows. As a San Juan Capistrano nursery owner put it, ‘These little birds are the symbol that unites our diverse community regardless of ethnicity or income.’
It is important to note, however, that despite the contemporary touristic (and often locally embraced) narratives celebrating the towns’ reverence for swallows, western-styled ‘small town community spirit,’ and shared mission heritage, San Juan Capistrano is a divided town: it is geographically bisected by a riverbed and a major Amtrak line, and it is also economically and ethnically bisected. According to the 2000 census, whites represented 62.3% of the population, Hispanics 33.1%, Asian (largely Southeast Asian) 1.9%, and American Indians 1.7%. With some exceptions, the heart of town (the area adjacent to the town’s historic mission) has a higher concentration of apartments and condominiums and is largely home to migrant workers and elderly citizens living on fixed incomes, whereas the surrounding hillsides are dominated by recently constructed mini-mansions. Moreover, a fair number of the San Juan Capistrano’s day laborers, restaurant workers, supermarket stockers, and nail salon employees are Latino and Southeast Asian Americans who reside in other more affordable parts of the county. Not surprisingly, as with other American communities that have experienced similar recent socioeconomic transformations, in the 1990s and 2000s San Juan Capistrano witnessed various class, ethnic/racial and age-based tensions between different factions of the community. Some of these tensions pertained to broader debates raging in American society concerning the status and treatment of undocumented Mexican laborers residing in the community. Other tensions were rooted in growth-related proposals for redistricting, or the construction of expensive new tract houses and new larger-scaled suburban businesses, which some perceived as threatening to the town’s identity (cf. Davis, 1998, 1990; Gregory, 1998). Still other conflicts in recent years have raged around a new Catholic high school’s proposal to build an athletic complex on ancient Native American burial grounds. In various ways, all of these conflicts form a backdrop to the community-based heritage tourism-oriented events staged annually.

Motifs in San Juan Capistrano’s contemporary tourism imagery: mission swallows, ranchers, sheriffs, and the ‘Old West’

I turn now to take a closer look at some of the dominant imagery of San Juan Capistrano and the ways in which that imagery is articulated, deployed, conscripted, and negotiated in touristic arenas by various stakeholders. As mentioned earlier, the community’s celebration of the swallows is at its pinnacle during the annual threemonth long festival of the swallows, an event that draws together community members, residents of surrounding Orange County cities, and tourists from farther afield. The festival begins in late February with a ‘Taste of San Juan Reception,’ where local and nearby community members pay to sample local restaurant fare while being entertained by costumed dancers from San Juan Capistrano schools, mariachi troupes and Spanish, Mexican, and Native American dancers. This is followed by a children’s pet parade in late February, one of many festival events overseen by the Fiesta Association, whose energetic volunteer members are identifiable by their sheriffs’ badges and western gear evocative of the idealized ‘good old days’ of frontier living.11 In mid-March, Swallows Week is officially launched with a $50 per head President’s Ball, which invites community members and visitors to ‘journey back to the late 1800s of early California and let the Fiesta Association show … “how the West was fun” at this western style dinner dance’ (http://www.swallowsparade.com/ presball.aspx). Advertisements for the Ball call for ‘all colorful characters’ to come clad in western, Mexican, Spanish or early California attire to ‘enjoy good old fashioned gambling and gaming during the
evening as well as dancing to great music’ (http://www.swallowsparade.com/presball.aspx). Each year, the Ball draws a predominantly white group of participants, most of whom arrive in 1880s ‘Old West’ attire, costumed as cowboys, ranchers, elegant town matrons or seductive Madames, Spanish senoritas, and the occasional conquistadores. Not surprisingly, given the idealized, fantasy nature of these celebratory enactments, it is the rare participant who opts to don the garb of an 1800s-era Native American.

