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# Hard Rock Indigeneity: Ritual and Personhood in Las Vegas

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## Abstract

The past decade has seen a boom in research dedicated to experiential design in the casino industry, focused on how that design both lures and secures the patronage of customers. However, it is my contention that there has been insufficient attention paid to the reciprocal relationship between casino and patron. Using the Mohegan Sun in Las Vegas as a case study, I discuss how that casino - which is defined by partnerships between the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut, Virgin Hotels and JC Hospitality, as well as a legacy relationship with the Hard Rock franchise, owned by the Seminole Tribe of Florida - possesses a unique identity that informs its experiential design; an identity and design approach that is, in turn, informed by patrons. The casino space is shaped by a multitude of forces outside the purview of experiential designers, including patron's prior relationship with the space and the casino's position in the wider 'field' of Las Vegas. Using sensory ethnography, walking ethnography and autoethnographic approaches, I explore the sensory elements of both the Mohegan Sun and the wider Las Vegas landscape. It is my argument that the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas possesses its own form of personhood, borne from the capitalist forces that shape it, as well as habitus and Indigenous notions of animist personhood.

## KEYWORDS

*sensory ethnography; casino; gambling; ambiance; habitus of space; walking ethnography; Indigenous gaming; personhood; ritual; Las Vegas*

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*The King tells all on the Las Vegas Strip (David Welch).*

In 2020 I found myself living in Las Vegas, both fascinated and appalled by an environment that gives itself up to indulgence, of every stripe. The experience fostered a profound interest in the roles and functions of casinos, though as an anthropologist rather than gambler. This interest led me to the understanding that the casinos found on the Las Vegas Strip, and its periphery, could be framed as *ritual* centres; and further, these ritual centres form component parts of a whole, constituting the larger space/place that is Las Vegas, with each component endowed with its own 'personality'. Indeed, my research also found that casinos could demonstrate a form of *personhood* that challenges how the concept is typically applied. In an attempt to understand this

phenomenon, this thesis uses a particular method, walking ethnography, to interrogate the wider city Las Vegas, as well as interviews and observations at a particular site – the Indigenous-operated casino, the Mohegan Sun. The Mohegan Sun casino offered a unique opportunity to explore the dynamics of the casino as a ritual space, as well as the features (including design, partnerships, atmospherics, management, materiality, and patronage) that comprise its personhood.

My fieldwork, which lasted close to two years, revealed that patrons, management and the wider landscape played *equally important* roles in shaping a casino's identity, and, by extension, its experiential design. Employing sensory, walking, digital and autoethnography as well as photo elicitation, I navigated the Las Vegas Strip and the wider landscape in an effort to understand the perspective of patrons and identify the city's sensory signs and symbols; to decode its syntax. Weaving these various strands of data together with a narrative, storytelling approach inspired by the work of Tim Ingold (2008) (2016) (2022), I uncovered a ritual that takes place in the city on a daily basis. While the ritual differs from casino to casino, in the 'desert sleek' halls of the Mohegan Sun it takes the form of *sophistication*; a sophistication defined by the complicated and compromised status of an Indigenous-operated casino, and the desire of patrons to 'preform' sophistication within the casino space. In tracing this ritual, I draw on the theory of Victor Turner (2002) (1974), along with Claudia Irazabal's notion of *hyperkitsch* (2007) as well as theories of ritual space, specifically the work of human geographer Yi Fu Tuan (2011) and historians of religion Jonathan Z. Smith (2010) and Thomas Tweed (2015). It is my argument that the ritual that takes place at the Mohegan Sun is both *generative* and reciprocal, and endows the casino with its own form of *personhood*. A personhood

defined by the purpose the casino serves for the community who frequent its halls, and the purpose it serves its owners and operators.

## Casino Design

The past decade has seen a boom in research dedicated to experiential design in the casino industry, and how that design both lures and secures the patronage of customers. The city of Las Vegas is central to this still emerging literature. Las Vegas is the second most visited tourist site in the U.S after New York City, with some 42 million visitors a year (Doyle, 2021). It is a city dominated by hotels and casinos, located in the heart of the Mojave Desert. Despite gambling being legal in several states, Las Vegas far outstrips its competition (Giosue, 2021). Similarly designed casino-focused cities have arisen in Singapore and Macau, though they have tended to be "dingy affairs, [with] small and smoky rooms [and] few of the amenities and none of the pizzazz of a Las Vegas or Monte Carlo gaming hall" (Kurlantzick 2005, p. 284). What differentiates Las Vegas casinos from their competitors is their heavy use of what experiential designers and consultants label 'atmospherics'. Atmospherics focus on spatial layout, ambient conditions like light, sound and smell, as well as the signs and symbols present in the casino space (Bitner, 1992). The majority of Las Vegas-focused ethnographic literature,<sup>1</sup> which includes Scott Lukas' influential work on themeification (2007) and Natasha Dow Schull's widely praised *Addiction By Design* (2014), has focused on the city's negative aspects: the ways in which casino managers 'manipulate' the senses of their patrons; directing patrons to gamble on devices that offer little chance of financial reward (Schull, 2014) as well as the wider ramifications of those strategies, with studies on gambling

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<sup>1</sup> To be discussed in chapter 2.

addiction and homelessness (Borchard, 2009). The literature's bleak picture of the Las Vegas casino experience led me to pose the following research question: with all of the perceived downsides of the casino experience, *what purpose does the Las Vegas casino space serve for those who frequent its halls and how does that space differ for different communities?* As my fieldwork began in 2020 and continued through early 2022, I was also forced to ask the inevitable question: *how have these spaces been altered by COVID-19?*

I found answers to these questions in my chosen field site, the Mohegan Sun in Las Vegas. The Mohegan Sun possesses a complex identity, defined by partnerships between the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut, Virgin Hotels and JC Hospitality, as well as a legacy relationship with the Hard Rock franchise owned by the Seminole Tribe of Florida (Rosica, 2016). It was also an identity borne from COVID-19, as the casino opened its doors in 2021. While the Mohegan Sun was Las Vegas' first Indigenous-operated casino, it was not considered an Indigenous casino by locals; this status would fall to the Palms Casino, owned by the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, when it re-opened in 2022 (Robertson, 2022). I discovered that, in the world of Las Vegas hotels, ownership conferred Indigeneity while operation did not. Following this thread of association, the Hard Rock franchise (a brand associated with 1990s alternative rock, which had occupied the casino site prior to the Mohegan Sun, and still helped define its patronage), was a manifestation of Indigeneity: a Hard Rock Indigeneity.

## Background: A New Zealander in Las Vegas

As a New Zealand-born Pākehā male in his mid-thirties living abroad, I felt unmoored in Las Vegas' desert landscape and assailed by the curious assortment of symbols that made up the casino space.<sup>2</sup> Raised in a wooded valley in the seaside town of Nelson, and having spent much of my adult life in New York City, I perceived the Nevada landscape as a forbidding, alien environment. It was clear, from my first visit, that Las Vegas was very different from the East Coast<sup>3</sup> which consists of anonymous grey towns, past their prime, decorated with Dunkin' Donuts and Burger King franchises. Las Vegas is a spectacle in the desert. The Sierra Nevada Mountain ranges loom heavy over the landscape, with a gigantic black pyramid visible from the airport's tarmac, sending a spotlight heavenward. To my eyes, the city was an elaborate monument to kitsch and tastelessness that was impressive for its perversity and scale. The scale, indeed, was impactful. In New Zealand, architecture tends to take more modest proportions.

The more time I spent downtown and on the Las Vegas Strip, the less I felt I understood the city. I relocated to Las Vegas from Los Angeles in November 2020, so that my partner could be closer to her family, and to escape the effects of California's many COVID-19 lockdowns, which manifested as large-scale protests and an increase in street violence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Initially visiting Las Vegas on a regular basis for work based in New York, I came to live fulltime in the city, mere blocks from the strip.

<sup>3</sup> I lived in New York for over a decade.

<sup>4</sup> After a move to Los Angeles at the start of 2019, I found myself in the midst of a pandemic. Hollywood, where I was residing, was shuttered and overwhelmed by crime. Stores were adorned with signs pleading not to be looted; guns were worn openly in the street; the national guard parked a tank outside the celebrated Mann's Chinese Theatre; homeless and drug addicts battled it out on a daily basis to regular police calls; a young woman was shot during a drag race held at a busy intersection. The pandemic was exacerbating tensions and Hollywood became a rallying point for Black Lives Matter protests. On one eventful morning, in the midst of a protest, armed guards inspected my laundry with a machine gun in my

It was an unlikely choice. Gambling had never appealed, nor blind drunkenness. I was also surprised by the number of people smoking. The prospect of people filling a large space with fumes and letting their ashes fall to the carpet was distinctly unappealing. I was most struck by how bombarded I felt. While New York has its claim to sensory overload, Las Vegas appeared to me to have escalated this sensation to the point of disorientation. Every two feet a bell rang; a light flashed; music thumped and echoed, overlaid with music booming from another room. People intoxicated and unfamiliar with how to navigate a crowd pushed, jostled and stumbled. Why, I asked myself, would people choose to spend time in this environment? I still felt Las Vegas was simply an escape from COVID-era Los Angeles. I felt a bias against the entire city, viewing it as sordid, impoverished and chaotic. This perspective shaped this thesis in many ways. My research was an attempt to come to terms with the city, and understand its purpose for those attracted to a such a singular desert outpost.

What I found in Las Vegas was, in a sense, a fun house mirror vision of my hometown, Nelson, which is located on the eastern shore of Tasman Bay in New Zealand's South Island. Both are resort towns. Nelson's lure (like Las Vegas) is sunshine, though there are no beaches to be found in the Mojave Desert. In my youth, Nelson's economy revolved around tourism and the fishing industry. Las Vegas' interests, however, are focused primarily on tourism and indulgence. As locals stressed to me in casual conversations, almost all jobs connect, in some way, with the casinos, whether it be dining, adventure tourism or serving casino employees. Like Los Angeles (a sprawling city for which Vegas serves as a satellite), its 'design' revolves around a series of

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building's basement. It seemed prudent to join my girlfriend's family in Las Vegas, which lies approx. 300 miles east of Los Angeles.

anonymous strip malls; each one catering to a different grouping of similarly anonymous housing.

I found Las Vegas to be a stifling and arid environment, with few trees and even fewer parks. Public spaces were practically non-existent, outside of the Strip and a three block 'arts district'. Having grown up in New Zealand, where parks and public spaces are plentiful, I was struck by what seemed to me to be a spatial impoverishment. Where many cities attempt to cater to their populace with public amenities and parks, Las Vegas seemed entirely geared toward the transient visitor, who cloister themselves in air-conditioned hotels. The environment demands a car and discourages interaction.<sup>5</sup> Locals who wish to socialise find themselves drawn to small, neighbourhood casino/bars. The Strip, locals told me, was best to be avoided, being viewed as a garish assault - not to mention a place of work. Local bars take two primary forms: chains like 'Dotties', which offer bar top poker machines, or gas station/grocery store casinos that permit smoking and (in some cases) drinking. The latter often had a distinct sense of community, with customers spending entire days in the space: shopping, filling up their cars and playing rounds on poorly maintained slot machines.

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<sup>5</sup> The focus is consumerism, with endless iterations of the same shops: Home Depot (a hardware store), Ross (a seller of discount homeware), Target, PetSmart, McDonalds and little else.



*Auntee M's Market, which serves as a mini mart/laundromat and video poker centre (David Welch).*

One of the closest of these venues to me was Auntee M's, which lay off the main drag in a small strip mall, just across the parking lot from a tattoo parlour and stripper pole 'fitness' centre. The road was desolate and industrial, with drug addicts making late night deals underneath a bridge, two blocks south. Outside, the homeless and mentally ill sought help, conversation and a place to dance as music blasted from damaged speakers. There was a clang, bang and sense of unease. I felt like a narcotics officer - both suspect and suspecting. Auntee M's served a dual role, like many Las Vegas so-called 'mom and pop shops'; by turns a grocery store, liquor outlet, laundromat and casino. The aisles were unevenly stocked and cluttered, leading into a laundry. Several slot machines lay opposite the confectionery aisle and were occupied throughout the day by regulars. Some smoked intensely, lost in the whirl of the machine. Others chatted,

commented and even went behind the counter to grab lighters, snacks and converse with staff.<sup>6</sup>

It was my impression that these community spaces were, in a sense, small-scale, localised versions of what was on offer at the major casinos (though at cheaper prices and without the flash of more polished casinos). When engaged in casual conversation with patrons of these multi-purpose casinos, I was told they were looking for comfort. They knew that they were part of Vegas' grand facade, but they preferred life backstage. Unlike Nelson, there were few outdoor pursuits on offer. Where the people of Nelson can go for a pleasure hike at any time of year, visit a beach or walk in the woods, residents of Las Vegas were severely limited. They were forced, instead, to live in a permanent liminoid space<sup>7</sup>; a life that revolves around the temporary escape of visitors from their daily experience. They served as both mediators and permanent participants in a ritual, outside the regular movement of time. With their senses dulled by stimulants and absent seasons, many locals spent their free time engaged in the ritual and their work hours observing it, locked away in enormous sense-distorting halls that natural light cannot reach. As I began to explore Las Vegas more fully, I was confused: why had this small

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<sup>6</sup> In these spaces, family life dominates. At Auntee M's, drama and comedy play out on a daily basis. The owner's children occupy the till for several hours a day, and their discussions spill across the space. The owner's son smoked marijuana with patrons in the parking lot, borrowed money from the till and regularly showed up late with half-baked apologies. His behaviour was treated permissively; the youthful indiscretions of a soon-to-be business owner. His sister was held to higher standards: she worked longer shifts, and held the till more consistently; though she still adopted an approach to customer service far looser than you would find in a larger casino - heckling and upbraiding her customers with a laugh. The majority of patrons seen loitering at Auntee M's were in late middle age. Their faces were creased and voices hoarse from decades of smoking. The machines lacked the pizzaz of the Strip; unlike the Konami serviced machines seen at MGM or Caesars Palace, they were chipped - their games sputtering against cracked and poorly illuminated backdrops. This didn't seem to bother the customers; they were there for the company and to enjoy a spin between a hostess twinkie and their fifth cigarette.

<sup>7</sup> To be discussed in chapter 2 and chapter 4, p. 63.

and inhospitable town in the middle of a barely habitable desert taken on such strange dimensions and what drew people from across the world to engage in this seemingly ritual behaviour? The unusual forms taken by 'casinos' like Auntee Ms also led me to question the very nature of what a casino *is*: the varieties in form are often radical and appeared to alter based on the needs of the community and environment.

## The Mohegan Sun and the COVID-19 Landscape

The change in operations in the early days of the pandemic was dramatic: crowds thinned, masks altered the nature of game play and the 'pandemic denial' discourse became a feature of casino entertainment.<sup>8</sup> During visits to Las Vegas in May and June of 2020, prior to my moving to the city fulltime in November of that year, I found that the Strip had been rendered a ghost town and 'the city that never sleeps' had shut off its lights. It was an eerie, post-apocalyptic sight. While many hotels had reopened by late 2021, a number remained shuttered (Svoboda, 2021). It was in this environment, where hotels were fighting to reclaim their clientele and convince reluctant customers to return, that the Mohegan Sun opened its doors.

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<sup>8</sup> One example is 1970s-era impressionist Rich Little, a long-term denizen of the Las Vegas club circuit. I saw Little perform at the 'Laugh Factory' at the Tropicana Hotel in 2021. The hotel was sparsely populated. The once glittering Strip was filled with empty casinos - the lights put out. Most of the crowd were of an older variety; fans who had experienced Little's heyday. He was now a living representative of Vegas history and the much-mythologised scene surrounding Frank Sinatra. Little took the time to personally thank me for coming: "See!" he proudly crowed to casino staff, "I have young fans!" Masks were conspicuously absent and Little made his position clear. In between moth-eaten impressions of vaudevillians like Jack Benny and George Burns, Little (a spry 80) introduced his doddering and enfeebled Joe Biden impression, complete with comically oversized face mask. This performance was met with hearty laughter. Only a month earlier there had been large anti-mask protests in the city. Little's other 'more recent' impersonation was Donald Trump, which took a more laudatory route. A large group, dressed in oversized shirts and baseball caps stumbled into the performance and displayed shock and confusion in response to the site unfolding before them. One muttered, audibly "what is this?"

I reached out to a number of casinos during this period, as part of my fieldwork, including the Boyd Corporation-owned Californian Hotel and Casino, which caters primarily to Chinese and Hawaiian communities (despite, or perhaps because of its Old West themeing) and larger scale hotels like Caesars Palace. I was met with resounding silence, no matter who I contacted. While COVID no doubt played a part in this silence, with casinos likely unwilling to discuss their setbacks, it was also part of a trend I discovered in the city, as I was generally met with suspicion by locals.<sup>9</sup>

The silence was broken with a flyer I received in the mail, announcing the opening of a new casino, the Mohegan Sun. Unlike the well-established hotels I had been contacting, the Mohegan Sun team were receptive to my inquiries and apparently keen to obtain publicity, of any kind. It turned out to be a piece of good fortune, as the casino proved to be a fascinating case study, with its status as Las Vegas' first Indigenous-operated casino, in partnership with Virgin Hotels and JC Hospitality, placing it outside of the Strip's fraternity. This was the case both geographically and thematically, as the Sun lies adjacent to the Strip - the last stop on the tour. The casino's glistening mid-century surfaces resemble Palms Springs, California chic far more than the gaudy Disneyesque facades and dive hall interiors of its more successful rivals.

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<sup>9</sup> The Las Vegas Paiute, despite multiple attempts in 2021, did not respond to my outreach. While, I received a response from the Moapa Band of Paiutes, who own a small casino, they informed me that they would be unavailable for interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## A Filmmaker on Foot

My interest in film was the impetus for my move to the U.S. in 2008 and led to my producing and directing a 2016 feature documentary.<sup>10</sup> It was this background, with its attendant interest in duration and how sound and images interact, that steered my decision making when choosing the city as a research site and heavily informed my perspective of the city, as I attempted to decipher the casino experience. It also pointed me in the direction of sensory ethnography - an approach that helped me decode the rapidly-shifting barrage of sights and sounds that guide you through the experience, as you travel from casino hall to casino hall. Anthropologist and former theme park trainer Scott Lukas suggested that every facet of the casino experience can be engineered to guide the casino patron through a space, via sensory cues like light and smell, as well as spatial design (Lukas, 2007). The sensory approach proved to be ideal, as it permitted me to place my own experiences front and centre.

