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Book Review: High Stakes: Florida Seminole Gaming and Sovereignty

Jessica R. Cattelino, *High Stakes: Florida Seminole Gaming and Sovereignty*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2008

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Abstract:

In this lucidly written, carefully conceived, persuasively argued and thoroughly researched book, Jessica Cattelino studies the ways that members of the Seminole Indian nation have reconfigured material and symbolic forms of their sovereignty in the casino-era. As such, *High Stakes* makes a valuable contribution to literature on cultural economy, cultural studies, political economy and cultural history in addition to the author's home discipline of anthropology. It also makes an intellectual intervention at a moment which has seen Indigenous ownership of legal gambling businesses become the object of often contradictory discourses which Cattelino relates to '...more general American anxieties...about the effects of economic power upon cultural difference and the role of differential political status in a democratic multicultural nation'(8).

In an attempt to unsettle the colonial logics of Indigenous-settler relations, which often frame debates on tribal gambling in, the United States, Cattelino combines participant observation and cultural history with a theoretical framework which displaces questions of 'authenticity' to explore how the fungibility of money and the materiality of sovereignty have enabled Seminole to (re)produce inalienable but necessarily contested forms of cultural value in the casino era.

In chapter one, the focus is on the role of Indigenous agency in determining the material forms of sovereignty in past and current economic ventures. In contrast to some other gambling nations, Seminole tend to disarticulate gambling from cultural aspects of their identity which they value as inalienable. This illustrates a dynamic process through which certain aspects of economic activity such as cattle-ranching, craft and patchwork clothing production and alligator wrestling have been given gendered cultural value while gambling tends to be grouped with other areas of past and present economic activity such as agricultural, construction and manufacturing work, regarded as alienable from Seminole cultural identity. Since the most valued forms of work are those which connect to 'other forms of distribution and obligation' (50) the majority of Seminole have sought employment within the expanded sphere of tribal government produced by gambling rather than in the area of gaming service delivery.

In chapter two, Cattelino considers how gaming revenue is tied to Seminole consumption considered both collectively and individually. Countering non-Seminole gambling opponents' worries that the nation has 'sold out' to capitalist materialism, she examines the major projects into which money has been channeled. She also examines the way that relative affluence has shifted prior meanings attached to consumer goods, focusing in particular on the automobile. Other aspects of consumption affected by gambling wealth are related to intergenerational anxieties about the values of children who are now able to buy the latest entertainment media and technological gadgets and issues raised by non-Seminole 'marrying-into Seminole wealth as well as the inheritance rights of children born to Seminole men and non-Seminole women. The lure to outsiders of Seminole wealth has also led to an influx of non-Seminole claimants to a previously unacknowledged Indigenous heritage, leading to disputes over the relative weight to be granted to aspects of identity such as blood quantum and clan membership as grounds of belonging.



In chapter three the focus is on the distribution of gaming wealth within the Seminole nation and the cultural factors that shape tribal leaders' investment choices. Rather than perpetuating a Western ethnocentric view that money is constitutively opposed to Aboriginal culture, Cattelino focuses on the fungible qualities of money which enable it to be given specific personal and political meanings. She demonstrates how Seminole understand their positions of relative poverty and wealth at different historical moments as inextricable from intra- and inter-tribal political relationships. Cattelino argues further that the ways gambling revenue is distributed between individual and communal interests exploits money's fungibility to 'selectively generate inalienability' (103). In this context per-capita dividends paid to individuals are simultaneously cultural signifiers of discontinuity with the federal welfare era and of an era of greater dependency on tribal government, leaders of which campaign on the basis of competing models of wealth distribution.

Chapter four combines a theoretical discussion of sovereignty with cultural, historical and ethnographic research on Seminole housing to demonstrate how economic and symbolic aspects of sovereignty are *materialized* in the casino-era. Cattelino departs from a Foucaultian paradigm in which sovereignty is defined against 'governmentality' and reduced to a formal political-legal status concerned with the value of autonomy and which is sometimes encapsulated in the proud claims that Seminole make about being an 'unconquered people' who never signed a treaty with the US. Instead she presents Seminole sovereignty in terms of the everyday ability to make informed decisions as part of an evolving group. This everyday experience and enactment of sovereignty is illustrated through a cultural history of Seminole housing from the moment of federal tribal 'reorganization' in 1957 to current housing developments on reservations in the casino era.

The final chapter builds clearly on the previous arguments and connects the ethnography to wider questions about capitalism and colonialism in settler societies:

Indigenous economic power in the casino era brings to the surface American anxieties about capitalism and materialism, service economies, and capital mobility. The order of things grows less clear when economic actions undertaken by the few tribes with substantial casino wealth start to look less like assimilation than beating settler Americans at their own game – and perhaps changing the rules along the way (200).

It is easy to agree with Cattelino's conclusion that 'The stakes of Seminole gaming remain high, but the odds are with the house' (205). However, and in spite of the attractions of her argument, I finished reading Cattelino's exemplary ethnography with a question.

If the cultural role of white possession within broader logics of settler colonialism is taken seriously, how is the displacement of a discourse of Indigenous autonomy with one of interdependent distinctiveness achieved and sustained? As long as possessiveness remains a structural and thoroughly institutionalized aspect of white subjectivity in settler-colonial nations, Indigenous autonomy needs to be continually asserted. The interdependent distinctiveness of Indigenous people will never simply 'be' in such contexts; the default position of white sovereignty is to circumscribe the economic and political power of Indigenous people, invoking cultural authenticity as a way of possessively imposing a double bind between a pre-historic era of recognized sovereignty and a post-colonial era in which a journey towards assimilation is presented as historically inevitable. The odds of Indigenous gaming continuing to function as a vehicle for empowering articulations of sovereignty in Seminole or other Indigenous nations do not look so good as to warrant premature celebration. Instead, the challenge remains one of working to permanently remove Indigenous sovereignty from the table as a stake on which non-Indigenous settler states periodically gamble as though the right by which we performatively claim its possession in the first instance has ever held legitimacy in the laws that continue to govern Indigenous lands.