Following the President’s Ball is the Fiesta Grande, held annually at the Swallows Inn Pub. This event tends to draw a small sub-set of San Juan Capistrano insiders: many San Juan Capistrano residents have never attended this particular ritualized fiesta and only a dozen tourists were in attendance when I documented it in 2003 and 2006. The Fiesta Grande is hailed as ‘a night of Old West entertainment’ and includes four contests: Best Dressed Old West Man, Best Dressed Old West Woman, Best Belt Buckle, and the Hairiest Man Contest (wherein men who had signed on and shaved their heads weeks earlier are judged for most extensive hair growth). Both years I documented this event, many of the males in attendance sported cowboy hats, jeans, leather vests, bolos and western boots, while women came as voluptuous, feather bedecked Anglo or black lace-trimmed Spanish ‘saloon girls’ or as more conservative gingham-clad ‘schoolmarms.’ Contestants in the Best Dressed contests were expected to ‘tell their stories,’ with the most imaginative and off-color accounts of ‘Old West’ exploits drawing the prizes. Clearly, the primary focus of the Fiesta Grande was on the (idealized) Anglo Old West, and not the indigenous pre-Anglo West.

The eve of the swallows’ parade is San Juan Capistrano’s ‘Hoosegow Day’ (The term ‘hoosegow’ is an Anglicization of the Mexican Spanish term, juzgado, or ‘jail’). In current-day San Juan Capistrano, hoosegow refers to a portable jail that is attached to a pickup truck and carted around the city’s neighborhoods by teams of volunteer Fiesta Association gun-slingers (some on horseback) hunting for tourists or residents who failed to garb themselves in the obligatory ‘western attire’ of the day (minimally defined as jeans, a badge or a garter belt). The Fiesta Association’s web page description conveys the highly gendered, Anglo West emphasis of Hoosegow Day,

Hoosegow Day is a San Juan tradition! Bringing a taste of the Wild, Wild West back to San Juan Capistrano. The ‘Sheriff’ and the ‘Deputies’ of the Fiesta Association are dressed in their traditional black and white western garb while they roam the town in search of city slickers. If you’re not wearing western wear, watch out! You might just be roped into the fun! The Deputies will ‘arrest’ anyone not dressed in western attire (and some who are, but just look like they need time in the Hoosegow), or any man who is clean-shaven … There’s plenty of wild western whooping and hollering’ going on as our gunslingers fill the streets, shooting in celebration … The penalty for noncompliance is being thrown into the Hoosegow. Jail sentences are short for those who can make ‘bail’ by purchasing a Fiesta Association souvenir. ‘Bail’ money is used to help defray the costs of the parade. (http://www.swallowsparade.com/hoosegow.aspx)

While ostensibly an occasion for poking fun at unsuspecting tourists, Hoosegow Day is far more than that alone. As with the Fiesta Grande and the President’s Ball, it is a public, ludic enactment of San Juan Capistrano’s imagined cowboy and ranching past, self-consciously celebrating a sanitized and simplified past of ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys.’ But perhaps equally significant is that it is a ritual that defines ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in terms of clothing and willingness to ‘play along’ rather than in terms of ‘race’ or economic standing. On the day I was invited to participate as a
member of one of the Hoosegow teams patrolling the city, we made stops in various key
points in town, ranging from the mayor’s office, to strip malls and office parks. Most of
the people we encountered at those varied stops cheerfully took part, from Vietnamese
immigrants working in nail salons to Hispanic shop cashiers, to post office workers, to
the trainers at strip mall gyms. Those who had not already prepared for Hoosegow Day
by sporting jeans, cowboy hats, garters or boas complied with the Fiesta Association
sheriffs and ‘bribed’ their way out of the hoosegow by purchasing the necessary
badge or garter. Only one arrestee complained: most whole- or half-heartedly embraced
the role-playing dimension of the Hoosegow Day. Given the range of ethnicities and
income groups encountered on that day, one might surmise that the Hoosegow Day
activities provided a space in which community members who might not routinely
cross paths, or who might not normally see themselves as aligned, could come together
in a ludic fashion. An optimistic interpreter might envision this particular heritage
tourism ritual as presenting opportunities for reinforcing shared overarching umbrella
identities, as members of a community that playfully celebrates not only swallows
but also a certain degree of nostalgia for a simpler past that never existed. However,
a more cynical interpretation of the Hoosegow ritual is that these seemingly willing
participants had little choice but to participate. Moreover, it pays to underscore that
the Hoosegows I monitored stuck mainly to the major thoroughfares of town, with
the occasional detour into adjacent solidly middle class residential cul de sacs.
They did not circulate in the largely Hispanic apartment areas or retiree-dominated
trailer parks, nor did they climb the towns’ hillsides to arrest the residents of the
mini-mansions.