My primary challenge as an anthropologist was gaining the trust of potential informants, as the majority of casino patrons at the Mohegan Sun and other casinos are transient, which made building rapport and arranging in-depth interviews all but impossible. Instead, I took up the patron's trail, experiencing the Strip and Fremont St. on foot and followed the weaving circumlocutions of the tourist. To understand the purpose of this pilgrimage to the desert, I realised that I needed to engage in the ritual myself: to trace their footsteps and experience the giddiness of sensation. I also needed to walk along the paths 'backstage' and experience the signs and symbols that were less obvious. I

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<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Conrad*, which focused on the poet CAConrad and the unsolved murder of his boyfriend in rural Tennessee.

needed to understand the symbols lightly inscribed on the surface (Ingold, 2016).<sup>11</sup> In this echoing prism of signs and gestures, all sensory elements play a part. I needed to cross the many elevated walkways and traipse from hotel to hotel, as I was bombarded with lights, smells... information. I needed to pass the semi-naked man in a cowboy hat singing to Mexican families pushing prams. I needed to pass the Mirage's exploding volcano. I needed to pass into the state visitors were seeking.

My documentarian's sensibility led me to place as much focus on tableau and the mingling of sensory elements, whether it be sound or visual stimuli, as the social. It is this lens that comes to the foreground in *chapter four* of my thesis - a chapter where I describe the outcomes of a walking ethnographic approach, as I explored Las Vegas and the wider landscape of Vegas on foot. My documentarian's gaze was manifested as distilled, sensory impressions - as angles, scenes and moments. Philosopher and anthropologist Francois Laplantine once wrote that cinema "tries to show the temporal character of the sensible - chromatic vibrations, the greater or lesser intensity of... overlapping sound flows, the impulses, frustrations, disappointments, and tiny curves of sentiments" (2015, pp. 88). A cinematic approach to temporal and 'chromatic vibrations' was invaluable in deciphering the encoded and sensory aspects of the Las Vegas casino; vice halls experienced as *sensually encountered locales* (Tweed, 2015). It soon became clear, however, that an abstract analysis of varying sensory impressions - rendered with a descriptive, bird's eye approach - was insufficient. I needed to find a way to explore this diverse data in a holistic, ethnographic manner, weaving together

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<sup>11</sup> Like the ruins of Templo Mayor buried beneath Mexico City Cathedral, or the layered cities described in *Freud's Civilization and its Discontents* (2022), Las Vegas consists of multiple strata; symbols stacked upon symbols (though some are etched more deeply, and not all have equal value or are as readily visible as others) - symbols best observed on foot. These include the stone mandalas of the city's homeless that will be discussed in chapter 4.

the sensory and autoethnographic, as well as the photo elicitation and interviews that I was able to arrange.<sup>12</sup>

The approach I settled on owes a significant debt to the work of Tim Ingold, whose style draws on diverse sources, ranging from ancient history to art, and often sees him interpreting these sources through the lens of phenomenological anthropology. Rooted in the theories of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and environmental psychologist J.J. Gibson, Ingold's work often focuses on perception and consciousness, though does not create binary divisions between the 'mind' of the individual actor and the environment. As Sarah Pink once noted, "[For] Ingold the mind does not have to 'piece together information about external objects delivered by way of different registers' and 'the senses are not keyboards or filters that mediate the traffic between mind and world'. Rather, he sees them as 'aspects of the functioning of the living being in its environment. And their synergy lies in the fact of their being powers of the same organism, engaged in the same action, and attending to the same world' (2011b: 314-5)" (Pink, 2015, p.6). It is this perspective that led to my placing *equal* focus on patrons and the environment they inhabit - with the unique sensory elements of the Las Vegas casino experience acting as both bridge and feedback mechanism, facilitating a form of dialogue between the individual and the *world*. Using autoethnographic methods,<sup>13</sup> I also placed myself in that loop and incorporated details of how my own perception was altered by the experience.

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<sup>12</sup> To be discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 12.

## The Mohegan Sun and Personhood

My identity as a New Zealander, and attendant interest in Indigenous New Zealand beliefs concerning the land, further informed my research when considering the wider Las Vegas environment and the nature of the Mohegan Sun casino. The Valley of Fire and Sloan Valley (which is a mere 15 minutes outside of the city) are marked with petroglyphs and other signs of the Indigenous Las Vegas Paiute Tribe and their forebears. These markers are largely invisible to visitors, and many locals too.<sup>14</sup> The entire terrain could be considered a mythical space (Tuan, 2011); a terrain where the ancestors of the Southern Paiute are enshrined in the landscape in the form of rocks, cliffs and other landmarks (Martineau, 1992). This relationship with *place* reminded me of New Zealand and the relationship between Māori and the Whanganui River, where the local Whanganui Iwi regard the river as a spiritual ancestor. In 2017, a watershed agreement was reached between the Whanganui Iwi and New Zealand government, granting the legal rights of personhood to the river (Hutchison, 2014). Outside of corporations, this was an unheard-of application of rights to an 'inanimate' territory. No equivalent rights exist for the Southern Paiute, who are considered by Las Vegas residents to be all but invisible.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of place in Māori culture need not cover as broad a territory as a river (Vicente, 2020). Following this line of thought, the focus of my research turned towards the unusual status of a Mohegan operated casino (a property managed by a corporation owned by a sovereign nation) in the territory of the Las Vegas Paiute. The Southern

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<sup>14</sup> To be discussed in chapter 4, p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> To be discussed in chapter 4, p.p. 67-69.

Paiute and Mohegan share complementary, if somewhat differing,<sup>16</sup> attitudes towards personhood and their native territories. To fully interrogate this complex, multifaceted site, I examined the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas from a *top down*, institutional perspective as well as *bottom up*, patron-level perspective, conducting multiple interviews with staff, which covered everything from human resource policy to experiential design, as well as the experience of patrons. In my research, I came to realise that, to answer my core question "*what purpose does the Las Vegas casino space serve for those who frequent its halls and how does that space differ for different communities?*", I needed to understand the purpose from the sides of both patron and casino manager, as well as how the landscape and the casino space itself played a part in this relationship. The relationship between casino and patron proved to be complex and reciprocal, with the casino's identity both *informed by* and *informing* the patron experience. The more time I spent at the Mohegan Sun, the more I realised that the many forces that served to shape the casino, as well as the patron, required investigation. In this thesis, I attempt just that: to capture the many forces at work, shaping both the space and patron, starting with the wider Las Vegas landscape and moving, ultimately, towards the complicated dance that takes place at the Mohegan Sun; a ritual of *sophistication*. A ritual, I will argue, that endows the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas with its own, unique form of personhood; a personhood borne from the casino's ritual function.

In the next chapter, I will review the literature I drew on for this thesis, including sensory ethnographies focused on Las Vegas casinos and experiential design. I will also cover theory related to personhood and ritual space. In chapter 3, I outline my methodological approaches, which were uniquely tailored to this research and include sensory, walking,

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<sup>16</sup> To be discussed in chapters 4, 5 and 7.

digital and autoethnography, as well as photo elicitation. Chapters 4 and 5 will focus on the sensory elements of wider Las Vegas, and the Mohegan Sun, specifically, while chapters 6 and 7 form a two-part discussion of the ritual that takes place within the halls of the Mohegan Sun, and how that ritual endows the casino with a form of personhood. Chapter 8 will conclude the thesis with a recap of the argument I will be making throughout, and point toward future directions for research.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the literature I will be drawing on throughout this thesis. The first section will focus on experiential design in Las Vegas hotels and casinos. These design strategies are called *atmospherics* by casino operators (Turley, Fugate & Milliman, 1990) and impact all the senses via unique scents, floor design, lighting and sound. The survey will begin with Las Vegas-focused sensory ethnographies and journal articles, and touch on the work of Laplantine and his engagement with transcultural psychologist Laurence Kirmayer's writings on cognitive loops that extend through the environment (2015). From there, I will discuss Scott Lukas' work on *themeification* (2007) as well as Erving Goffman's writings on the *performative* nature of the Vegas experience (2013).

In the second section of this chapter, I will turn my attention to the work of several theorists who have engaged with notions of space and place, as they relate to ritual. Casino atmospherics are only part of the picture and do not fully address what draws patrons to the city from across the globe. Having spent almost two years in Las Vegas, I realised that the landscape and wider environment are as important to the patron as the engineered worlds developed by casino operators. This section will include discussions of Jean Baudrillard's application of *hyperreality* to the city of Las Vegas (2009) and Claudia Irazabal's extension of Baudrillard's ideas in the form of *hyperkitsch* (2007). Concepts related to the social construction of space, as applied by human geographers Michael Harvey (2001) and Edward Soja (1989) will be explored, as well as Yi-Fu Tuan (2011) and Jonathan Z. Smith's (2010) conceptions of ritual space and Thomas Tweed's discussions of the potential personhood of space (2015). In addition to these writers, I

will also touch on the ritual concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), Georges Bataille (2012) and Victor Turner (1974) (2002).

## **Servicescapes and Atmospheric**

The study of the Las Vegas casino industry is an ever-expanding field, divided into two primary strands. The most prolific of these strands deals with the social ramifications of the gambling industry from the 'bottom' up. The second places a focus on the 'top down': examining the lures and snares used by the industry to encourage patrons to their hotels and engage them in gaming. The 'bottom up' group tends to rely on participant interviews and records the lives of individuals impacted by the casino system. Examples of issues discussed include the 'leisure activities' that have fostered the growth of the city's homeless population (Borchard, 2009) and the cycle of dependency between medication and gambling (Schull, 2006). 'Top down' ethnographers more often turn to the *space* itself - treating casinos as symbols of commerce or 'nowhere' (Carosso, 2006) (Venturi, et al. 2017); examining the nature and history of experiential design and how that design is purposefully geared to 'manipulate' the senses of patrons.

One of the most influential Las Vegas-focused ethnographies of the past decade is Natasha Dow Schull's *Addiction by Design* (2014), an ethnographic study of gamblers who are addicted to slot machines. In her work, Schull balances both 'bottom up' and 'top down' approaches: interrogating the mechanisms that lure patrons to machines and keep them in what players refer to as "the zone" (2014, p.p. 1 - 34); a liminoid space,<sup>17</sup> where the user dissociates from standard time and engages in repetitive behaviour. This

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<sup>17</sup> A term coined by Turner to describe ritual spaces in the modern world. Discussed in greater detail in chapter 4, p. 63.

feedback loop is constantly altered by the algorithms of the slot machine, which are programmed to follow a Skinnerian schedule of behavioural reinforcement (Schull, 2014) (Skinner, 2000). For every win, there is a dry period that is offset by the positive reinforcement of 'free' plays. Pursuit of this zone becomes all-encompassing for those addicted to the buzz and whirl of the slots.

Schull documented the daily experience of addicts through a careful cataloguing of sensory impressions; impressions obtained through interviews, participant observation and roughly sketched diagrams (for the purpose of gaining deeper insight into her participant's 'mental maps' of casinos and wider Vegas<sup>18</sup>). This approach is balanced with analysis of the behavioural architecture of casinos, gleaned through conference attendance and interviews with casino managers. The principles of this behavioural architecture are derived from the work of Bill Friedman, a former gambling addict who outlined a series of 'standards' for the optimization of slot-machine use. Friedman's standards were designed to ensure the fidelity of 'the zone' and heighten confusion in the visitor. This confusion is achieved by creating a 'labyrinth' for patrons to negotiate, including pathways that lead only to small, secluded 'islands' of slot machines (Friedman, 2000).

In *Addiction by Design* (2014), Schull makes use of Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2008) but fails to elaborate on a human/non-human network of relations beyond the slot player's 'relationship' with the slot machine (a relationship slot developers describe as 'irrational', but impossible to avoid) (Schull, 2014, p.p. 107 - 166). Schull stops short of connecting this relationship to a wider network of relations within the casino space, outside of the vaguely defined manipulative aspects of experiential design.

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<sup>18</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in the chapters 3 and 4.

She only partially realises Laplantine's observation, drawing on the work of transcultural psychologist Laurence Kirmayer, that we are part of a larger sensory *system*; a system that can not only be *positive*, but is - in fact - inseparable from the social (Laplantine, 2015). Schull fills this gap with Kleinian object relations theory and Winnicott's extension of Klein's theory into the field of play (Schull, 2014, p. 172). She identifies the 'zone' as a psychological space similar to the mindset of infancy; a period when infants struggle to differentiate between people, objects and the self. For Winnicott, *play* is a psychological bridge that serves to bring a sense of *awareness* and emotional fulfilment to the player and a consciousness of others (Winnicott, 2012). Beyond this useful observation, Schull fails to exploit the part the larger environment and network of relationships contributes to such a state.

In the sensory ethnographies focused on Las Vegas, there is little discussion of the patrons who flock to the city year-round. The drive of this group is not *purely* to gamble; the proliferation of exotic car rental companies, theatrical productions and slot machine-free bars attest to this. The previously discussed 'bottom up' ethnographers focus on disadvantaged or minority groups in the Las Vegas field; groups who are directly impacted by the economics of casinos. Schull, in particular, stresses the importance of slot machine patrons due to the apparent profitability of that industry (though this group makes up less than 20% of hotel attendance) (Schull, 2015). While richly detailed, Schull's sensory exploration of the casino space is limited to the experience of slot machine users (who typically limit their interaction to specific segments of the casino, and avoid other aspects of the experience) and her alignment of this methodology with theory is only partially realised.

It is the manipulation of the patron that is of primary interest to ethnographers taking a 'top down' approach. Among the more prominent anthropologists working in this vein is Lukas, who has written extensively about the 'themeification' of space: an experiential design approach rooted in a model popularised by Walt Disney Studios in California (Lukas, 2007). While Disneyland drew inspiration from early 20th century World's Fairs and the less thematically developed Knott's Berry Farm, it revolutionised the industry with the promise of a self-contained world; a fantasy space offering both an extension and inversion of reality (Sorkin, 2011 p.p. 205 - 232). Most importantly, Disneyland was intended to be *immersive*; a place to forget the everyday. Disneyland is located several miles outside of downtown LA, on a vast property that permits managers to control the wider environment. Starting in the 1960s, Las Vegas adopted many of Disneyland's principals, starting with Caesars Palace (one of the first 'themed' casinos) (Cantrell, 1995). Lukas, Sorkin and others have spilled much ink discussing this 'themeification'; a process that carries as far as the placement of lights in parking lots to the sloping of streets leading to casino entrances (Blumenberg & Ehrenfeucht, 2008). Every facet of the patron's experience is guided, from their entrance to eventual exit, and continues on to the wider environment, with bridges and rail systems connecting various casinos.

The quotidian, day-to-day experience is almost entirely missing from writing on themeification. The literature is above all ideological; invoking Jane Jacobs's rallying cry for small-scale neighbourhood improvement in reaction to the engineered Le Corbusier-esque 'radiant city' model (Jacobs, 2020). This literature tackles similar issues and common enemies to Jacobs; figures like Robert Moses (a leading New York city planner in the early 1960s) who was intimately involved with Disney's mid-60s projects; projects that led to the development of EPCOT (an intended 'city of the future', with every detail planned from rose beds to appliances). The intended residents of EPCOT were a

transient worker population, most suitable for providing data; mere commodities in a commodified environment (Lukas, 2012). As with the sensory ethnographies previously discussed, this approach neglects the agency of the resident/city dweller/patron and their vital part in the ecosystem. An absence in the literature that led me to my thesis question, and a consideration of how the Las Vegas casino space serves the patron. Anthropologists, such as David Howes, have continued these investigations into casino atmospherics using a *sensory* methodology; examining the sights, smells and even physicality of movement within the casino environment. These investigations have primarily fallen within a psychological or 'managerial' context: in other words, the way that a space is designed to manipulate the patron to enact a specific set of behaviours. This is a rich field, with invaluable insights into the mechanics of the environment. It is also one of the most transparently 'manipulative' of spaces. These writers analyse the role that the carefully curated sights, sounds and odours have in *shaping* patron behaviour.

A recent study by aforementioned Lynch, Howes & French (2020) brought the patron back into the picture, examining the sensory flows and rhythmic intensities of the casino space; an approach that owes a particular debt to Laplantine (2015, p.p. 37-53). The writers hold that the senses should not be examined separately but be considered in terms of how they *mingle* (2020, p. 194). It is this mingling that is the truest representation of the patron's experience. As Pink wrote "If one of the objectives of the ethnographer is to come to know as others do, then we need to account for the processes which we, and the participants in our research, come to know" (Pink, 2015, p. 35). While this statement could be interpreted as a call for a pedagogical or broadly psychological lens, it was made in the context of discussing Ingold's 'ecological' approach: "the total field of relations... in a richly structured environment" (Ingold, 2022,

p. 353). Ingold's stressing of *relations* is key; it is through our senses that we learn, and those senses do not exist in isolation. To understand the participant's experience, particularly in a space as sensorially complex as the Las Vegas casino, the ethnographer must account for all the senses, and their relations. This relationship is both formed by, and informs the wider ecosystem.

An understanding of physicality is also critical to this process. Laplantine has stressed the importance of physicality in a sensory ethnographic approach (Laplantine, 2015, p.p. 95 - 105). A participant's movements and interaction with the environment contains layers of invaluable 'knowledge' that help the ethnographer chart the participants transformation: "the discourse of 'place'", Laplantine wrote "... of 'location', and even of 'movement' are spatial markers incapable of giving a full account of all the body's transformations. It grows, loses vigour... but also... reddens when it becomes angry or ashamed, trembles and grows pale when afraid" (2015, p. 103). In other words, documenting the full spectrum of engagement with the wider ecosystem and feedback loop is critical for a deeper understanding of the ritual 'transformation' inherent in the casino space.<sup>19</sup>

### **Space, Place and Ritual**

Sociologist Erving Goffman's work as a croupier at a Las Vegas casino in the early 1960s led to his pathfinding work on game play (Goffman, 2013); his casino role enabling him to observe the social dynamics of the roulette table. Goffman placed particular emphasis on the physically 'performative' aspects of game play (2013); how the behaviours demonstrated in gambling reinforce the social status of the patron, while providing a

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<sup>19</sup> To be explored in-depth in chapter 4, and following chapters.

simultaneous 'relief' from those roles through the act of play. It is, for Goffman, a form of social release that reinforces the social order through its *undoing the order* in a process similar to the rites of rebellion in South East Africa described by Gluckman (2008). This terrain has been covered more recently in Jeffrey Sallaz' study of gambling and Geertzian 'deep play' in contemporary South Africa (2008).

Erving Goffman's work on play in the casino space and performativity (Goffman, 2008) enters the realm of ritual but keeps the frame narrow; he views casinos as a series of one-on-one, high stakes interactions not unlike a 1950s western (Goffman, 2013 p. 17 - 85); a theatre of performed masculinity, femininity and status. While this is a facet of the larger experience, it is only a portion of a wider canvas where the performance of wealth and 'fun' is acted out on a much broader scale. While physicality is important to the experience, it is not the only element. The way people present themselves is impacted by their environment: the volume of sound, proximity of patrons (Hall, 1992), visual stimulus and smells. Philosopher Edward Casey, in his writings on the *phenomenology of place*, wrote that "place is an event" (2007); a locus of action and transformation. What the place is comprised of, in other words, is central to forming experience.

In order to make better sense of my data, I made use of the work of several theorists who have focused on *space*. Jean Baudrillard - the doyen of 1980s post-structuralists - is among the most widely quoted of philosophers interpreting the Las Vegas experience. His work *America* cast the city as a hologram, in the sense that the symbols to be found there both represent and are a piece of the larger picture that makes up America (2009, p.29). He describes this hologram as a "three-dimensional dream"; a wild alternation of *similar* elements, from large cars and picket fences to desolate stretches of road, held together by a "beam of light" (2009, p. 30). These symbols are placed within - what is,

for Baudrillard - the strongest metaphor of all: the desert. The desert *is* America; a hollow land of death, primitivity, emptiness and negation only visible to the sophisticated 'European' outsider, i.e., Baudrillard himself. Baudrillard saw death and hollowness in American faces; atrophied, emotionless smiles that bore more relation to the symbolic representations of warmth found in billboards and advertising than any genuine expression of warmth. Baudrillard held that Americans were unable to recognize this state as they were themselves a part of America's *Hyperreality*; a state where artificiality has replaced reality. Symbols dominate, but those symbols have become divorced from their referent (Baudrillard, 2009). It can be suggested that Las Vegas, then, is a city of representations removed from experience, from emotion and lived reality. It is a land without history, a shadow and a hologram.

Claudia Irazabal, from the University of Maryland extended Baudrillard's work by wedding the notion of hyperreality with *kitsch* - a form of art that embraces the exaggeration of stock or cliched forms (2007). Irazabal views Las Vegas as a prime example of *Hyperkitsch* - a challenge to the notions of "originality, authenticity, and symbolic depth"(2007, p.204) - favouring allegory and surface over substance. *Hyperkitsch*, in Irazabal's reading, is rooted in urban disaffection - a comforting superficiality sought by city dwellers disrupted by capitalism's continual re-shaping of the cityscape.

Many of the spatial theorists discussed in this chapter fall into similar patterns to sensory ethnographers.<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard, for instance, reserves agency for himself - the European

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<sup>20</sup> It should be emphasised that a sensory approach does not, of itself, lead to conclusions that neglect the agency of patrons. As will be discussed in the following chapter, I adopted sensory and walking

academic outsider. The Americans he takes as his subject lack agency or insight; they play out their roles in hyperreality like puppets in a shadow theatre. While less strident, Irazabal continues a similar line of thought with her disaffected city dwellers, who are seeking escape in the shallow veneer of kitsch - a classic indicator of a 'lower class' status, due to a perceived lack of social or cultural education (Morreall & Loy 1989). Even if Irazabal's conclusions regarding why patrons visit Las Vegas are accurate (conclusions I found to be accurate in the field),<sup>21</sup> different casinos attract different groups for different purposes (as will be discussed in the following chapters); which is to say, not all patrons can be tarred with the same brush.

Human geographers, such as Edward Soja and Michael Harvey, have dedicated careers to discussing space as a social construction; a terrain carved up to reflect the systems that are both perpetuated by and act upon a given society. Soja took pains to emphasise that this space should not be confused with that which is taken as "given"; the physical space regarded as a "container" (1989, p. 79) for life. He instead points to a *socio-spatial dialectic*. In other words, social space isn't merely the product of class structures and their relations to the modes of production: it is a component of those relations, which is both social *and* spatial. In this sense, no space is a *negation*; it is an ever-evolving social discourse. Karl Marx took early, if tentative, steps in this direction, uniting the economics of his time with Hegelian dialectics. Geographer David Harvey summarised Marx's model in his classic *Spaces of Capital* (2001). For Harvey, *accumulation* is central to Marx's vision of capitalism, noting that Marx himself acknowledged accumulation takes place in a "geographical context and create[s]

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ethnographic approaches for this research, in order gain a better understanding of the perspective of patrons.

<sup>21</sup> See chapter 6.

specific kinds of geographical structures" (Harvey, 2001, p.237). The drive towards accumulation, by its very nature, leads to instability, as capitalists (in an attempt to increase revenue) produce without consideration for a market's limit (for instance, a product might be produced in numbers that far outstrip the actual demand, or the purchasing power of their potential customers). Overproduction leads to crisis, with either unemployed capital (at one extreme), or unemployed labour at the other. This crisis is what Harvey defines as a 'barrier'. This barrier is not an anomaly, but an important part of how capitalism functions. The crisis state leads to new conditions, and a recasting of geography. This is manifested through the process Harvey labels 'intensification', as well as expansion into new regions. Intensification is exactly what it sounds like; an intensification of production within the core, using new methods, or (in some cases) a refashioning of the old. This process is plainly visible on the Las Vegas Strip. The demolition of casinos that no longer have the veneer of the 'new' are redesigned or demolished on a regular basis.

These processes, however, do not provide a complete picture of Las Vegas as a broader social space. In order to address the question of *why* patrons are drawn to these spaces, I turned to theorists who have focused on ritual and its relationship with space. Thomas Tweed, a renowned professor of religious studies, once wrote "space [can be understood as existing on a] continuum between differentiated and undifferentiated, where differentiated means *imaginatively figured* (emphasis added) and/or sensually encountered locales that are deemed more or less 'special', 'singular' or 'set apart'" (Tweed, 2015, p.p. 225). The sensory or (as Tweed would have it "sensual") qualities of the casino space exist on the differentiated end of the spectrum; a singular environment for the enactment of ritual. Victor Turner, in interrogating Dilthey's maxim that there is

separation between *mere experience* and *experience* noted that *mere experience* is the everyday - a passive, and open-ended series of events, while *experience* stands out as structured, self-contained and with a clear beginning and end (Turner, 1986, p. 35). Turner applied the label of *experience* to the liminoid space<sup>22</sup> - a period of living outside of the confines of the social structure, and undergoing a transformation. In my research I examine casinos through this lens of *experience*, considering how the highly curated and guided qualities of themed spaces serve as a catalyst for a liminoid state.

Human geographer Yi Fu Tuan views this as a complex process that transforms space, as well as the individual. A landscape imbued with symbolism and "mythical organisation" endows space with *personality* - it becomes, in Tuan's words, a *place* (2001, p.91). Jonathan Z. Smith, the late historian of religion, defined Tuan's *place* as a 'pause' from the movement of *space* (2010). In other words, the hyperkitsch casinos of Irazabal (2007) are liminal places defined by pause; a place outside of the perpetual movement of Marxian geographical structures. For Smith, ritual centres are a 'focusing lens' in Tuan's mythical landscape. While literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht agrees that 'ritual spaces' (like football stadiums) possess these characteristics even when empty (2021), the crowd is essential for the completion of the personality (or placehood) discussed by Tuan. Gumbrecht argues that crowds form a *mystical body*; a body akin to the 'body without organs' described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their classic *Anti-Oedipus* (2019). These considerations also led to investigations of carnival, performativity, transgression and habitus, drawing on important theorists in these areas, including Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), Esther Newton (2001), Georges Bataille (2012), Marcel

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<sup>22</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in chapters 4 & 6.

Mauss (2020) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984).<sup>23</sup> Bourdieu's conception of habitus has similar pitfalls to the theories of Baudrillard and Irazabal (again, placing the theorist at the apex of the cultural pyramid), but offers flexibility in its notion of trajectory. Soja and Harvey's vision of socially created space also has room for movement, but tends to focus on the destructive, rather than positive and generative aspects of the forces at work on the landscape.

## Summary

In his chapter, I have discussed the major theorists I will be deploying throughout. The chapter was divided using a structure that reflects the core chapters of this thesis. In chapters 4 and 5, I will be focusing heavily on the sensory aspects of the Mohegan Sun and the Las Vegas casino environment. While chapter 4 will focus on the sensory from a patron's perspective and expands the focus to include the wider environment, chapter 5 will primarily focus on the servicescape from a 'top down', casino operator's perspective. These chapters primarily draw on the work of anthropologists Natasha Dow Schull and Scott Lukas as well as Lynch, Howes & French's 2020 study of casino atmospherics.

While Erving Goffman's writings on the *performative* nature of the Vegas experience will also be touched on in chapters 4 and 5, performativity and the ritual nature of the Las Vegas experience will be investigated fully in chapters 6 and 7. This chapter will draw on the ritual-focused work of Baudrillard, Irazabal, Bakhtin, Turner, Gumbrecht, Deleuze & Guattari and Bataille. It will also incorporate the spatial writing of these writers as well as Tuan, Smith, Tweed, Soja and Harvey (though it should be noted that, in keeping with

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<sup>23</sup> These theories will be discussed in greater depth in chapters 4 and 7.

the Ingoldian approach of this theses, these space-focused theorists will also be engaged with in the spatial discussions found in chapter 4).

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

The Las Vegas casino is a space like no other; brimming with symbols and sensory data that alter the way time and space are perceived, placing the patron in a *liminoid* state.<sup>24</sup> To understand the nature of this ritual space, it was necessary to understand the patron's perspective, including how this state and these symbols *mingle* and are in turn responded to - generating a feedback loop that alters both patron and space. This mingling and transformation can best be understood through a sensory approach that does not silo individual senses into a series of 'scapes', but instead accounts for their inseparability. Coming from a background in documentary filmmaking, I was drawn to the sensory nature of the Vegas casino (and the Mohegan Sun, specifically) and adopted *sensory ethnographic*<sup>25</sup> as well as *autoethnographic* approaches, so as to better reflect on my own experiences in the field. In addition, I adopted a *walking ethnographic* approach, which permitted me to gain a higher-level view of Las Vegas and the systems that shape the landscape.

After discussing those methods, I will detail how *photo elicitation* was employed, in order to gain a deeper insight into how individual patrons view the sensory elements of Vegas, as well as *digital ethnography*, which was used to understand how patrons present themselves in the casino space, and what those self-presentations means. I will conclude by discussing the project's ethical considerations, and how I attempted to capture the complexity of the Las Vegas experience in literary form. I chose to communicate this complex material using a narrative approach that guides the reader through a series of

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<sup>24</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> Discussed in chapter 2, p.p. 24-26.

*perspective views* of wider Las Vegas and the Mohegan Sun, which (when read in sequence) provide a holistic picture.

## Sensory Ethnography

From my perspective, the casinos of Las Vegas offer a bewildering assortment of ever-shifting sensory experiences, from flashing lights to curated odours that intermingle with the stench of stale cigarettes. It is this intermingling that is central to the casino experience, as stressed by Howe, et. al. Sarah Pink has criticised ethnographies that limit themselves to specific *soundscaapes* or *smellscapes*, noting that senses are - by their very nature - interrelated (Pink, 2015). This observation invokes Gibson's argument that the senses are 'perceptual systems': the bridge between mental and physical processes (Gibson, 2015). If I was to gain insight into the meaning it has for patrons, it was essential that I endeavour to gain as holistic as possible an understanding of the sensory impressions that make the casino space what it is, as well as an insight into the meaning it has for patrons. An insight that would be impossible without my own participation in the experience.

Taking the anthropological approach of putting myself in the shoes of others, my strategy for gaining insight was to place myself in the position of patrons and reflect on my own experiences in the Las Vegas landscape,<sup>26</sup> as well as conduct interviews with both hotel patrons and casino managers who<sup>27</sup> play a pivotal role in shaping the casino experience. My research began with the Mohegan Sun. As mentioned in the introduction,<sup>28</sup> my initial outreach at the height of the pandemic was largely fruitless. In

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<sup>26</sup> To be discussed in the following section, p.p. 42-44.

<sup>27</sup> As discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>28</sup> See chapter 1, p.16.

mid-2021, I reached out to several casinos and resorts (including Caesars Palace and The Las Vegas Paiute Resort, as well smaller Boyd-owned operations) via email, with either no response or email threads that quickly lapsed into silence.<sup>29</sup> Attempts to speak with casino floor managers in person, when visiting hotels on foot, were similarly unsuccessful. However, I had a breakthrough in late 2021 with the opening of the Mohegan Sun casino in conjunction with Virgin Hotels resort.

The Sun's marketing manager, Cody Kremsner was responsive and even willing to wait for approval from Massey's ethics committee, prior to his participating in an interview. I conducted two in-depth interviews with Cody, between September and October of 2021 (sending questions and ethics forms in advance), on the Mohegan Sun grounds during daytime working hours. These interviews were wide ranging and touched on everything from the casino's experiential design to its marketing strategy, clientele and the hierarchical status of the casino within the Las Vegas landscape. This information was invaluable in forming a picture of the sensory world constructed by the Mohegan Sun team, as well as the various institutional forces that actively shaped the space. My work with Cody also led to an interview with Mike, a bartender at the hotel's Desert Star bar. While Mike was often vague and tight lipped in his responses due to the presence of both a microphone and Cody, what he did say was revealing and fleshed out the picture. While the formal operators of the casino, The Mohegan Tribe, were discussed by Cody,

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<sup>29</sup> In the case of the Las Vegas Paiute Resort, they initially agreed to participate (on the basis that the Paiute themselves would not be discussed) though my emails were no longer responded to after I tried to lock in a date.

we did not delve into areas that he felt uncomfortable discussing. He noted that my thesis, or the results of my findings, did not need to be shared with the tribe.<sup>30</sup>

Up to this point, the sensory literature concerned with the casino space has treated patrons as mere test subjects in the Vegas “laboratory” (Lynch, Howes & French, 2020). Patrons serve as pawns, who are unwittingly directed and manipulated by positive and negative reinforcement and experiential design. Based on my own experiences navigating Las Vegas on foot, I knew the reality to be more complex and strongly believed that the patron's agency and their role in shaping the space needed to be studied more closely. However, the transient nature of Las Vegas<sup>31</sup> made gathering information from patrons difficult. My status as a resident also complicated my understanding of their perspective. While I was able to conduct interviews with individuals working in an institutional setting (like Cody and Mike) and observe patrons in the casino environment, transient patrons and locals were often reticent when it came to providing more than a few minutes of their time or going on record<sup>32</sup> (this often seemed to be due to a fear of retribution from hotels or the 'sinful' connotations associated with Las Vegas<sup>33</sup>). I was, however, undeterred and spoke with a number of casino patrons between October 2021 and May 2022. The majority of my excursions on the Strip took place during the afternoon when it was less hectic and crowds moved slower, while my conversations at the Mohegan Sun and on Fremont St. typically took place in the evening, so as to capture patrons while they were most engaged with their surroundings.

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<sup>30</sup> While I followed Cody's recommendation, I have also been in touch with the Mohegan Tribe's medicine woman, Melissa Jayne Fawcett, as well as their tribal leader regarding Mohegan beliefs related to personhood (see chapter 7 for discussion).

<sup>31</sup> Described in the chapter 1.

<sup>32</sup> Though many were fine with their comments being paraphrased and anonymised.

<sup>33</sup> To be discussed in chapter 6, p.p. 113-114.

While every visitor or patron that I spoke with gave verbal approval for me to use the comments I jotted down mid-conversation, they were reluctant to sign forms indicating this approval. The conversations I had with patrons primarily touched on their motivations for visiting the city (or a specific hotel) and how they were finding their experience. The questions that I asked focused on where they were from, and what drew them to Las Vegas over other cities, like Reno. The majority of respondents were from Los Angeles or the Midwest, and they had selected Las Vegas due to its reputation as an ideal space to “have fun” and escape from the grind of daily life. I also asked them specifics about their hotels. In most cases, price was a deciding factor, as well as the environments they offered. When I asked visitors about what they planned to do during their stay, very few intended to explore the wider city, or sites in the surrounding area. The majority had come to gamble and drink on the Las Vegas Strip.

In most cases, I asked these informal participants to point out what they found to be key features in the landscape, as well as sensory elements that were at the forefront of their attention. While the responses I received were often vague and brief, they were not without value and I surfaced a variety of themes that overlapped with my own experience, including the impact of music and the perception of distance.<sup>34</sup> While the responses I received were helpful (if vaguely articulated), I realised it was necessary to employ alternative methods if I was to fully understand the perspective of casino patrons. These alternative methods included walking ethnography, participant observation, digital ethnography and photo elicitation.