The swallows festival culminates with three events, the mission’s St. Joseph Day
celebration (the ‘official’ date of the swallows return to San Juan Capistrano), the swal-
lows’ day parade, and the town Mercado (a street fair and craft market). In 2009, the
swallows’ day parade was comprised of over 100 marching groups and at least 500
parading horses. Taking their place in the parade were elementary school children
clad as 1880s ranchers and settlers, preschoolers in swallow costumes, marching mar-
ichis, parading pirates, carriages bearing couples in elegant 1880s attire, school girls
performing Mexican dances, high school marching bands, kilt-garbed bagpipe players,
Wild West enactment troupes, and even marching Italian-American gladiators, syn-
chronized pizza-tossers and dancers and goats bedecked in Italian-flag colored
ribbons commemorating San Juan Capistrano’s Italian sister city.

The swallows’ day parade, the mission’s St. Joseph Day festivities, and the Mercardo
are not only popular with tourists and the dominant white population of San Juan Capis-
trano, but they also draw sizable numbers of recent immigrant and old Californio
families. Local Mariachi bands and Aztec Dance troupes are featured performers
inside the mission gardens on St. Joseph’s Day, attracting enthusiastic Latino audiences.
In addition, one of the three viewing areas of the swallows’ parade has a Spanish
language Master of Ceremonies. As one Southern California blogger observed of
recent shifts in the parade,

San Juan Capistrano is a cowboy town, and many people here remember when there were
more horses than cars. There are still horse trails everywhere, and in the winter, the smell
of stables drifts over the town as thick as molasses. There are two Indian bands in the town
who are regularly in the parade … [and] over the last few years, as more and more Mex-
icans come to live in SJC, the ratio of Indians to Cowboys [in the parade] has changed
remarkably, and the bright-feathered costumes of the Mexicans now outshine the drab
black of the bolo-tie’d cowboys on their austere brown horses and their longskirted
To summarize, what we see celebrated in the various touristic and heritage-oriented events that constitute the festival of the swallows, is a nostalgic and idealized vision of an old western community, a community that prides itself not only on its celebrated mission (hailed as ‘the jewel of the California missions’), but also on its small town western heritage and sense of community. These are central elements in the touristic marketing of San Juan Capistrano as well as key themes in certain stakeholders’ perceptions of their community. But a more careful look at the various events comprising the festival of the swallows also reveals how many of these events, such as the Fiesta Grande contests and the Ambassador’s Ball, ludically enact and encode idealistic visions (especially for white males) of small town community of bygone days. The dominant ‘script’ in San Juan Capistrano’s festival of the swallows presents an idealized and sanitized image of the past – a past un-plagued by racial and ethnic struggles – where there were clear-cut divisions between ‘good guy’ marshals and sheriffs, and ‘bad guy’ hoosegow captives, where women were either upstanding matrons and righteous schoolmarmers, or seductively alluring saloon girls, and where Native Americans and Hispanics are on the scene only to add colorful dances and flourishes to proceedings.

By spotlighting ‘colorful feathers and flourishes,’ the aesthetic or romanticized dimensions of the destination and its affiliated ethnic communities, the more troubling histories, and current-day power issues pertaining to race are contained. The colourfully distracting feathers may adorn the costumes of Native American performers or imported Aztec dancers, they may decorate the braids of the ‘native dolls’ sold in local tourist shops, or the fringes on the dresses of women clad as saloon girls on Fiesta Day, or they may grace the wings of birds flocking to the heritage destination, as in the case of San Juan Capistrano’s celebrated swallows. In short, Greg Acciaioli’s observations about Indonesia’s state-building strategies seem to be applicable to certain American heritage sites’ framing of ‘race’ and ethnicity: ‘diversity is valued, honored, even apotheosized, but only as long as it remains at the level of display, not belief, performance, not enactment’ (Acciaioli, 1985, p. 161).

Having highlighted how legacies of ‘racial’ or ethnic subordination are eclipsed and how hegemonic Anglo-friendly meanings are encoded in the touristic heritage destination of San Juan Capistrano, I turn now to spotlight some of the spaces drawn upon by some San Juan Capistrano minority group members to destabilize, re-write, and reclaim the dominant history enshrined in the touristic images of San Juan Capistrano. As I ultimately suggest, via these instances of creative resistance and reframing in tourism arenas, scholars and practitioners concerned with social justice in tourist sites can find clues for addressing some of the hegemonic discourses surrounding the sites with which they are concerned.