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<sup>34</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

## Autoethnography and Walking Ethnography

In my research, autoethnography and walking ethnography were inextricably bound, as my responses to the environment were shaped by my *habitus*<sup>35</sup> and self-perception. My status as a 30-something middle-class Pākehā male from New Zealand served as a form of filter and supported my interpretation of Las Vegas as both gaudy and abrasive,<sup>36</sup> as opposed to 'fun' and liberating. My origins in Nelson, which possesses a remarkably mild climate, further shaped my opinion of the city as being a land of extremes, with the heat in summer months reaching as high as 47 degrees (Wright, 2021). As I walked the blistering streets of Vegas, I became acutely aware of my own prejudices towards the city and sought to find the 'ordinary' in the landscape. In other words, I set out to make the strange familiar.<sup>37</sup>

In a discussion of walking ethnography and the 'mobile encounters' that emerged from that process, geographer Cheng Yi'En stressed the importance of revealing what he labelled the "ordinariness" (2014, p.2) of the environment. For Yi'En, the banal and workaday aspects of an urban landscape yield an important picture of how the environment is shaped, and the larger processes at work. Following Yi'En's lead, I followed in the footsteps of Las Vegas' patrons, focusing on the lulls and repetitions of the Strip as much as its eccentric landmarks. I took this approach even further, exploring the periphery - the barren stretches between motorways and decaying bridges separating off-Strip casinos like the Rio from the main drag. In this focus on the everyday,

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<sup>35</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in chapters 4 and 6.

<sup>36</sup> An opinion that is, admittedly, not uncommon.

<sup>37</sup> Examples include my focusing on the day-to-day experiences of a bar tender at the Mohegan Sun (discussed in chapter 5), and less glamorous or surreal aspects of the Las Vegas landscape in chapter 4.

the true effects of the capital-driven forces that shape Las Vegas were revealed.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, walking ethnography can be a political act. As Yi'En noted, "although some may view 'walking' as a poetic practice to exploring urban space, I prefer to recognize its inherent potential to be political" (2014, p.11). While this thesis is not explicitly political (and does not reject the poetic), I found it impossible to discuss the Las Vegas experience without addressing the economic and political forces that actively shape both the Mohegan Sun and wider environment.

Most important to me, however, was to become synchronised with what Laurence Kirmayer called "loops through the environment"<sup>39</sup> (Quoted in Laplantine, 2015, p.p.xiii) and translate the city's rhythms to the page. Just as Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst asked, rhetorically, in their walking ethnography-focused anthology *Ways of Walking* (2008), "if every word of a story, like every peal of a bell, correspond to a footfall, then what would the story sound like?" (p.9), the sounds and sensations encountered in my wandering become part of the narrative, and that narrative fed back into my engagement with my surroundings. Perhaps counter-intuitively, I found this was best achieved through what Filipa Matos Wunderlich labelled *discursive walking*; a mode permitting the researcher's focus and attention to wander so as to "half consciously" explore their environment (2008, p.132). This, for me, meant letting go of preconceptions and allowing happy accidents<sup>40</sup> to filter into my research (in the way that a documentary filmmaker needs to abandon searching for a 'moment' in order to discover it). Some of the elaborate stone mandalas laid out by Las Vegas' homeless population,<sup>41</sup> for instance,

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<sup>38</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

<sup>39</sup> To be discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>40</sup> As painter and television personality Bob Ross once said, "we don't make mistakes, just happy little accidents" (Economy, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Discussed in chapter 6.

would never have been noticed if I hadn't allowed myself to approach my walking in an unfocused state. By giving myself up to the 'loop', I gained a greater understanding of the environment around me.

## Photo Elicitation

Interviews, reflexive analysis and the participant observation only provide part of the story and I realised that I needed additional methods if I was to gain a deeper understanding of how the 'phenomena' of the casino is received by patrons. One way of gaining this insight was through photo elicitation.<sup>42</sup> In a 2002 paper, sociologist Douglas Harper argued that the method transcends basic interviews as images tap into 'deeper' facets of human consciousness than language. Due to this, the method doesn't just elicit *more* information, but a *different kind* of information than might otherwise be accessed (p.13). In an environment as sensorially complex as Las Vegas, obtaining this 'different kind' of information was essential for a holistic understanding.

In my own research, I found that the sharing of images and discussion of those images with visitors to the city not only provided a clear jumping off-point for discussion concerning specific symbols and phenomena in the casino space, but also provided a common reference point for both researcher and participant (Storm-Mathieson, 2018). These encounters were on Fremont St., which serves as a contained space with a more diverse selection of sounds, images and other sensory stimuli than any other part of

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<sup>42</sup> Photo elicitation first emerged as a methodology in the mid-1950s when Cornell researcher John Collier began 'photo interviewing', to solve a practical problem faced by his multi-disciplinary team, who were investigating the effects of the environment on mental health in the Maritimes of Canada. The team were unable to agree upon categories for housing and the use of photo elicitation not only resolved their issue, but opened up an entirely new field of enquiry (permitting photography to transcend the simple role of illustration that it had previously occupied) (Collier, 1957).

Vegas.<sup>43</sup> While the Mohegan Sun granted me permission to speak with patrons, they did not offer a formal endorsement that would allow me to use similar methods to those I applied on Fremont St, and I did not want to cause any difficulties for Cody.

As noted earlier in this chapter, my visits to Fremont St. were typically in the evening, and on two occasions in March 2022 I stood in one spot with a clipboard, taking notes and asking various passers-by if they would be interested in participating in research. I intentionally avoided asking obviously intoxicated participants, so as to make sure that those who participated fully understood the purpose of my research. Ultimately, there were two visitors who offered to share the pictures they had taken over the past hour. The visitors, a designer and social media coordinator visiting from Arizona, were both women in their early thirties. Our conversations were semi-formal, though did not follow a pre-written order. The conversations were recorded, to ensure fidelity. While I had more informal discussions with other visitors,<sup>44</sup> they either hadn't taken pictures or were heavily intoxicated.<sup>45</sup>

The pictures taken by the two visitors shed light on the different ways that patrons perceive the casino space and focus their attention; providing a fascinating counterpoint to the researcher's perception. To return to Yi'En, photography while walking adds another layer to the body's 'conversation' with the environment (Yi'En, 2014, p.4); revealing, as clearly as can be achieved, Harper's deeper consciousness - shards of perception from within the 'loop'. Photo elicitation sheds light on how patrons process

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<sup>43</sup> To be discussed in chapter 4, p.p. 58-59.

<sup>44</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>45</sup> These encounters usually occurred when intoxicated patrons approached me and struck up a conversation. This was a common occurrence, due to drinking in public being permitted on Fremont and the Strip. Every 2 meters, it seemed to me, you would spot a visitor nursing a drink. Almost as common were 100 oz yard glasses, purchased from a nearby Fat Tuesdays, which would be left scattered on the sidewalk.

the vast array of symbols they are bombarded with and how those symbols are perceived throughout a journey. It also helped bring greater clarity to differences in cultural perception and why certain spaces and symbols resonate with some groups and not others. In addition to photo elicitation, I had locals that I am on a friendly basis with (including one of my partner's friends as well as my partner's father and her brother-in-law, when visiting their homes throughout 2021 and 2022) informally draw up mental maps, to further flesh out their 'view' of the landscape. Viewing a map of how that participant views the city provided invaluable information about how the geography of Las Vegas is perceived. A similar method was used by anthropologist Natasha Dow Schull in her 2014 ethnography *Addiction by Design*, in order to gain deeper insight into how gambling addicts viewed the city.<sup>46</sup>

## Digital Ethnography

Another important method employed in this project was Digital Ethnography. While photo elicitation was useful for gaining an understanding of how patrons perceive both wider Las Vegas and the casino space, it does not shed light on how patrons perceive *themselves* in relation to the casino experience and how they present that self to their friends and family. In the *Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, Christine Hine argued that "to understand.... 'life as lived' it becomes necessary to extend studies to other spaces, and other media" (2017, p.22). In my attempt to frame this 'life as lived', I narrowed my focus to two of the most popular social media platforms for Las Vegas visitors, Instagram and Twitter, and sought out the communities who most explicitly (and publicly) associated themselves with the Mohegan Sun casino and Virgin Hotels, through

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<sup>46</sup> In Schull's work, it was revealed that gambling addicts view the city in terms of their daily routine, with large blank spaces between their home and their local casino.

hashtags and tagging (using the tags #mohegansunlasvegas, #virginhotelslasvegas and other site-specific tags). I quickly found that the platforms represented two very distinct groups: the image-heavy Instagram platform tended to attract those who were making quick visits to the city, while Twitter (a forum that favours those wishing to express an 'opinion') (Rajadesingan & Liu, 2014) was used almost exclusively by Las Vegas locals or frequent visitors. This divide is reflected in the way my research is presented throughout this thesis, with public perception and commentary drawn from Twitter and self-presentation drawn from Instagram.

## **Ethics**

This project raised a number of potential ethical concerns at the outset. The first set of issues related to my interactions with patrons. Potential intoxication was a concern as well as likelihood, given the nature of Las Vegas and its encouragement of public drinking. I addressed this by only conducting interviews or engaging in projects like photo elicitation if the participant was sober and able to understand their rights and the purpose of the project. I also offered the option of rescheduling interviews for intoxicated participants, though the transient nature of the city meant that rescheduled interviews never eventuated. Discussions of gambling addiction were also an initial concern, considering Las Vegas' status as a centre for gambling. This, however, turned out not to be an issue as the topic didn't come up in conversation, and was not pursued. In all interviews, I sought informed consent, and provided an information sheet. When participants (typically patrons) felt uncomfortable signing a document, I offered the option of anonymity and accepted verbal permission. Another patron-related concern was the use of digital sources from Instagram and Twitter. When a public 'tweet' was

used in this thesis, I made certain to reference the source. However, when a patron's public photographs from Instagram were studied for research purposes, I made sure to anonymise my sources and not include images without written permission.

Working with the Mohegan Sun casino also had ethical implications. It was important to consider the job security of the staff I spoke with, and to not put them into compromising or uncomfortable positions when asking questions. In all cases, I obtained written consent and did not conduct research on their grounds without verbal approval. I also sought support from a cultural advisor, based in Reno, NV, to ensure I was following correct protocols when reaching out to and dealing with an Indigenous-operated casino. Respecting the assurances of Mohegan Sun employees, I have not actively sought involvement from the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut, though have reached out for clarification regarding aspects of their beliefs, in an effort to ensure accurate representation. At no point in my research were there conflicts of roles.

### **Narrative Approach**

My greatest challenge in constructing this thesis was marshalling the array of material generated by these varying (but related) methods, in a manner that made my conclusions both coherent and digestible. Rather than present a wide and disconnected selection of findings, ranging from industrial design to the politics of Indigenous casinos, and follow those findings with analysis, I chose to integrate the two and present my material within the framework of a narrative/story-telling approach that guides the reader through a series of *perspective views* of the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, which (when read in sequence) provide a holistic picture.

While there are a number of positives to the methods and approach I adopted, there are limitations as well (mostly borne from the reluctance of transient Las Vegas patrons and locals). For instance, a wider and more abstract scope can lack the immediacy and focus of an ethnography centring on a small group or individual, followed over a period of time. While lacking the richness of that kind of specificity, I was able to attain something else: a complex portrait of a highly *particular* space. A space with its own narrative, as revealed by the casino's design, as well as the materialities that reflect its Indigeneity. This approach, similar to my embrace of sensory ethnography, stems from my documentary filmmaking/journalism background which, I found, allowed for a greater flexibility in portraying the casino's *webs of significance* (Geertz, 2017); the many strands (political, social and sensory) that make up the casino's identity, or, as I will argue later in the thesis, its particular form of personhood, and its *habitus*. A personhood rooted in the ritual function the casino serves for its specific community.

In sum, while the methods used were many and diverse, they were products of necessity, stemming from the difficulties that I experienced in the field. The way the findings are presented were moulded by my reflexive position, which was influenced by my background as a filmmaker. This approach led, fruitfully, to an ethnography of the casino *itself*, rather than a specific group of patrons and a new way of considering such a space.

## Chapter 4 - Las Vegas as Ritual Space

Facilitated by walking and sensory ethnographic approaches, this chapter both explores and describes the symbols I encountered while traversing the wider landscape of Las Vegas, while situating the Mohegan Sun casino within that landscape. Using this approach, I discovered on foot how Las Vegas is a space that contains multiple 'tiers' (which I will explain in depth), each with their own symbols and engagement with the terrain. While capitalism's processes are the most visible, in the form of towering casinos and the more obscure markings of the city's homeless population, there are also sophisticated reciprocal processes at work, manifested as crowd-based rituals which tie directly to the servicescape model.<sup>47</sup> Situating myself within and among these sites, I will also describe the impact this environment had on me directly, from an autoethnographic and sensory perspective. From there, I will shed light on the experiences of others, via the medium of photo elicitation and consider how my sensory experiences, as well as the experiences of others, are moulded by the larger systems shaping the city. In this chapter I will build on the theoretical approaches taken by Turner, Gumbrecht, Smith and Tuan and will argue that Las Vegas is a ritual space and this ritual can take many forms, including the petroglyphs of the surrounding landscape. Indigenous worldviews and capitalism intersect and coexist and take an unusual form at the Mohegan Sun.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> To be discussed in chapter 5.

<sup>48</sup> To be discussed in greater depth in chapters 5 and 7.

## Las Vegas as a Socially Created Space

Exploring Las Vegas by foot is an almost impossible task in the peak summer months of July through August, when temperatures rise above 42 degrees Celsius. The combined feeling of wind and heat often made me feel like an ant beneath a magnifying glass, with the sun's concentrated rays baking my skin within minutes. This forced me to confine my lengthier explorations to the winter and spring months. The majority of my wanderings began at my apartment, which is nestled behind the Palms Casino, bordering the Strip and Chinatown. This positioning helped to shape my view of the city, as it placed me on the Strip's periphery - a space where the ill effects of the city (including exhaust, dirt and dilapidation) intersected with the lavish fantasies of the main drag. As I walked the filthy and scorched sidewalks of Vegas, I became acutely aware of the effects of capital.

Capital, for human geographer Edward Soja, is a "crude and restless auteur" (Soja, p.147); relentlessly reshaping landscapes to meet the needs of the present, only to destroy that work and further disrupt the landscape when those needs change (Harvey, 1985 p.150). This process can be seen repeatedly, and in spectacular fashion, on the Las Vegas Strip: casinos are demolished on a regular basis to make way for new, more 'current' and optimised sources of accumulation. As I explored the Strip over a period of some two years, I observed a city in a seemingly perpetual state of construction, with several large hotels in development and gaping vacant lots ready to be transformed. There have been over 14 demolitions in the last three decades, which accounts for approximately 26% of all Las Vegas casinos. The Mohegan Sun (which lies on the Strip's outskirts) plays a part in this rewriting of the landscape, resting as it does on the bones

of the Hard Rock Hotel, which is set to be re-born, phoenix-like in another location a mere year after its demise. The new owners will be demolishing the Mirage (developed by Stephen Wynn), including its enormous volcano and dolphin pleasure-cove to make way for Hard Rock's trademark, outsized guitar. Like all spaces touched by capitalism, Las Vegas, as Harvey tells us, rides the "knife edge... of preserving past commitments... [and] devaluing them to open up fresh room for accumulation" (Harvey, 1985, p. 150). The forces working most aggressively to reshape Las Vegas' landscape are MGM Resorts International, Caesars Entertainment and the ascendant Boyd corporation. Wild card players like Steven Wynn and his Wynn Resorts have gradually lost their footing in a battle for spatial dominance; over several decades, Boyd soaked up Freemont and the off-Strip area's more idiosyncratic players including Michael Gaughan's Gold Coast and Main Street Station, which I found was still populated with the Victorian bric-a-brac and glossy, Disco-era fixtures installed by its eccentric founder, Major Riddle in the 1970s.



*Signage at Las Vegas' Neon Museum, which acts as a boneyard for demolished and renovated casinos (David Welch).*

The Mohegan's Sun's position in relationship to the Strip tells the visitor a good deal about its relationship with and to its competitors. This was particularly clear to me, when traversing the space on foot. The hotel lies 'off-Strip' (a 23-minute walk from the main drag), in an area populated by lesser players like the Brazilian-themed Rio (recently purchased by Hilton and Caesars) and the Boyd-owned Gold Coast casino, which caters primarily to locals. The Mohegan Sun team see the hotel's place outside of the Strip's hustle and bustle as an advantage, with their marketing manager, Cody branding the Sun "the greatest hotel closest to the airport". I met with Cody at the hotel on multiple occasions and conducted two in-depth interviews, touching on a variety of topics, ranging from experiential design to HR policy. In our second conversation, on a typically warm September day, we discussion the Mohegan Sun's position in the wider field of Vegas casinos. While Cody aspired to compete with the major hotels on the Strip, he was aware of the Sun's status as a lesser competitor. While not as prestigious as the casinos competing on the Strip, the Mohegan Sun is considered several steps above the 'dive' hotels found on Fremont.

Once a force in Las Vegas, the many 1960s casinos to be found in the 'Fremont Experience' (including the once celebrated Golden Nugget and Four Queens) have fallen victim to Vegas' perpetual search for the latest entertainment, and participate in what has become a carnival-style enticement of intoxicated locals and visitors who find comfort in loud music and cheap liquor. The Mohegan Sun occupies the vaguely defined 'middle' tier. As Cody noted "we're still competitive towards the Strip [but] there's no direct competitor, because nobody is quite like us. Palms will be close; it's kind of a mirror image, because ... it's going to be an Indian Casino. It's going to be owned by

San Manuel. Rio isn't a mirror image of us, even though it's off the Strip, because it's owned by Caesars. And Gold Coast is straight local. So, I don't want to say we don't have a direct competitor, but we have a lot of close competitors." All of his reference points fell to the hard-to-define middle tier, lying off and adjacent to the Strip; a middle tier also in terms of pricing and branding identity. No off-Strip casino can boast of the 'lavishness' or clear brand identity of a Caesars Palace or Venetian; a loosely conceptualised Old West or South America cannot compete with the towering pillars of Rome or canals of Venice, snaking through high-end shopping centres.

While exploring Las Vegas on foot is a mode thoroughly rejected by locals (who are forced to approach the wider terrain by car, due to a lack of regular public transportation) (Littlejohn & Gran, 1999), I found that it provided a unique vantage point. On foot, the hierarchy of casinos is readily apparent - I could clearly perceive the fanfare surrounding major casinos like Caesars, and the (relatively) close proximity of the major casinos. By comparison, the 'middle tier' hotels inhabit a veritable no-man's land. The Rio and Gold Coast require visitors to traverse a lengthy bridge over a freeway; a bridge that is home to a number of homeless who have made the desolate and noisy area their home. In these zones, capitalism's inscriptions are still rendered, but in less obvious ways than the demolition and rebuilding of casinos. As I strolled down these less-traversed roads - like Dean Martin Drive, which divides the car-centric city from the 'middle tier' - I could see the markings of Las Vegas' homeless population everywhere. Bridges are the most active spots; hubs for interaction and the city's underground drug trade (Daughton, 2001). They are also sites for self-expression; rocks were plentiful in these areas and lead to large, Mandela-like patterns; obscure communications spelt out in stone. These too are the inscriptions of capitalism; the off-centre signs of those who have either rejected the

system, or fallen through its cracks (Borchard, 2005). These areas wind and snake around the Strip, acting on the periphery; a commentary on what Wallerstein would call the conservative 'core' (Wallerstein, 1980). It is here that the fallout from the city's forward momentum (without thought for human cost) is most evident.



*One of the many symbols of Las Vegas' homeless population, hidden in plain sight on a bridge separating the Strip from Las Vegas' middle-tier casinos (David Welch).*

The Mohegan Sun is even further from the traffic of the Strip and the activity of the city's homeless population. It is located in a barren stretch of Paradise, surrounded by rarely frequented strip malls and cannabis dispensaries. This location plays a major role in defining the hotel's identity. While Cody stressed to me that his team were targeting the local population - for many - the Sun's distance from both the Strip and residential areas render it a non-entity. Tweets on social media, from both locals and regular visitors, make this clear. In January 2022, I found that the online community was outraged by the

Mohegan Sun's decision to begin charging resort fees - often controversial 'hidden' fees that serve to artificially lower the cost of rooms when patrons first book (Roeben, 2022) (Schulz, 2021). This was an outrage, one user stated, because the casino had no "appeal" (@Shawnptidwell, partial quote, 2022). Many noted that the casino had had a "slow start" and that its sole attraction was its regular concerts. It was perceived, locally, as a luxurious oddity; doomed to fail, with one user declaring that the casino was "bleeding money" (@TimWilliams, partial quote, 2022). Much of this perception appears to stem from the casino's location; as if it had relegated itself to the very ends of the earth.

By contrast, the Strip is the centre of the primary Vegas patron experience, with more than 88% of visitors confining their visit to this area (Katsilometes, 2016). Whenever I would approach the Strip on foot, I would find myself placed in the centre of an ever-moving crowd; caught in the ebb and flow of masses moving from casino to casino - observing the regular eruption of the Mirage's still-active 54-foot man-made volcano, which shoots flames 40 feet into the air (Furlong, 1989), or the synchronised water show outside the Bellagio. I would feel the sights, sounds and oppressive heat comingle in a peculiar, sense-distorting atmosphere, with jarring transitions between major sites like the Eiffel Tower and the Great Sphynx. It is a truly unique form of travelling, without travelling (in a traditional sense). It hues closer to the mediaeval conception of travelling described by Ingold in his 2004 work *Lines*, where a journey was less a transition point between activities than a "way of being" (Ingold, 2016, p.77). It is what Ingold labels 'wayfaring' - a mode of travel where the pauses between sites are themselves 'sites of activity' (Ingold, 2016, p. 82). Walking the Strip, the patron is taken from one 'wonder' to another, at an unhurried pace - shuffling down widened sidewalks, and over elevated crossings that steer the patron from one hotel to the next. The bright afternoon sun, and

the smell of exhaust fumes emanating from the congested road swiftly transition to tobacco, perfume and the dark of night and back again. Small details - like a statue in a casino unexpectedly encountered on a stroll - can take on as much significance as an entire hotel or a replica of the statue of liberty with rollercoaster as backdrop.

In 'wayfaring' on the Strip, it often felt to me as if the ordinary rules of how space and time are experienced were suspended, with geographical distance distorted and casinos plunging patrons into perpetual night. When wandering the Strip in the depths of Summer, I spoke with a patron who concurred (a stout, unshaven European male in his late 30s, wearing reflective sunglasses and shorts); emphasising that the experience was 'surreal'. The man was visiting from Tennessee with his family, for the first time. He expressed surprise at the contrast between the street and casino experiences and the intensity of that contrast. In walking the Strip, I found that space itself appeared, simultaneously, both severely contracted (with only a half mile between simulacra of major global landmarks) and extended. Unlike major metropolitan cities I have experience of, like New York or Chicago - where a walk is broken up by a succession of stores - casinos consume entire blocks. This can expand the journey; making the walk from casino to casino feel physically taxing (particularly in the Spring and Summer heat). A new casino entrance, with air conditioning, can feel both welcoming and disorienting. It is a landscape of extremes, defined by variations in intensity.

## Intensity, Crowds and the Las Vegas Experience



*Vegas Vic, one of the many symbols vying for a patron's attention on Fremont St. (David Welch).*

Navigating the 'low tier' casinos of Fremont Street on foot can be a bewildering experience: noise slams against a 50-million-dollar LED canopy (Bittenbender, 2019) as women in short-shorts and bikinis writhe uncomfortably on bar tops. Bemused Midwestern visitors stumble through the crowd, yard glasses in hand. Women in fishnets lash each other meekly with cat-o-nine tails. A giant mechanical prospector leers and grins, as tourists with cheap necklaces smoke cigarettes and dance to a piercing beat. An emaciated homeless man requests either money or the opportunity to fondle women's breasts - rolling his eyes and winking, in best Sid James fashion. It is here that the luxury images of the casino, the tavern, the strip club and homelessness collide.

Unlike the Strip, Fremont *can only be experienced on foot*, with a large portion of the street closed off to traffic in the 1990s, in a bid to bring patrons back to an area that had once offered serious competition to the Strip. What struck me most about the area was its intensity; an intensity heightened by the music's volume and the number of sites that vie for your attention. I found that the disorientation this induces affects other wayfarers too, like those I witnessed stumbling and gazing at their surroundings in a state of intoxicated confusion. I spoke with a cab driver (an African American man in his mid-40s from Flint, Michigan), who had visited Vegas over a dozen times in the past 8 years, but was still yet to adjust to the 'Fremont Street Experience' (as it is branded), with shocking images found on every corner: "You wouldn't believe it!" he bellowed at me, "a man wearing a giant head in diapers! It's crazy! You'll never experience anything like that in your life, anywhere!" Each image... each snatch of sound vies for the participant's attention. In some cases, the beat takes hold and participants begin dancing in extended conga lines or cumbia-style shuffles. It is a truly American ritual, with buffet-style offerings. Don't like this group ritual? Try the next hotel! Ritual behaviours overlap and clash against one another in an echoing melee.

The entire street of Fremont is what could be referred to as a 'feedback loop': Kirmayer's "loop through the environment"(Quoted in Laplantine, 2015, p.p.xiii). According to Laplantine, Kirmayer wrote that the experience and 'mind' of an individual consists of more than just complex neural networks; the network continues through the body and into the wider environment. This extended network serves to generate a feedback loop, like those described in the early cybernetic work of Norbert Wiener (Wiener, 2019), where a stimulus or signal is 'fed' into a loop and both the feed and loop are altered as a result. In the case of Fremont, a number of diverse and often confusing loops (both

human and manufactured - from busking to table dances, from glaring neon signs to music) clutter the space, and are then processed by patrons; altering the patron's perception of their 'experience' as a result. The patron, in turn, responds to the environment, altering the signal further, whether it be through shouting, vomiting, interacting with passers-by or spontaneously dancing - all of which occur regularly. These signals take on the form of complex rhythms, which carry from person to person; incorporating other rhythms which, when combined, create new variants.

As Laplantine emphasised, the body is an important part of the equation - just as important as the 'mind'. Patrons are influenced by the rhythms of their own bodies, as they navigate the space - rhythms firmly rooted in habitus. In the 1930s, pioneering anthropologist Marcel Mauss wrote of the body in terms similar to Laplantine and Kirmayer, with physical bearing influenced as much by outside stimulus as individual psychology. In his essay on the *Techniques of the Body* (2020), Mauss described the unique walks he observed throughout the world: from the accentuated, lolling gait of the South Pacific to American walks imported to France via cinema. Mauss argued that physical bearing was rooted in the "effective" and "traditional bodily techniques" (Mauss, 2020, p. 83). The 'traditional' ways of the body were physical behaviours dictated by custom; the 'effective' followed Darwin and were physical behaviours with the most successful, potent effect. Mauss' model, then, saw physical behaviour in terms of evolutionary advantage: both striving to fit in and searching for a niche, based on the effectiveness of behaviour. Physical behaviour also influences thought, with the harsh, stiff strides of Gestapo officers serving to regulate the thought patterns of officers, used as an example. All manner of physical displays can be witnessed on Fremont St. (though they are better understood through the more nuanced analysis of sociologist Pierre

Bourdieu). Fremont St. is - first of all - a place of exhibition; an exhibition of largely heteronormative (even if extreme) sexuality. Men emphasise their 'masculinity' with tattoos, cargo shorts, t-shirts, Caesar haircuts and Drake-style beards; women emphasise their femininity with prom-style, ill-fitting dresses or crop tops. The men often walk stiffly - their carriage upright; women, in an exaggerated and ungainly interpretation of sensuality. These performances are inscribed with both their regional origin and class association.

I, too, was not above this complex dance of 'habitus' and transformative feedback loops. The minute I set foot on Fremont, I became part of the crowd. It is on Fremont that the 'crowd' aspect of the casino servicescape model<sup>49</sup> is best understood, with the street serving as an extension of the 9 casinos that feed into it. In his 2021 work, *Crowds: The Stadium as a Ritual of Intensity*, Gumbrecht discussed the nature of such gatherings in regards to their manifestation in stadium situations. Gumbrecht pointed out that the Catholic Church has a long tradition of viewing these gatherings as a "mystical body" (Gumbrecht, 2021, p.76). Drawing on 1940s-era interpretations of the Catholic Church by Pope Pius XII, Gumbrecht divided the church into its institutions and its believers; both of which maintain their independence and distinct 'personality'. What unites these two is their shared observation of Christ's passion; in other words, it is the focus brought about by ritual that dissolves divisions - even if each, simultaneously, maintain a separate identity (Gumbrecht, 2021, p. 78). Gumbrecht applied this interpretation of Catholic liturgy to stadium sporting events, where institutions of sport and the crowd-goer remain distinct and 'solitary', though united by their focus on the event. For Gumbrecht, this focus bestows a 'ritual' significance on the events observed. Gumbrecht's interpretation

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<sup>49</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.

can also be applied to Las Vegas, though the *institutions themselves* are the focal point. On Fremont Street, the patron is assailed by the 'focusing' rituals of dozens of casinos, each with their own attention-grabbing gimmicks, whether it be cheap food, live music or titillation. This area is home to many of the 'dive bar' casinos that lack the budget to compete on the Strip, and opt for El-Rancho style displays of sensuality. It is, then, a multivocal ritual, in Gumbrecht' sense, that causes as much chaos and confusion as it lures potential customers. Two Fremont St. visitors offered to share the pictures they had taken over the past hour. The visitors were women in their early 30s; one a designer and the other a social media coordinator, and both visiting from Arizona. The images, when viewed in sequence, were a distorted collage; cowboy prospector snaps were followed by canted shots of flashing lights and a drunken man with his pants around his ankles. The human carnival taking place on Fremont contributed as much to the experience as the 1950s-era signage and LED announcements.



A photograph shared with me by a patron exploring the Strip (Micky A.)

It is my argument that the chaotic 'mystical body' of Fremont St. is facilitated by a *liminoid* state. Arnold van Gennep viewed liminality as a stage in a *rite of passage*; a rite in which an individual is placed *outside* of their assigned social role (*societas*), in order to transition into a new role in a particular community (*communitas*). The *liminal* falls to the space outside; a realm where the social roles of those undergoing a transition are largely undefined (van Gennep, 2004). While closely related to the liminal, the Las Vegas experience more closely resembles what Turner dubbed the *liminoid*. While the *liminal* state is characteristic of small-scale societies possessing clearly defined rites of passage, Turner argued that the *liminoid* is more typical of complex societies; societies where relationships between individuals are often contractual and given to solidarity of an organic nature, rather than the codified or "mechanical" (1974, p. 84) (Durkheim, 1984). Unlike a rite of passage, the liminoid state serves as a kind of social release valve, re-affirming a participant's social status. It is typically individualised, idiosyncratic and manifests itself as a critique of the social order.<sup>50</sup> Turner noted that the liminoid - unlike the liminal, which can be found in the activities of churches or group initiations - is more often a *commodity*: "the liminal.... elicits loyalty and is bound up with one's membership or desired membership in some highly corporate group. One *works at* the liminal, [while] one *plays with* the liminoid" (1974, p. 86). Play, through gaming and performance,<sup>51</sup> acting as a critique of the social order, or *societas*, with the 'mystical body' of Gumbrecht serving as a temporary *communitas*.

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<sup>50</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6, p.p.110-113.

<sup>51</sup> To be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

Key to the liminoid state are the markers highlighted by Gumbrecht: *intensity* and *rhythm* (2021, p. 79). In a literal sense, the intensity experienced is tied to both volume and physicality; a feeling (at least in my experience) of being assailed. Gumbrecht turns to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (2019) to interpret this phenomenon; a work where intensity is defined as "movements outside ourselves" (Gumbrecht, 2021, p.84) - by *multitudes*. This is Deleuze and Guattari's 'body without organs'. A 'body', in this philosophy, is the sum of its constituent parts, and extends beyond individual psychology to incorporate the wider environment (as in Laplantine and Kirmayer). You could view the crowd as a 'body' (or 'mystical body', to follow Pope Pius XII), in a perpetual state of homeostasis, or self-regulation. This self-regulation is the feedback loop that extends throughout the street - altered for and by both institutions and patrons. Deleuze and Guattari's 'body without organs' isn't a body at rest; it is an organism in perpetual search of 'intensities' - variations that change its fundamental qualities (Deleuze & Guattari, 2019) - supplied by intensity and rhythm. For Laplantine, these intensities can often exceed the comprehension of those engaged in the cycle, as they are intimately connected with *history*. As he once wrote, "there remains a political and a historical dimension to sensory experience, which exceeds what individuals can consciously experience" (2020, p. 83). This is clear on Fremont and in Vegas in general. While patrons may not be aware of the forces shaping the larger environment, or their history (let alone the actively 'constructed' sensescapes of casinos), they are still active members of the 'body without organs' - altering its rhythms and intensities, via their engagement with the space. The body without organs is a ritual that cannot exist without both institutions and participants, and neither group can unmoor the ritual from its social context. Whether intentional or not, Hull's El Rancho is still informing the rituals of today, just as the markings and memories of the Las Vegas Paiute shape the wider environment.

## Indigeneity and Ritual Space

In contrast with the multi-layered echo of Fremont St. and the Strip, I found the surrounding desert to be a place of silence, with ancient petroglyphs marking rocks that tower above the sun-baked valleys. Enormous boulders, eroded after millions of years of sandstorms and waves. Hawks circle overhead, while snakes and chipmunks scuttle for cover. Symbols, too, can be found on Paradise's periphery, though the symbols to be found there stretch back in time to the shadows of prehistory. The most famous examples can be found in the Valley of Fire, though petroglyphs are bountiful in Sloan Canyon National Conservation Area (a mere 15-minute drive from the Strip). While visiting the Valley of Fire is a popular pastime for locals, Sloan Canyon is less known. Petroglyphs dot the landscape; some of which are thought to be as old as 4000 years (these examples are amongst the oldest in the U.S, though their antiquity doesn't come close to those found at Pyramid Lake in Northern Nevada, which are thought to date back as far as 15,000 years). For the Southern Paiute, these eroded images of deer, lizards and abstract symbols are considered sacred. Raymond Andres, a historical preservation officer for the Bishop-area Paiute stated that his people see the petroglyphs as messages offering guidance and that "[the areas where the petroglyphs can be found are] a kind of church to educate tribal members and children about ... historical and spiritual connections" (Centre for Art Law, 2012). The messages can even be obscure to the ancestors of these ancient peoples. Anthropologist M. Janey Young quoted an elderly religious leader of the Zuni people as saying, when visiting a rock art site, that he "d[idn't] know what they mean[t], but ... kn[ew] [they were] important" (Young, 1985 p. 42 quoted in Patterson, 1992, p.xiv). While Andres and the Paiute community view the etchings as the work of remote ancestors, scholars have attributed Nevada's petroglyphs to an

unnamed Paleo-Indian people, who are believed to have predated the Southern Paiute people by some 3000 years (Knack, 2001).<sup>52</sup>



*Rock art in the Las Vegas desert (David Welch).*

Recurring images of ritual, fertility and water (while certainly not the only images to be found) are unsurprising; it is almost impossible to imagine a community inhabiting Sloan Canyon or the Valley of Fire prior to the comforts of the modern world; it is an arid and forbidding landscape that does not open its arms in welcome. I made trips to both areas

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<sup>52</sup> The harsh terrain that these people inhabited manifests itself in highly abstract form: as animals - like the coyote, red ants and plumed serpent; human-like figures representing spirits, as well as more obscure symbols depicting water, whirlwinds (a common occurrence in Las Vegas) and the vulva (Patterson, 1992). Birth and fertility are a constant motif along with bird-headed men (or men with birds - most typically Turkey - perched on their heads), which scholars believe depict shamans. Shamans, in many cultures, are believed to separate from the body and engage in flight (Eliade, 2020) (Schaafsma, 2001, p. 194).

on multiple occasions, though confined these visits to winter months. After a decade of summers in New York City and travels in Asia, I had thought I had experienced heat; Las Vegas forced me to revise that opinion. The prospect of leaving home in the summer months is forbidding; the desert and cement radiate, as a harsh light beats down on your head with a surprising relentlessness. In 2021, temperatures averaged 48 degrees Celsius in summer months (with similar temperatures in the shade), with night offering little respite.<sup>53</sup> This semi-nomadic life of the Southern Paiute<sup>54</sup> meant they were responsible for fewer monuments and long-term structures than were constructed by tribes found in other parts of the West (like the pueblos of New Mexico). This lack of clearly visible monuments, however, didn't mean there was an absence of culture (with a capital C).