**Swallows counter-stories and the reinsertion of minority voices**

Although the dominant touristic narratives of San Juan Capistrano tend to eclipse and obscure disturbing histories of native enslavement or minority group disenfranchise-ment, some minority stakeholders find ways to reinsert their voices into the dominant narrative. Drawn from my field notes is the following account of one such voice, that of Jacque Nunez, an Acjachemen woman who worked as a schoolteacher in the 1980s and
by the 1990s had started making efforts to revitalize Acjachemen’s culture and bring social recognition to her people.

On a crisp February evening about 250 people gathered at an old adobe Mexican restaurant for the ‘Taste of San Juan’ and the opening speeches for the *Fiesta de las Golondrinas*. A number of the celebrants were costumed in 1880s attire: cowboys, old time ranchers, sheriffs, corseted matrons in hoop skirts, and boa-trimmed barmaids crowded the restaurant’s courtyard and banquet room, nibbling on a smorgasbord of food from local restaurants. The fantasy aura of the old cowboy California hovered in the restaurant, as mariachi singers entertained the crowd. When the mariachi singers exited the stage, a strong Acjachemen woman clad in beaded buckskin embraced the microphone as her dance troupe filed in behind her. Her booming voice captured the buzzing crowd’s attention as she launched into her introductory speech. Her ponderous words echoed in the lofty room: ‘Before there were suburbs and towns here, before the ranchers, before the settlers, before the missionaries, before the Spaniards and Mexicans, there were swallows that flew here, coming from faraway Goya. And those swallows that flew over this land long ago also flew over a people, my people, the Acjachemen. Those were the first people that lived here. And those were the people who built the mission when the missionaries came. It is their craftsmanship and handiwork that we admire today when we see the mission. They – we – are still here. And now we will perform some of our dances.’

Nunez’s invocation of the beloved and multivalent symbol of the swallow was compelling, powerful, and silencing – I watched more than a few people shift awkwardly in their cowboy boots. Nunez’s narrative celebrated the community’s shared recognition of the swallows as pivotal objects. But her narrative pushed the audience to see new meanings in those swallows, meanings that pointed to the history of native displacement and erasure. Not only were the swallows invoked as witnesses of history, but they were also hailed as surveyors of ethnic primacy. In this particular fiesta setting, where a Mexican backdrop frames largely white enactments of fantasies of an Anglo Old West, swallows became avenues for resisting what appear to be hegemonic representations of history. In Nunez’s reframing of history, these animate objects took on yet another role, as testifiers in a struggle for ethnic recognition and resistance to erasure.

On less theatrical, smaller, more intimate stages, other minority stakeholders in San Juan Capistrano draw on the swallow in still other ways to reinsert themselves and their own communities’ experiences into the dominant Anglo Old West narrative spotlighted in San Juan Capistrano’s heritage tourism events. For several immigrants I interviewed in San Juan Capistrano, my invitation to share their associations with the swallow was met with statements likening the swallows’ annual migration between Goya, Argentina, and San Juan Capistrano to their own movement between the Latin world and North America – a pervasive theme in the lives of a number of California’s current-day labor immigrants. On one occasion, while watching local mariachi bands and imported Aztec Dance troupes perform in the mission one St. Joseph’s Day alongside enthusiastic Latino audiences, I spoke with a Latina woman and her friends who were staffing a fiesta booth for Orange County’s Spanish language magazine (*Para Todos En Espanol*). As she told me, she liked to think of the swallows as signifying the reciprocity between Goya and San Juan Capistrano. Thanks to the swallows, she underscored, these two cities in North America and South America have a special bond (San Juan Capistrano and Goya are officially sister cities). In short, in the narratives of some minority group members, the swallows are invoked not for their feathers and flourishes, but to signify trans-cultural bridges.
Habermas visits San Juan Capistrano: ‘coffee chats’ as open-access (yet orderly) political market square

I turn now to examine a second arena where San Juan Capistrano minority stakeholders have been able to insert their voices, an arena with more long-term potential for promoting equality in the touristic imagery of this heritage destination. Although this arena – a weekly open-to-all community members ‘coffee chat’ – evolved organically out of a particular set of circumstances, I believe it offers a useful model that could be successfully adapted in other destinations by tourism and festival planners.