To many of the Las Vegas residents I spoke with, the Southern Paiute and other Indigenous communities of the area are all but invisible. The petroglyphs at Sloan Canyon are little known and there appears to be scant awareness of the Southern Paiute Tribe's connection with the area. Apart from occasional remarks about the Palms casino being purchased by "Indians", they were ghosts: in some cases, quite literally. In my visit to the Boyd-owned Market Street Casino, I was approached by a security guard, who offered a tour. The highlight (aside from a portion of the Berlin Wall placed above a

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<sup>53</sup> Temperatures 1000 years prior were likely much the same, with precious little water to be found. The layers of sandstone channelled water through the baking and impenetrable plains till they emerged in cracks and springs. When water didn't emerge, it became trapped beneath the sand, leaving tell-tale patches of green (Knack, 2001, p. 13). Another alternative was to collect the pooled rainfall found in wind-eroded sandstone.

<sup>54</sup> Las Vegas lies two thousand feet above sea level, and the valley (then as now) averaged a mere 5 and a half inches of annual rainfall (though that measurement was often higher in the surrounding mountains). Such meagre rainfall meant that (in some seasons), crops didn't grow, which in turn made hunting for the animals who dined on these crops difficult. The only solution to this problem was nomadic movement in pursuit of more promising pastures (Knack, 2001, p. 11).

men's urinal) was a closed ballroom, dominated by an enormous train car that had once been owned by the novelist Louise Alcott, of Little Women fame. The security guard called in one of his co-workers to excitedly describe the many mysterious happenings they and others had experienced in the ballroom. These happenings included flashing lights, self-lighting fires and apparitions. Their explanation for these phenomena was that the casino was (purportedly) built on an 'Indian burial ground'. Who these Indians were or where their ancestors might now reside, they could not say. The Indigenous of Las Vegas - for the guards at least - are shadows lurking in the night; a vaguely sinister echo from the past.



*Security guards discussing the purportedly haunted ballroom at Main Street Station Casino (David Welch).*

For the Southern Paiute, however (or as they referred to themselves *The Nüwü* or *people*), their history is not a mere echo. At the turn of the 20th century, the Paiute believed that their lives took the same form as it had when the world was established (Knack, 2001, p.10). The Southern Paiute are both linguistically and culturally distinct from the Northern Paiute and possess their own myths, rituals and symbols (though there are commonalities). The animals, found dotted throughout the landscape of the Las Vegas valley are core parts of this symbology; centipedes, for instance, were intimately connected to shamanic practices and death, while the Coyote and Wolf (Toovuts) are associated with birth and creation (Martineau, 1992). In one myth, the rabbit Tawvoots embarked on a crusade to punish and correct nature when faced with Nevada's unbearable heat (after receiving his markings from the scorching sun) and the hostility of the stones, trees and water (Martineau, 1992, p. 7). Tawvoot's vendetta with the sun culminated in the star's burning the entire landscape (signs of which are visible to this day). It is stories like this - bound to the landscape - that help make the Las Vegas and wider Mojave Desert a mythical space; a ritual terrain.

For many European settlers and current residents, Las Vegas resides in a barren wasteland (Al, 2017); a territory both savage and empty. For many, it is simply *space*; a negation of civilization whose sole purpose is to serve as a barrier to progress (Baudrillard, 2009). It is an unknowable space, existing outside of conventional time. In none of the mental maps created by participants that I spoke with, or participants interviewed by Schull (2014) does the desert serve as a feature.<sup>55</sup> It is a blank,

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<sup>55</sup> As noted in chapter 3, I asked several individuals, including friends and my girlfriend's family members (all of whom live in Las Vegas) to sketch of the city's layout in order to perceive how they view the city. This method follows in the footsteps of Kevin Lynch, who deployed it in his 1979 *Image of the City*, which attempted to understand the planning of various American cities through the 'mental images' of locals. Schull used the method to understand how gambling addicts view the environment.

surrounding their image of the city. For the Southern Paiutes, however, the desert inhabits a mythical time, delimited by markers immediately visible to those searching for signposts of 'civilization'. For celebrated human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, mythical time exists in three forms: the cosmogonic, the astronomic and the human (2011). In Tuan's philosophy, the 'human' is the linear and one-directional time of a human life; a time trapped in the quotidian and subject to the rules of birth and death. 'Astronomic' time is the movements of the stars across the sky; the sun's daily march and the parade of the seasons. In Southern Nevada, the seasons have none of the delicate and transformational qualities witnessed on the East Coast (with snowfall in winter, and the dappled auburn leaves of autumn). It is, instead, a shift in *intensity* from winter's relative subtlety to the hard and abrasive textures of late spring and summer (a period when anyone caught outside is subject to the sun's mirthful tyranny, recalling Tawvoots' vengeful crusade). Even the wind takes on an aggressive character in the summer months - lashing out at any foolhardy enough (like myself) to walk the streets amidst the dust and scolding heat - an experience akin to being attacked by a giant hairdryer.

Cosmogonic time is for Tuan "ignored or weakly symbolised" (Tuan, 2011, p.131). Tuan's cosmogonic time is the time captured in the mythology of the Southern Paiute. This cosmogonic time recalls the dream time of Aboriginal tribes in Australia, in that the landscape itself becomes a shrine to the deeds of deities and ancestors. Southern Paiute territory occupies a similar realm, both in terms of their interpretation of the existing landscape and the traces they left behind. In addition to the spirits, mythical animals and obscure symbols found carved into rock, there are also markers indicating that important conversations had taken place and battles fought (Patterson, 1992 p.64). These etchings resemble the *tropaion* (or 'trophy') of ancient Greece; monuments draped with the

armour of rival warriors, marking the site of a military victory. Trophies also had a spiritual significance; they were a form of sympathetic magic that, by commemorating the Greek's slain enemies, served as a form of celestial protection in future battle. It is unknown whether the petroglyphs of Las Vegas depicting battle served this purpose, though sympathetic magic was not unknown; depictions of the rain god Tlaloc (also invoked in Mexico until the arrival of the Spanish) are a common motif - likely intended to bring rainfall to the parched soil. The markers and monuments of the Southern Paiute generate their own kind of space, and serve as what Tuan called a "symmetry of cardinal points" (2001, p.132); it is not a territory in the cartographic sense of the word - it is a *mythical space*. This *mythical space* is inseparable from *cosmogonic time* and depends upon both *human* and *astronomic time* for its continued existence. It is my argument that the mythical space of the wider Las Vegas landscape can be seen as a liminoid space; a space outside of human time, and therefore outside of the ordered existence of *societas*. It is a space conducive to *ritual*.

New deeds, collective memory and the natural world shape the course of the mythical space. It differs from both, however, in that it exists outside human time's linear passage and can provide a direct link to the world's foundation (and the figures who shaped it). Historian of Religions, Jonathan Z Smith (in discussing the Tijipala people of Australia) noted that rupture to this *mythical space* doesn't occur through invasion of territory or celestial collapse; it instead comes through forgetfulness - a general fading away - and once that rupture occurs, the connection can be severed (Smith, 2010, p.2). What prevents the fading away is its role as *place*.

A key feature of myth is its role in making the world sensible; to provide a kind of organisation. This mythical organisation, for Tuan, "imputes personality to space thus transforming space in effect into place" (2001, p.91). Place is space imbued with meaning. As Smith explains it (2010), space allows for movement, while *place* is defined by pause. It can be a site to rest; to contemplate. It can be 'home': the poetic prism described by philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his celebrated *Poetics of Space* (2014). Bachelard - in discussing French homes of the early to mid-20th century - held that every nook and cranny of a house was imbued with meaning for its occupants; from the drawers, to cellars, to dimly lit stairs, all contain multiple layers of uniquely personal meaning. It is a place to meditate, and cloister yourself (in Western society, at least) from the social movement carrying on outside its walls. Bachelard's focus was on the house of the past; a space that has a history with its occupants - serving as fuel for poetic expression. It is, in other words, its own *mythical space*; a unique organisation of symbols, memories and narratives of past generations that render the world intelligible. It is what Tuan would define as a *place*.

For the Southern Paiute, the periphery of Las Vegas is indeed a *place*. Areas like Sloan Valley and the Valley of Fire are also what Smith would call *ritual centres*. A ritual centre can exist within a larger mythical space, though serve a very specific function. For Smith, sacred sites and temples function as a 'focusing lens' (2010), drawing and directing an actor's attention. The ritual centre encourages the actor, through ceremony, to see a space as 'different' or outside the normal sphere of daily life. This focusing "requires the perception of difference" (Smith 2010, p.104), and imbues the ordinary with significance. This can apply to the cross of Christianity, the petroglyphs of Sloan Valley, or even the Styrofoam statues signifying Italian marble at the Venetian casino. For Smith, the sacred

and the profane are situational; what separates the ritual centre from the mythical space is focus brought about by ritual.

## Summary

Wider Las Vegas is a unique environment, home to countless minor rituals. What holds the experience together is the *crowd*, with casinos serving as Smith's *focusing lens* - institutions that focus the patrons experience, through the means of their servicescape model. Combined, the crowd and casino form a 'body without organs'; an organic entity maintaining a state of homeostasis through the feedback loop that is contributed to by both patron and institution. Enhancing this loop further is the casino's existence in mythical time; a state defined by what Tuan referred to as a symmetry of cardinal points. These cardinal points differ from casino to casino, and it is this unique arrangement that I will be exploring in the following chapter.

## Chapter 5 - The Mohegan Sun: A Hybrid Space in the Age of COVID

In this chapter, I will narrow my focus to a specific casino - the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, and discuss it from ethnographic and structural perspectives, examining the casino both in particular and in its broader social context. The chapter will begin by setting the stage and explain how I began my research with the Mohegan Sun as well as how COVID-19 has shaped the casino and its relationship with its patrons.<sup>56</sup> From there, I will place the Mohegan Sun in the context of the history of Indigenous gaming and consider how that history has further shaped the casino's identity. I will then discuss the ways in which Indigeneity manifests itself in the casino and how Mohegan concepts like the 'Trail of Life' are understood by Las Vegas employees. I will then place the Mohegan Sun in the context of the wider Las Vegas landscape and consider the ways in which Indigenous casinos differ from the casinos that are part of the current Las Vegas 'establishment'.

In addition, I will discuss the Mohegan Sun as *servicescape*; an industrial design framework designed for the service sector. Attuned to the environment through my sensory investigations, I found that The Mohegan Sun servicescape touches everything from taste, to smell and the audio heard in gaming halls. These elements heavily inform the casino experience and have deep connections to the earliest day of Las Vegas, including the sensory deprivation of Thomas Hull's El Rancho casino (founded in 1941). This chapter emphasises the role the casino plays in shaping the patron's *sensory* experience, placing my own experience of the environment at the forefront.

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<sup>56</sup> Also see chapter 1, p.15.

## A Hybrid Space

In 2021, The Mohegan Sun became the first Indigenous-operated casino in Las Vegas (followed by the Californian San Manuel Band of Mission Indians re-launch of the Palms Casino in 2022). It is operated by the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut under the banner of Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment, the tribe's corporate arm (Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment, 2022). The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas is a partnership between the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut and Virgin Hotels; a compromise that can be seen in the casino's design: a design that endeavours to reflect the identities of both corporations. In the first of our interviews, Cody Kreamsner, the Mohegan Sun's marketing manager, labelled the casino's interior themeing 'desert sleek': a heavily mirrored space with Indigenous rugs, evoking the mid-century flavour of California's Palm Springs; all glittering surfaces and acoustic wood panels.



*Unused slot machines at the Mohegan Sun (David Welch).*

I first met Cody in September 2021. He was early for our appointment, and quick to greet me. Cody was tall and wiry, with a shaved head, and (unlike many of the thick-set floor managers in identical grey suits) dressed casually, in jeans. Cody quickly set about locating a space with lower music levels, so as not to disturb the quality of the interview recording. He marched at a rapid pace, dodging obstacles; leaving me trailing behind and unsure about the motivation for his behaviour. Was he embarrassed about being interviewed? Was I meeting with him at a bad time? I concluded that it was best to follow his lead, and allow him to set the tone. As we rushed through the grounds, Cody launched into a stiff and well-rehearsed monologue summarising the casino's history: "It was on this spot that Sammy Hagar opened the Hard Rock; it was here that Steven Tyler stood." I rushed after Cody, as he stormed up an escalator to the second floor, where he eventually chose a spot overlooking the casino's two pools; an oasis in the baking desert, surrounded by palm trees and dominated by the enormous white block that is the Virgin Hotel. "See over there... that's where Paul McCartney played when it was the Hard Rock". This became a regular refrain. When in comfortable terrain, discussing the Hard Rock, Cody leaned back in his chair, legs spread; speaking in a commanding, if detached voice. His discomfort was clear, as cleaners and security observed our first interview through window panes and from other vantage points. As the interest of his colleagues waned, he opened up about the challenges faced by an Indigenous casino working in concert with another corporation.

Branding, Cody suggested, is one of the many issues the casino faces, with the uneasy and unequal brand alliance between Virgin Hotels and Mohegan Sun. Many of the casino's early visitors were long-time fans of the Hard Rock (whose 90s alt-rock sensibility shared little with the Sun's desert sleek ambience) and awareness of the Sun's brand had

also, up to that time, been confined to the East Coast. Lack of attendance was clearly evident. Managers roamed the space with seemingly little to do. Unlike other casinos, slot machines were few and confined to one area. This area was then surrounded by restaurants and stores (running counter to Bill Friedman's maxims) (Friedman, 2000). These choices, Cody informed me, were enforced by Virgin Hotels, who exert a strong influence over the shared space.<sup>57</sup>



*Semi-occupied tables at the Mohegan Sun, 2022 (David Welch).*

## The Mohegan Sun and Indigenous Gambling

Gaming on Indigenous territory is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Beginning with the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians in the 1980s, gaming has become an important source of revenue for many (though certainly not all) tribes. The Mohegan Tribe have

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<sup>57</sup> To be discussed further in chapter 6.

been one of the most successful, generating up to 2 billion annually in gambling revenue. This victory, however, comes with a price. Between 1778 and 1871,<sup>58</sup> the U.S federal government made agreements with 368 tribes; agreements that were, in many cases, broken and saw the tribes relocated to lands those states and the federal government considered undesirable. One example is the Hualapai tribe (located roughly 130 miles north of Las Vegas), who were relocated to the western rim of the Grand Canyon; an arid and desolate environment divided by an 18-mile-wide canyon. Fortunately, the Hualapai found in this land geological structures of spiritual significance and, later, a source of revenue. Not all tribes were so lucky.



*An 'Indian village' attraction in the Hualapai Nation (David Welch).*

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<sup>58</sup> Following the skirmishes of the 'The American Indian Wars', which saw tribes attempting to halt the encroachment of European settlers.

The territories occupied by many tribes are regarded as sovereign nations, though without the rights typically associated with sovereignty. While endowing tribes with "the freedom... to choose what their future will be" (Porter quoted in Light & Rand, 2005, p. 18), in practice, sovereignty has proved both problematic and confusing; conflating a body of law with political status (Light & Rand, 2005). According to legal scholars, the basis of tribal constitutional status is that their powers are not delegated by congress but held to be - as first inhabitants of America - "inherent and original" (Light & Rand, 2005, p.19). It should be stressed that this doesn't mean tribes were granted the authority to define their own conception of self-governance. They, instead, were forced to operate within a pre-established framework.<sup>59</sup>

Tribes were also saddled with the burden of supplying their own educational services, health services and police forces without the financial means to support them. In the 1970s, gaming was identified as a possible solution - offering a revenue stream that could be controlled directly by tribes. Many states bordering Indigenous territory had made gaming illegal; it was tribal sovereignty that permitted tribes to offer this service without interference (at least theoretically). From the beginning, there was resistance; regional authorities prosecuted tribes for a variety of offences.<sup>60</sup> Following a series of illegal raids by state law enforcement, the question of gaming on native land fell to the Supreme Court, which led to the 1988 Indian Gaming Act - enshrining the autonomy of Indigenous nations. To appease states, the act introduced the requirement that tribal

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<sup>59</sup> Tribes fell under the regulation of the federal government; a situation that can be traced back to a series of early decisions dubbed The Marshall Trilogy, which classified tribes as *domestic dependant nations* in need of 'protection' from states. While tribes were free to make their own laws, they were left without the resources to enact them (Wood, 1995). As previously discussed, the territory tribes were assigned often lacked natural resources and their populations were no match for states.

<sup>60</sup> In the case of Broward County in Florida, it was for exceeding jackpot limits set by the Catholic Church.

state form *compacts*; agreements between tribes and the state that permitted states to collect (sometimes substantial) 'special taxes' on gaming revenue.<sup>61</sup> If a compact could not be reached, gaming was not permitted, which granted states a significant advantage in negotiations.

The Mohegan Tribe's involvement in gaming began after being approached by three investment firms, who banded together to form Trading Cove Associates (TCA), a joint venture that partnered with the tribe. TCA offered, in exchange for partnership, 5% of the as-yet unbuilt casinos profits for 15 years and aid in the tribe's gaining federal recognition.<sup>62</sup> TCA remained involved in the venture until 2015, when they were bought out by the tribe (Hallenbeck & Day, 2014). The compact reached between the Mohegan Tribe and the state of Connecticut guarantees 25% of slot revenue for the state (Tribal-State Compact, 2021). In turn, Connecticut promised to work with the tribe to resolve issues related to alcohol service and state police presence. The absence of hotels in Southeastern Connecticut<sup>63</sup> made the Connecticut Mohegan Sun (or the 'Casino of the Earth') a roaring success; growing within a few short years to include a second hotel, the 'Casino of the Sky' which included an enormous planetary dome, multilevel onyx lounge and waterfall (Aubin, 2021). Like other tribes (Light & Rand, 2005), a good deal of the income generated by casinos has been ploughed back into the community. In 2016, over a million dollars was donated to charitable organisations, serving the regions Mohegan Entertainment operate in. Over the past two decades, 11 million dollars has been dedicated to providing clean water to the Mohegan community, and 35 million to other

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<sup>61</sup> In 2021 the state of Oklahoma collected \$163 million in tribal gaming "exclusivity" fees (Oklahoma Annual Gaming Report, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> A process that concluded a mere 2 years after TCA's involvement, though the Mohegan had been pursuing recognition since the late 1970s (Aubin, 2021).

<sup>63</sup> There were only 21 hotels in the region, at the time of the hotel's opening.

infrastructure projects, including roadworks (Mohegan Tribe, 2022). The Mohegan Tribe also support a variety of education programs, as well as inclusion programs for individuals with disabilities (Mohegan Sun, 2022).

The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas stands at a unique intersection of sovereignty and business. For this partnership, the Mohegans were not required to negotiate a costly compact. Instead, the casino is operated by a publicly traded corporation, Mohegan Entertainment who are responsible to the Nevada Gaming Control Board (unlike Nevada-based tribes, who are subject to the Nevada Indian Gaming Commission). The property the Mohegan Sun rests on is managed by a group called J.C. Hospitality, who also are responsible for managing a consortium of owners, including Orlando Development and Virgin Group (Las Vegas Advisor, 2021). Despite Virgin's name taking a prominent place on the masthead, they do not manage the hotel directly; this responsibility falling to Hilton Hotels (though Virgin maintain some involvement). According to Virgin Las Vegas CEO Richard 'Boz' Bosworth, this complex arrangement began life in 2017 as a Virgin Hotel project (Gros, 2021). Bosworth was approached by the owner of the Hard Rock Hotel when Virgin were seeking to develop a hotel in the Vegas area. The acquisition occurred in less than a year. The Mohegan Tribe only became involved after engagement in a competitive RFP process.<sup>64</sup> Virgin Group were in need of proven casino operators and Mohegan Entertainment proved to be the most suitable candidate. This arrangement limits the Mohegan Tribe's involvement and places them in a minority role: the casino floor at the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas can boast only 550 slot machines and 45 table games (Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, 2022); significantly lower than their Connecticut

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<sup>64</sup> An RFP is an open 'request for proposals' issued by institutions or businesses, in order to solicit the best partner, provider or contractor for a service.

operation, which runs to 5000 machines and 300 table games (Mohegan Sun, 2022). In addition, the eight restaurants within the casino (including the celebrated fusion eatery Nobu, co-owned by Robert DeNiro) are leased to separate operators, limiting revenue further.



*A privately operated restaurant at the Mohegan Sun (David Welch).*

To add to this complication of identity, over 81% of employees at the larger Virgin/Mohegan complex worked at the former Hard Rock Hotel and Casino. Mike, a bartender at the Mohegan Sun's Desert Star Bar, was one of these returnees. I interviewed Mike in September 2021 as he worked his shift, serving customers between questions as Bruce Springsteen's 1984 hit 'Glory Days' played dimly in the background. Mike had worked as a bartender for much of his life, having moved to Las Vegas from Syracuse (in upstate New York) as a teenager. Like many I spoke with, his family were

drawn to Vegas by the warm weather and comparatively low cost of living. Mike had dedicated his life to what he called 'service'; working his way up from barback, where you "do the grunt work. You do the push, pullin' and the draggin'", to head bartender - spending 17 years at the Hard Rock Hotel. As he saw it, his primary responsibility was to provide *first class* customer service: "that's what draws a lot of people back. You hear that a lot. That's why we see a lot of out-of-town regulars. That's the majority of what I do. I got [sic] to meet a lot of people from all over, I keep in touch with a lot of the customers that are from out of town. I still keep in touch. That's a big part of it. [Customers from] back east, California. Some people in Chicago. We get a little international [too], sure. A lot of visitors like the renovation, they like the new look. They like the restaurants of course. But a lot of it is [that] they like *us*." Mike believed an important part of the Mohegan Sun experience is the longevity of many of the staff, who had worked at the Hard Rock/Mohegan Sun since "day one. There are people who have been working here longer than me." Mike didn't see much change under new management, though there appeared to be an arbitrary division between Hard Rock and Mohegan employees. "You see," Mike stressed, "Cody is with the Mohegan and we didn't have Mohegan till we reopened just recently". How that affected working relationships was unclear.

Cody, who was present at my interview with Mike (arms crossed and keeping a watchful eye), shared the view that customer service was their major selling point. While the Mohegan Tribe were involved with his team via a required monthly update call, they don't assert themselves too strongly. Employees are provided with a training session that educates them in the Mohegan Tribe's vision statement, though this appears to be more intensive for some employees than others (Mike's recollection of this session was hazy,

at best). Cody's understanding of the session was more nuanced: "when we do orientation, we learn about the spirit of equality... we learn that it's thirteen generations... we learn how far this this tribe really goes back. We always respect the tribe... their ways. Thirteen generations of ... always evolving, always doing better." The full vision statement of the Mohegan Tribe runs as follows:

*We are the Wolf People, children of Mundo, a part of the Tree of Life. Our ancestors form our roots, our living Tribe is the trunk, our grandchildren are the buds of our future.*

*We remember and teach the stories of our ancestors.*

*We watch. We listen. We learn.*

*We respect Mother Earth, our Elders, and all that comes from Mundo.*

*We are willing to break arrows of peace to heal old and new wounds. We acknowledge and learn from our mistakes.*

*We walk as a single spirit on the Trail of Life. We are guided by thirteen generations past and responsible to thirteen generations to come.*

*We survive as a nation guided by the wisdom of our past. Our circular trail returns us to wholeness as a people (Mohegan Tribe, 2022)*

Unlike Cody's more linear, progress-focused interpretation, the Mohegan Tribe's vision statement clearly keeps its feet in the past and future simultaneously; representing history and the future as cyclic.<sup>65</sup> <sup>66</sup> This disconnect reflects a cultural difference. Where

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<sup>65</sup> A perspective that could be said to be not just cyclical, but multi-layered.

<sup>66</sup> An attribute that was already familiar to me, as a New Zealander, owing to its similarities with the Māori whakatauki, walking into the future with your eyes on the past: Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua (I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past) (Rameka, 2017).

Chicago-born Cody sees the Mohegan vision as negation of the past, the tribal vision (as written) reflects a reconciliation with and acknowledgement of history, for the present and future. The Mohegan trail is *circular*. Wounds must be healed. Future generations will bear the fruit of this healing. For those who live and work in Vegas, this presents an ontological challenge. In 2008, Las Vegas was declared the suicide capital of America (Trudeau, 2008). It is a city of *now*. A city that regularly negates its own history, while leaving the future open to speculators; denying the life of its denizens (Borchard, 2005). Cody's interpretation of the Mohegan vision renders history null and void; turning instead to a glistening and spackled repackaging of the ancient past for a tourist market. Indigenous-managed casinos *are*, in some respects, different. This is plainly visible in the messaging of the reopened Palms Casino. Where gaming apps and luxury services had dominated the casino's messaging under prior management, the focus shifted to the beliefs and values of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians. Unlike the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, the tribe's values were not buried beneath the branding of partners. On an enormous hotel high billboard, they announced that their focus was on 'building a better future for all [and] acting on [their] beliefs' (not the most obvious messaging for driving hotel bookings).



"Building a better future for all. Acting on our beliefs". San Manuel Band of Mission Indians messaging for the then soon-to-open Palms Casino; messaging that contrasts strongly with the consumer-focused copy of most Las Vegas casinos. (David Welch).

Mike didn't feel that the Mohegan Sun was considered an Indigenous casino by patrons, who can view these casinos negatively. One patron I spoke with expressed surprise at the high quality of performers booked at the Sun because it is an "Indian casino", also presuming that the quality of the soon-to-reopen Palms would dip. The poverty of many tribes seemed to equate to a poverty of *quality*; a notion supported by the make-shift nature of some Indigenous casinos (Berthier-Foglar, 2005). The success of tribes like the Mohegans have generated a negative social stereotype - the wealthy Indigenous living off the 'easy money' that supposedly comes with having casinos on tribal land (a 'luxury'

not afforded to other American minorities) (Robertson, 2016). According to this take, casinos are a welfare system for tribes, who are thought to be exploiting their arrangements with the federal government (Light & Rand, 2005, p.126). This view exists simultaneously with the perception that Indigenous Americans are in *need* of guidance and stewardship. For some, Native American tribes throughout the country are being bilked out of millions of dollars each year by unscrupulous investors; leaving tribal members impoverished (though this unscrupulousness apparently does not extend to the states) (Light & Rand, 2005, p.13). The focus, in this argument, is on the casinos that fail. This suggests that the beliefs harboured by some patrons are not held unanimously, as patronage at Indigenous-operated casinos is increasing (Stutz, 2020). Indigenous-operated casinos clearly fulfil an important function for their patrons, offering a ritual experience that fulfils social needs.<sup>67</sup> A function fulfilled by the unique confluence of space and place (as outlined in the previous chapter), which in turn births a highly specific social *identity* or *habitus*.

### The Mohegan Sun Patron

The patrons I observed, on my first visit, were an unusual mixture of the older Hard Rock crowd (usually white males in late middle age, wearing t-shirts identified with popular 1970s and 1980s rock bands, like Aerosmith) and younger men - presumably drawn by Virgin's glossier brand identity (many embracing a trap/cloud rap aesthetic; all dreadlocks, puffer jackets and gold grills). This identity, however, wasn't consistent. I found that, with each visit, the faces and habitus<sup>68</sup> of each group shifted. What was

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<sup>67</sup> To be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

<sup>68</sup> To be discussed in greater depth in chapter 6.

causing this change? The most perplexing shift came when I visited the Mohegan Sun to see a jazz performance by veteran actor Jeff Goldblum. The event had a middle-class burlesque veneer, with the eccentric actor enlisting cabaret performer Melody Sweets as a singer/strip tease artist to support his act. The crowd was (primarily) middle aged: the men dressed in jeans and blazers, the women in modest dresses. When queuing, the crowd was courteous. However, as I exited the event, I found myself surrounded by an entirely different and much larger crowd. Dreadlocks, tie-dyed shirts, and patchwork clothes predominated. Was I in the town of Joshua Tree? Was this the Mohegan Sun's new primary audience? The grouping had more in common with those found at the Burning Man alternative festival that takes place annually in the Black Rock Desert, or other outdoor festivals than the crowd I had entered with. The smell of marijuana hung in the air. It turned out that a series of concerts by southern jam band<sup>69</sup> *Widespread Panic* had drawn two, somewhat contradictory audiences to the hotel. A security guard who I asked about the crowd immediately identified me as a Jeff Goldblum audience member. How was I identified, I asked myself? On closer inspection, it was obvious; a blazer, clean-cut hair and grey shirt set me apart from the looser, desert-oriented dress of the crowd; a group in search of communal experience far removed from the polished confines of a burlesque performance. This provided me with a deeper insight into the ever-changing *habitus* of the casino: a performed *Hard Rock Indigeneity*. I realised this was the Mohegan Sun's established, post-Hard Rock identity: a 'glamorous' concert venue with high-quality concerts and beach party zone, serving to reinforce its image as a 'desert sleek' oasis; classier than others in its group.<sup>70</sup> Many elements make up this persona,

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<sup>69</sup> The 'jam band' genre originated in the 1960s, with San Francisco-based psychedelic rock group The Grateful Dead. Jam bands often have loyal and dedicated followings, and focus on extended improvisations (Reeder, 2014).

<sup>70</sup> The concepts of class and sophistication, and how they relate to the Mohegan Sun, will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

and these elements, when combined, translate into *sophistication*; a sophistication that defines the Mohegan Sun's middle-tier habitus.<sup>71</sup>

## Experiential Design

As discussed in the literature review, experiential design plays an important role in shaping the patron's experience, and by extension, the casino's *habitus*. Casino operators have attempted to refine this to a science, manipulating the way patrons navigate their spaces through signs, smells, sounds and spatial layout. It is what industry consultants have dubbed *casino atmospherics*; "controllable items that connect with the internal and external environment ... [and] elicit an emotional or psychological reaction from customers" (Turley, Fugate & Milliman, 1990, quoted in Schull, 2014, p.46). The concept of atmospherics was first developed in the 1970s and is intimately connected with *service*. In the early 1990s, academic Mary Jo Bitner developed a 'servicescape' model - a stimulus-response framework influenced by environmental psychology, designed for application in the service sector. Bitner identified two primary types of service environment: the lean servicescape and the elaborate servicescape. Las Vegas casinos (with their dense, symbolic environments and high contact relationship between staff and patron) most typically fall into the latter category. Key to Bitner's model are the categories 'signs and symbols', 'spatial layout' and 'ambient conditions' (which encompasses light, colour, sound, temperature and other environmental factors); areas to which Vegas casinos pay particular attention (Bitner, 1992). A number of studies have since been dedicated to studying these *servicescape* elements in casinos, including the effect that the introduction of "pleasing" odours on slot machine play time (Schull, 2014, p.47), and the linkage between atmospherics and customer satisfaction (with floor layout,

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<sup>71</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

ceiling height and noise level proving particularly important) (Johnson, Mayer & Champaner, 2004).

In our second interview, Cody acknowledged his team's awareness of the Mohegan Sun as a *servicescape*, with particular attention paid to the effect of sound on gaming. According to Cody, the music played in the casino's first two months failed to resonate with customers, due to a lack of *familiar* songs and sufficiently upbeat tempos. Upon taking on the task of sequencing, he insisted on "high BPM, upbeat music" to elevate the mood of patrons. To satisfy the Hard Rock audience, he kept classic rock on the playlist (particularly during day time hours): "people love classic rock - everyone that's coming back from the Hard Rock knows that's what this place used to be - except we don't have the memorabilia around the casino [anymore], so had to keep that." However, the team are aware that the Mohegan Sun *is not* the Hard Rock, and are conscious of catering to patrons from a "new era, new generation. We are trying to go towards the twenty-to-thirty-year-olds that are coming into their own (in [terms of] making money) and want to go gambling... so there is some EDM (Electronic Dance Music), there is some pop music ... gelling both together. [I don't see] a problem with that... playing Def Leppard and then ... Britney Spears, and the next song is Tiesto and then going back to Led Zeppelin." This approach jibes well with a generation reared on Spotify; an era where older music is consumed as readily as current hits and dance music (Gioia, 2022).

Volume as well as sequencing for music alters throughout the day, for which there are practical as well as conceptual concerns. In our second interview, a month later (prior to a Black Jack tournament at the Sun), Cody noted that "in Vegas everyone is waking up

around noon. At night time, when people are ready to gamble [the goal is to] keep them awake, keep 'em going... get some EDM music going, get some pop music going". The volume, too, goes up. Cody explained that "at night time you have a thousand people on the floor [instead of an average hundred during the day], and they're all talking and gambling and machines are hitting. It's pretty loud in there. Now you need to turn it up to eight or nine. [That said] there are some old stories that the Hard Rock guys love to tell [about how they] used to crank the music super loud... to like ten - blasting - and you couldn't hear. If you're a blackjack dealer, you can't hear the customer talking to you. Sometimes they were rocking out themselves!" Atmospheric, then, are intimately connected with the practical.

Lukas sees the shamanic hand of the casino operator at every turn; the subliminal influences of Friedman and his followers shaping each facet of the servicespace. In tracing the path of the Strip in the mid-2000s, Lukas made note of how sensory experience is shaped (Lukas, 2007) - from the gradual transformation in Excalibur's entranceway to the long journey through Caesars' Palace - guiding the patron with subtle cues like slanting pathways, changing cloud projections and alterations in fragrance that guide you step-by-step from the gaming rooms to the forum shops (which feature high-end retailers like Balenciaga and Hermes). This is what Lukas calls *microthemeing* - fine, manipulative details designed to enhance the larger theme (2007, p.76). This microthemeing, Lukas contests, is what sets the luxury casinos like the Wynn, Mirage and Caesars apart from their competition. *Performative theming* also plays a major part; Lukas' days as a trainer at Six Flags amusement park made him aware of the attention given to multiple senses when directing staff: the visual accounted for by dress code and body language; the auditory through 'positive' greetings and avoidance of off-stage

matters; the other senses, like touch and taste, through delivering 'satisfying' food and game experiences (2007, p.78). This performative view of front-of-house staff life was also reflected in Mike's attitude throughout our discussion, as he reiterated that customer service (as opposed to the preparation of drinks) was his primary role. Lukas identified a heavy incorporation of Bitner's 'signs and symbols' in many themed hotels; for instance, the mediaeval-fantasy themed Excalibur hotel featuring recurrent themes of "meat and empire... that playfully appealed to numerous sensory dimensions of patrons" (2007, p. 81). In other words, the 'nuanced' associations of flesh, indulgence and wealth.

In the work of Schull, Lukas, and others, an arch and Machiavellian aura has come to surround the industrial designers assigned with shaping these environments. In practice, the experience is far more haphazard. The snares are both glaring and subtle - both more obvious and less effective than you would assume. The directive to gamble is present at every turn, and in its obviousness, easy to avoid. While Caesars Palace is described by Lukas as being a seamless, 'hands-free' experience I have found myself lost and confused on more than one occasion; all roads - seemingly - leading nowhere. This, the experiential design believers would have you think is all part of the master plan (Scull, 2005). One patron, a woman in her late twenties visiting Caesars Palace from Colorado, told me "I've gotten lost [in the casino] I don't know how many times! I'm always finding myself somewhere in the back near some random statue." Odours are held to be unique signatures (although it should be noted that the Mohegan Sun has no such feature). Cody claimed that "a blind man knows when he's in the Flamingo Hotel. I mean, it has such a specific scent [and] it's been that way for a million years. I could be walking the Strip and I could be blindfolded and I could smell it and ... know I'm at Flamingo." However, in my experience, the overwhelming odour found in most casinos (including The Flamingo)

is cigarettes; no amount of Disney-style themeification can eliminate the feel of the saloon, which extends back as far as Las Vegas' early development. A dankness prevails, no matter how glossy the surroundings; the feel of sawdust and the harsh grate of moonshine. An inorganic design feature of the casino's personhood.