The San Juan Capistrano coffee house chat was established in the late 1990s, by a reporter for Orange County’s newspaper who had been assigned the South Orange County beat. Faced with the demanding task of covering events in multiple communities, he initiated the weekly coffee chat as a ‘short-cut’ strategy for efficiently gathering news stories in San Juan Capistrano and for ‘taking the pulse’ of the community. He offered free coffee to community leaders who would come discuss community issues for an hour and a half each Friday morning at alternating, locally owned coffee houses. Ultimately, as interest grew, he opened these ‘coffee chats’ up to all community members, advertising via posters and newspaper announcements. At the beginning, these weekly coffee chats had what their initiator described as a ‘corporate form’: he never imagined how interactive they would become, nor ‘how much of a catalyst for civic involvement they would prove to be.’ At the time of my field research, they drew between 40 and 75 participants in a given week, with a core of ‘regulars’ and a varying array of newcomers seeking to promote support for their perspectives on particularly ‘hot’ community issues. Although this reporter probably did not have Habermas in mind when he developed the idea of coffee house chats, Habermas’ (1962) notion of the historic role of British coffee houses in fostering democratic civic engagement is apropos. San Juan Capistrano’s coffee chats tend to draw both powerful and minority stakeholders, given that these coffee chats are free, and have a reporter-facilitator (with an extremely relaxed approach), thereby promising the possibility of publicity for one’s cause.12

The coffee chats operate in a semi-ritualized fashion. New attendees are invited to introduce themselves, stating their names and where they live. If these introductions do not immediately flow into impassioned discussions of local burning issues, the reporter-moderator then asks about what is going on in ‘our community.’ Despite the wide array of topics discussed at these meetings, participants’ speeches, observations, and commentaries exhibited relatively routine use of several touchstone phrases. I documented frequent invocation of the terms ‘our community’ and the theme of San Juan Capistrano as a city rooted in a ‘small town heritage,’ where people look out for each other.13 Both of these phrases were most frequently invoked by the moderator at moments of elevated tensions between attendees. This strategic use of this language of overarching shared identity and interests (despite the many palpable cleavages in the community) appeared to help foster a climate hospitable to working out differences. During my fieldwork, I documented a number of cases where the coffee chat forum resulted in shifts of public opinion and constructive problem resolution. Due to space limitations, I offer just one example in the following paragraph.

In 2006, the growing presence of undocumented Mexican workers was one of the most divisive issues in Orange County and elsewhere in Southern California. A controversial, voluntary militia of Minutemen had formed to patrol parts of the California–Mexico border, and the Minutemen’s leader had submitted an application for his
group to march in San Juan Capistrano’s swallows’ parade (the group did not have a San Juan Capistrano chapter, and the leader was not a San Juan Capistrano resident). Although the coffee chat is not a decision-making group, by 2006 it was already a well-known venue for shaping and making public opinion and so the Minutemen’s representative attended the coffee chat to pitch the group’s participation in the parade. An extremely heated argument ensued between the Minuteman leader and several Hispanic and Anglo coffee chat attendees. The following week the Fiesta Association declined the application (some members of the Fiesta Association had been present at the coffee chat and had witnessed the heated discussions). Soon after this decision, local papers carried news that the Minutemen’s leader had threatened to sue the Fiesta Association for denying them permission to march in the parade. The following week, the Minutemen’s representative again appeared and spoke at the coffee chat, telling the attendees that he and his fellow Minutemen were the victims, akin to the witches in Salem’s witch hunts and that they had been unfairly tarnished by the media’s representations of them as violence inciters. He declared that if they could not march, he and his fellow Minutemen would don their Minutemen apparel and watch the parade from the sidelines. Pointing at one of the Mexican immigrant community members at the meeting, he asked pointedly, ‘Do you plan to bring the Mexican Mafia down to start parade violence?’ Another heated discussion ensued, with many invocations of the value of community. Several present spoke about the value of ‘bringing our communities together, not apart.’ Others noted that there were probably residents of San Juan Capistrano who supported the Minutemen’s cause, but that ‘this was not the community in which to parade … if anything happened the parade could be ruined forever.’ Another present interjected, ‘The one and only time there was a riot at the parade was when they ran out of beer!’ The humor dissipated the tension, and the Minutemen’s leader ended up agreeing not to sue the city. In subsequent interviews, many San Juan Capistranoites told me that without the coffee chat forum, the conflict would not have been so easily resolved.

While not all San Juan Capistrano controversies are resolvable at the coffee chat, this case and others like it suggest that it nevertheless serves as an avenue for the negotiation of issues and for community-building among diverse stakeholders. In short, the San Juan Capistrano weekly coffee chat offers a new kind of PMSq model, that of the PMSq coffee house, that has the advantages of being open-access, yet also relatively civil. Unlike the ‘jungle’ version of the PMSq event planning model, which suggests that gate-keeper-free types of PMSq planning processes tend toward higher levels of conflict and turbulence, and presumably more challenges for decision-making, the PMSq coffee house model offers new possibilities. The PMSq coffee house model presents a ritualized scenario where tensions between stakeholders are aired, yet consensus is actively built via the rhetoric of shared, overarching ‘community’ orientations. While not every tourist destination shares the dynamics of San Juan Capistrano, this homegrown model can be adapted and implemented in other places in order to ensure that minority stakeholders have an arena for voicing and amplifying their perspectives.

From ‘feathers and flourishes’ to public interest anthropology: final reflections on promoting equality in heritage destinations

Having examined some of the ways in which tourism in San Juan Capistrano is superimposed on a prior history of ethnic and racial hierarchies and having illustrated how certain minority group stakeholders’ experiences and histories continue to be eclipsed
by the contemporary touristic imagery prevailing in San Juan Capistrano, I return now to reflect on the value of a PIA framework for revealing and addressing the hidden racisms underlying some heritage tourism sites.

PIA’s attentiveness to mapping regimes of power enables us to reflect more critically on the ways in which San Juan Capistrano’s dominant tourism narratives celebrate a vision of history that is largely white and Anglo. This approach has helped spotlight the historic processes whereby Native American voices and histories, as well as Mexican experiences, have been marginalized, rendered decorative, or erased. That is, through embracing this framework, we have been able to more clearly see how the narratives of Old West community, the focus on the missions’ architecture and gardens, as well as the community’s annual tourist-drawing parade and swallows festival offer up a generally aestheticised, sanitized, and idealized version of history. Moreover, the PIA framework has prompted attentiveness to minority stakeholders’ voices as well as their attempts to dislodge or reframe the dominant touristic narratives and imagery surrounding San Juan Capistrano. Whereas a PMSq approach alone may not spotlight the existence of these marginalized voices in the community, when paired with a PIA approach (and morphed into a political market coffee house model), it is no longer as easy to be deaf to the peripheral voices in the market square.

Having identified these sites of power imbalance and conflict over representations of the past by differently positioned stakeholders, I turn now to the final dimension of PIA which entails sharing findings with all parties and, where invited, participating in consensus building. At San Juan Capistrano what would this look like? Perhaps it would entail bringing together the various groups and communities involved in planning the festivities surrounding the festival of the swallows, as well as representatives from the mission, the Historical Society, and various ethnic communities residing or historically based in San Juan Capistrano in a location separate from the coffee chat venues to forge new, less problematic narratives and imagery of San Juan Capistrano’s past – narratives that include the currently obscured histories of some of San Juan Capistrano’s historic ethnic minorities. This is perhaps the trickiest charge of all those entailed in PIA. Scholars working in museum settings have underscored the challenges, debates, and compromises entailed in attempting to address long-standing critiques of representations of local ethnic groups in museum showcases by bringing together various community stakeholders to collaboratively forge new, more uniformly acceptable cultural displays (Jonaitis & Inglis, 1992; Kahn, 2000). Miriam Kahn’s comments about the collaborative process of exhibit revision at Seattle’s Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture may scare off some tourism planners from embracing such an approach, as she writes,

Because community involvement is collaborative in nature, every statement, whether verbal or visual, becomes a compromise. The more collaborative the process is, the more of a compromise the product will be. This is why some visitors [will] see/hear … a confusing cacophony, while others will see it as a presentation of diminished and destabilized cultural caricatures (Kahn, 2000, p. 71).

Moreover, as Jonaitis and Inglis (1992) observe and Kahn underscores, no matter how much one involves native peoples, bias can never be fully eliminated. Nevertheless, as Kahn concludes, despite the problems and challenges encountered, the collaborative approach was ultimately worthwhile, and the Burke Museum’s collaboratively conceived galleries were generally deemed a success. Those of us working in touristic settings who
nurture hopes of cultivating sites more attuned to issues of cultural diversity and inequality should take heart.

To sum up, this case study of San Juan Capistrano shows the promise of embracing a PIA approach in order to identify and address the underlying, hidden racisms in touristic venues. In addition, the case of San Juan Capistrano suggests a way in which the PMSq model might be productively reframed in other destinations to facilitate more inclusive approaches to developing tourism policy. A PMSq coffee house model (without a gatekeeper, yet with a facilitator who draws heavily on the rhetoric of community) may offer the possibility of enabling both powerful and minority stakeholders to come together in a more convivial (though occasionally conflictual) manner to find common ground for policy-making and community-building. I suggest that tourism policy-makers concerned with social justice would do well to incorporate insights and strategies drawn from this fusion of PIA and a PMSq Coffee House model.

Notes
1. In 2008 alone, 25 potential new world heritage sites were identified in the USA alone (http://www.nps.gov/oia/topics/worldheritage/USWH_Sites.jpg), with a reformulated list of 14 nominees forwarded on to the UNESCO World Heritage Center. This figure represents only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, as far more regionally and locally proclaimed heritage sites are emerging that may not achieve global recognition but are, nevertheless, important regional leisure destinations.
2. ‘Californios’ refers to the Hispanic populations from colonial Mexico who arrived, settled on, and colonized the California frontier in the period ranging between 1769 and 1821. This term is also used for their descendants.
3. The Acjachemen (or Acâgchemem) people are also known as ‘the Juaneno,’ as they were dubbed by San Juan Capistrano missionaries.
4. For samples of this genre of representation, see McGroarty (1929) and the 1927 Mary Astor film Rose of the Golden West (a romanticized story of California’s Spanish days filmed on location in the Mission San Juan Capistrano grounds).
5. It should be noted, however, that despite this influx, Californios (old Hispanic families residing in California) and Indian remained the largest groups in San Juan Capistrano through the 1930s (Haas, 1995, p. 110).
6. As Haas (1995) observes, it was partly in the interests of establishing a broader based economy for the struggling town that O’Sullivan embarked upon the mission restoration with the hopes of promoting tourism (p. 125).
7. Some years later, it was determined that the swallows actually fly to Goya, Argentina, and not Jerusalem.
8. Today, less than 10% of San Juan Capistrano’s land remains available for further development.
9. According to Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2002), emotional appeal, media attention, and marketing are all essential ingredients to place branding.
10. The swallow festivities and celebration of western community imagery have become so entwined with San Juan Capistrano orientations that upon taking office, San Juan Capistrano city officials are presented with the western wear accoutrements of badges and bandanas.
11. The Fiesta Association is a volunteer-run organization with an open-door membership policy. This group plays a key role in organizing and monitoring many of the San Juan Capistrano’s swallows festival activities.
12. It should be noted that the regular participants in this gathering tend to be somewhat demographically skewed toward retirees and professionals with flexible work-schedules and immigrant laborers and working mothers are rarer. However, on occasions when controversial decisions were on the horizon, working male and female minority stakeholders made it a point to attend the first half-hour of the meeting in order to speak out about the issues at hand before beginning their work days.
To a lesser degree, the town’s disappearing or long-suffering swallows were occasionally invoked (often with ironic humor), as a metaphor for developments that some perceived as threats to San Juan Capistrano’s collective well-being. For instance, when developers proposed building a golf course on open land in a run-off area perceived by local environmentalists to be unsuitable for development, members of the environmentalist group attended the coffee chats to rouse support for their battle: their fliers and entreaties at the coffee chat emphasized the need to ‘save our open space, save our swallows’ heritage.’ As they stressed, the swallows had been systematically driven from the center of town due to rampant development, to the point that they need to be enticed back by the release of ladybugs for the benefit of tourists – allowing the golf course development would be akin to the ‘death knell’ for the swallows which have ‘been with us since before the days of Father Serra.’ Although many at the coffee chat initially relished the idea of a local golf course (and developers attended to push for their cause, as well), the strategic deployment of community symbols in this forum (which is attended by public officials) sway public opinion, and the proposal was rejected by City Hall, despite the offer of developers to sweeten the deal with the construction of a new city park.

References