Vegas owes its life to the saloon. In 1941, Californian developer Thomas Hull opened the El Rancho hotel which was designed to attract clientele travelling on the newly built highway 91 (out of Los Angeles). In the early 1940s, Las Vegas was still considered a desolate frontier town (AI, 2005, p.11) and the El Rancho a risky development; constructed, as it was, in the middle of the Mojave some two miles outside of city limits (to avoid city taxation and the costs associated with building a large hotel downtown). While other casinos (like the Golden Gate) predated it, The El Rancho was the first casino on what became known as the Strip; a paean to the American west complete with wagon wheels, cowhide curtains and mounted deer heads (AI, 2005, p.15). It doubled as Vegas' first luxury hotel complex and an old-time hall of vice; sharing as much in common with saloons and roadside attractions (like Margate NJ's Lucy the Elephant and the Cabazon Dinosaurs), as upmarket L.A. hotels like the Chateau Marmont. Light was extinguished, and all that was left was the lure of dancers and booze. These sensory cues are, per Lukas, still Las Vegas' primary lures; keeping patrons isolated from the wider world in large halls that never see clocks or the light of day - plied with alcohol (and other stimulants) and titillated with the suggestion (and supply) of sex.

Time became relative to the patron. This is still the primary *modus operandi* in local-focused resorts The Gold Coast and El Cortez. The Mohegan Sun, Las Vegas, however, adopts subtler means. The casino's position off-Strip allows it deploy the desert itself as a form of isolating device; the enormous glass window panes opening out onto tiered

pools and a blazing sun. In keeping with the casino's modernist, forward-looking mission, the Mohegan Sun's design has more in common with the mid-20th century modern homes of John Lautner than the 19th century beer hall ambience of the older casinos; favouring, as it does, an openness that seeks to blur the distinction between interior and exterior. "We try to keep it brighter", Cody noted, "because some people don't like the dim casinos... they don't want to be in a dark, dingy casino. [They don't want to feel like they are in] some dive bar." While the means differ, the effect is still the same as that sought by Hull: patrons feeling isolated from the cares of the wider world and more inclined to indulge in the services the hotel has on offer. Most of all, they feel *comfortable* - a point often missed in the literature; too often the emphasis falls on the more extreme or curated aspects of the environment. In this thesis, I intend to add to the debate and explore this aspect of the hotel experience further. At every casino I visited, the audience aligned with the *comfort* feature on offer; at the Orleans (despite a New Orleans theme) a Midwestern atmosphere predominated, with a supremely casual dress code and long lines outside family food chains like TGI Fridays. While apparently comfortable for visitors, I often felt ill at ease with a code so lax as to allow pyjamas in public spaces, and slot machine players to put their feet up on machines, and surround themselves with multiple drinks and semi-filled ashtrays. This *laissez faire* approach to public conduct clashed with my upbringing in New Zealand, where even minor deviations from 'acceptable' public behaviour could draw scrutiny. This 'relaxed' attitude, however, is a key part of the casino strategy. Lukas, familiar with these demands due to his background in service, emphasised: "theming can ... comfort, so much that one is lost in the self. As a sensory structure, re-assurance functions on a continuum from the total excitement of maximum sensory elaboration to the total low of sensory deprivation that is akin to a body in an anechoic chamber" (Lukas, 2007, p.83). At the

Mohegan Sun, a glittering Palm Spring ambience and favouring of pool-side ambience is the comfort zone for many patrons (a comfort supported by a familiar soundtrack, along with other elements to be discussed in chapter 6).

## Summary

In summary, the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas occupies a unique position in the Las Vegas landscape as the first Indigenous-operated casino. Its focus on the 'Trail of Life' defines its positioning; a positioning outside of the traditional *field* of Las Vegas casinos. Their minority relationship with JC Hospitality and Virgin further defined their position as that of a minority, with their say only partially heard amidst the maelstrom. Las Vegas casinos are unique *sensory* environments, designed to elicit specific responses from patrons. The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas is no different, with strategic uses of sounds, light and space. While the Mohegan Sun experience is less heavily orchestrated than more lavish casinos like Caesars Palace (lacking its own unique scent, among other elements), it still works within a tradition that can be traced back to the Strip's first resort, *The El Rancho*. This tradition focused on a form of sensory isolation, which serves to make the patron more amenable to spending.

## Chapter 6 – Discussion Part 1: Carnival of Sophistication - The Mohegan Sun as Ritual Space

Building on the previous two chapters, I will focus on the Mohegan Sun as a *ritual centre* and discuss the purpose it serves for patrons. The chapter will begin with a discussion of Indigenous casinos in Las Vegas and what makes these casinos 'Indigenous', as well as what that Indigeneity might mean from a ritual perspective. This will lead into a continuation of my discussion of the Mohegan Sun's role as a liminoid space and how economic factors, stemming from the Sun's minority position in partnership with Virgin Hotels and JC Hospitality, play a role in defining that space – which manifests, I will argue, as a form of *sophistication*. I will then view the Mohegan Sun ritual through the lens of Clara Irazabal's *hyperkitsch*, which draws on Baudrillard's treatment of hyperreality in Las Vegas and the exaggerations of cliched form found in kitsch art, as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's *carnavalesque* as a rite of both release and reversal. I will consider how these concepts relate to the performative nature of the ritual. This will then segue into a final discussion of the transgressive nature of the Las Vegas ritual, and how the Mohegan Sun as a liminoid space supports that transgression.

## Hard Rock Indigeneity



*The carnival begins at the grand opening of the Mohegan's Sun's competitor, The Palms (David Welch).*

The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, like many casinos, is a space where patrons come to live out fantasy versions of their own lives; to perform on a stage. A place where every patron and staff member are part of the play, and sexuality is just a part of this complex ritual. Nowhere was this performativity clearer than the grand opening of the Mohegan Sun's direct competitor, the Indigenous-owned Palms Casino, which I witnessed on April 27, 2022 and will now describe.

The day opened with a small, loosely choreographed blessing ceremony by the casino's owners, The San Manuel Band of Mission Indians. The day was characteristically warm, and many of the group were wearing suits or heavy matching shirts - rattles in hand. While seemingly casual and relaxed (lacking the costumes, fanfare and energy found in the audience-focused Indigenous rituals I observed in Mexico City), they were effectively

transforming the space - endowing it with *mana*<sup>72</sup> (Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021). The ritual had an off-hand quality, and evoked memories from the remarkably casual ceremonies I witnessed on the Hualapai Nation, which had no clear beginning, middle or end - with participants simply wandering off, when the feeling took them. The ritual was cemented by guest Dino DiCienzo (head of Canadian Niagara Hotels, Inc.), who rolled the first dice of the day (Velotta & McKenna, 2022). From there, the carnival ensued: neon stilt walkers, Day-Glo drummers and tabletop dancers, wearing gold pants and enormous hats. As a spectator, I was enveloped in the atmosphere; surrounded by pounding music - echoing iterations of familiar hits from every corner. What I saw around me were thousands of performances: an elderly East Asian man with an enormous, Elvis-style coif, strutting through the crowd; Anglo women in their 60s with glittering dresses and beehive hairdos, and Kardashian impersonators with the surgery to prove their fidelity to the mould (Sood, Quintal & Phau, 2017). From my perspective, glamour, as perceived by the masses, was the order of the day. An emaciated man in his early thirties - shirtless and toothless - with suspenders and a carefully manicured moustache, appeared to me to be embracing his own vision of glamour.

The Mohegan Sun's opening was, according to a contemporary report, a far more perfunctory affair - reflecting the Mohegan Tribe's minority position, in relation to their partners Virgin Hotels and JC Hospitality. The Palms was hailed in media coverage as Las Vegas' first Indigenous casino (Robertson, 2022), suggesting that (in the eyes of the wider public and media, at least), ownership endows 'Indigeneity', while operation does not. This perception was also reflected in the Mohegan Sun's opening in 2021, with

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<sup>72</sup> While an oversimplification, *mana* has been described as "the power of the elemental forces of nature embodied in an object or person", as well as "moral authority" (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

ceremonial practices limited. Instead of a public blessing, the casino was opened with a 'ceremonial door unlocking' - followed by the traditional gifting of a gourd, sweetgrass and Mohegan blanket to JC Hospitality CEO Richard Bosworth by tribal councillors (Mohegan Entertainment, 2021). The more restrained public presence of the Mohegan Tribe is true of the casino's design, too. It takes on an almost subversive<sup>73</sup> form - with framed blankets in alcoves and tribal proverbs, hidden in plain sight. Despite their subtlety, the symbols are clearly felt, with many of the patrons I spoke with commenting on the casino's "Indian feeling"; a material feature of the casino's personhood.

The continued engagement with the casino's Hard Rock history adds an additional layer to this symbolic 'Indigeneity', as the title of this thesis reflects. The Hard Rock franchise was purchased in 2006 by the Seminole Tribe of Florida (Rosica, 2016), who control casino and hotel rights in the U.S, Australia and South America. Following the logic of Las Vegas news media, this ownership endows The Hard Rock brand with an 'Indigenous' identity, even if this Indigeneity may not be intelligible to fans of the franchise. The Hard Rock's ownership makes the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas' ongoing discourse with its past, to me, symbolically fascinating: a meeting of two sovereign nations through the medium of a gambling hall which is situated in the ancestral land of the Las Vegas Paiute, whose legacy in the area stems back thousands of years.

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<sup>73</sup> Or, to put in other words, *subtextual* form. The 'Indigenous' aspects of the casino's habitus are not explicit, but are instead spare and subtle. This is in keeping with the casino's *sophisticated* habitus.

## The Mohegan Sun as Liminal Space



*The Mohegan Sun (David Welch).*

The symbols a casino deploys play a defining role in the patron's experience and shape everything - from the servicescape techniques deployed by managers, to the patron's they market to.<sup>74</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, these symbols address all the senses, via scent, layout, light and sound. In the case of the Mohegan Sun, a spacious design with a blurred division between outdoors and the interior, and a carefully sequenced soundtrack create an experience that is unique and appeals to a specific audience. The 'themed' environments created by Las Vegas casinos are, as Lukas noted (2007), fantasy spaces that place patrons *outside* of their day-to-day experiences. The guiding hand of servicescape techniques are what differentiates one casino from

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<sup>74</sup> See chapter 5.

another, and define the kinds of fantasies - or, rather *rituals* - they offer. The ritual nature of these spaces is key, and I am suggesting that casinos are not just fantasy, but *liminoid* spaces. By 'liminoid', I am again referring to Turner's notion that, unlike a rite of passage, a liminoid state serves as a social release valve, re-affirming a participant's social status (Turner, 1984). It is typically individualised, idiosyncratic and manifests itself as a critique of the social order.<sup>75</sup> They are spaces where patrons are shorn of their day-to-day habitus (to be discussed in greater depth further along in this chapter) and placed in an area outside the 'normal time' (Tuan's notion of *human time*) of their routines and daily schedules.

The Mohegan Sun's unique location (off-Strip, in relative isolation) supports the argument that the casino supports a liminoid state. Like The El Rancho,<sup>76</sup> the Mohegan Sun isolates the patron from their day-to-day life via its absence from the Strip's bustle. This isolation is exemplified by the hotel's many windows and glass walls, which open onto tiered pools; creating the effect of a desert oasis, with the Mojave's heat heightening the ambience. The Sun, also a liminoid space, is much gentler than more traditional casinos (which tend to plunge patrons into a maelstrom of music, smoke and clanging slot machines); placing registration and check-in at the conclusion of a labyrinth. In many ways, the more aggressive approach of traditional casinos is necessary for grabbing the attention of passers-by (and keeping them there) (Griskevicius, Goldstein, Mortensen et al. 2009). Many adopt loose theming concepts - such as the California Gold Rush or the Old West (apparently favoured by Chinese and Hawaiian visitors) (Weik, 2019) - though the distinctiveness of this symbolism is offset by the micro-theming of slot machines, which cater to their own groups. Each and every slot machine offers its

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<sup>75</sup> Discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

<sup>76</sup> While avoiding that casino's tavern-like ambience.

own theme, from Tarzan to Judy Garland. This approach is appropriate in casinos where machine gaming is the primary focus. According to anthropologist Natasha Dow Schull, slot machines became a dominant revenue stream in the early 2000s (2014). As discussed in the literature review and chapter 5, entire approaches to designing casino floors (like those of Bill Friedman) have been dedicated to leading patrons to the slots. Each casino has its own method for acting as a 'focusing lens' for ritual.<sup>77</sup>

The Mohegan Sun contains very few gaming machines. This philosophy is partly a result of the Mohegan Sun's complex relationship with Virgin Hotels and JC Hospitality. The number of machines had been purposefully limited, so as not to clutter the space and prevent registration. In this arrangement, Virgin Hotels and JC Hospitality (as landlord) are the dominant partner and their interests take priority over the Mohegan Tribe. While older casinos continue to pursue Friedman's ideal, a space where the slot machine users can achieve a state of focus (or 'zone') and block out the wider world (Schull 2014), the Mohegan Sun is more open and communal. The typical confusion and clutter of a standard Fremont casino is drastically limited. As Cody expressed in our first interview, "If you go to Four Queens, downtown, it's been here forever... it's been here fifty or sixty years, right? Forever... they jam pack that place full of machines". For Cody, there are two primary differences between the Four Queens approach and that of the Mohegan Sun: "One, [the Four Queens layout] doesn't look good and two, it's not a money-making model [for us]. [The Four Queens] don't have a lot of square footage either... [but they] own a lot of their machines... probably, ninety percent of it, and they jam pack as much they can. That's pure profit going into their pockets." The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, however, inherited much of their stock from Connecticut's collection of

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<sup>77</sup> See chapter 4 p. 72.

older (and less popular) machines, meaning the Vegas team were forced to rent newer machines: "Our slot manager is very in tune with reports and how things are working. There's a method to the madness. You don't need seven of one machine, just to fill space, if five are going to do. Now you have seven and two aren't being played... well, now the report doesn't look as good. It [also] looks better on the casino floor that you're not jam packed". The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas' economic restrictions and business model, then, play an important part in shaping its spatial identity, and how patrons engage with the casino. With the barrage of micro-themed slot machines limited to a small area, the space is opened up for the patron to fill the space with their own fantasies, and engage in a dialogue with the larger feedback loops taking place.

From my first visit, I was conscious of the Sun's relative openness and spaciousness, contrasting with its middle-tier rivals. A registration desk was clearly visible upon entering (in the manner of an airport), with a small bar on the periphery and a seating area with tables with outlets for patrons to charge their devices. This area acted as a gateway, or threshold, to the liminoid space. After passing through the threshold, I would find myself accepted into a gaming area, which was surrounded by restaurants and stores on either side. It is in this phase of my entrance that I would be met with the greatest number of symbols - from restaurant signage to slots. From there, I would pass into a sheltering womb of darkness, and a series of bars. Unlike the tavern-style ambience of Fremont, the feel was more akin to the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*; a respect for the varying shades of light and life, with an acceptance of darkness as well as light (Tanizaki, 1977) - a philosophy of the *middle way*. The openness of the Sun's design permitted a freedom of movement not found at the Four Queens, where I would typically see patrons confined to spaces approximately 5 feet by 5; drinks laid out by

their slot machine, cigarette in hand. The Four Queens leaves the patrons isolated, in their own interior world - locked into Friedman's 'zone'. At the Mohegan Sun, however, patrons find their way to the terrace - overlooking multiple swimming pools, where they are immersed in the crowd and absorbed in the desert environment. It is here that the core ritual of *play* - a 'performance' of *sophistication* and *transgression* - takes place. Richard Schechner in his *Performance Theory* (2015) drew correlations between ritual and performance (emphasising the similarity in phases between religious rituals, drama and sports games), and distinguished rituals of 'transformation' and 'transportation'. In rites of passage,<sup>78</sup> there is a 'transformation' of the social state. In western *liminoid* rituals, however, the ritual is 'transportive' and the actors in the ritual performance always return to 'themselves', and the social role they began with. The performances that take place at the Mohegan Sun are such a ritual.<sup>79</sup>

### Hyperkitsch and Sophistication

As introduced in the literature review, Clara Irazabal, Director of Urban Studies and Planning at the University of Maryland, views Las Vegas casinos as a largely urban phenomenon that are sought out by those who feel alienated by their environment.<sup>80</sup> Irazabal's conclusions certainly held true for the patrons I spoke with, with none hailing from small towns or even remote suburbs. In Irazabal's reading, city dwellers seek refuge in what she labels *hyperkitsch*; an extension of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality which suggest that modern urban environments are not providing stable *symbolic* support for

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<sup>78</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>79</sup> Though, as will be discussed later in this chapter, there are layers of complexity. The ritual is closely related to habitus, and contains the latent seeds of a potential 'upward' trajectory within the field.

<sup>80</sup> Irazabal's research was drawn from architectural studies and scholarly, multidisciplinary literature on Las Vegas, as well as informal interviews and participant observation conducted on the Las Vegas Strip over several visits in the early 2000s (2007, p. 219).

"social urban identity formation" (Irazabal, 2007, p.217). Urban identity is considered vital for a city dwellers sense of community, self-identity and *place*<sup>81</sup> (Ujang & Zakariya, 2015). In other words, the placehood of the Las Vegas casino provides a necessary support in the formation of the patron's identity.

As previously discussed,<sup>82</sup> Baudrillard saw Las Vegas as a land of symbols, divorced from their referents, and similar to a hologram. In her essay, Irazabal draws a connection between Baudrillard's hyperreality concept and the notion of *kitsch*, a term originating in Germany in the mid-19th century, meaning 'false art'; or an art that, in some sense, *fails* in mimicking common and widely accepted iconography. *Kitsch* art takes stereotypes and cliches as its subject and exaggerates their form. Irazabal sees kitsch as a reaction against modernism and the disruptive, ever-changing nature of urban life (the perpetual reconstruction of the landscape by capitalism). She suggests that kitsch is a way of raising the symbols of the everyday to the level of comforting superficiality - to fantasy (Irazabal, 2007, p. 203). Irazabal argues that, contrary to Baudrillard's argument, the desert is not the home of America's ultimate reality. It is home to its fantasy. Irazabal sees Las Vegas as the home of hyperkitsch; it is a refuge for those seeking to escape the uncertain reality of a landscape subject to capitalism's fierce re-writing. She states: "when kitsch substitutes real things by commodified loss, hyperreality is created... kitsch turns out to be one of the most appropriate media by which the previous beliefs in originality, authenticity, and symbolic depth are challenged by an eclectic appreciation of the surface and allegorical values" (2007, p.204). Hyperkitsch, then, can be liberating, and

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<sup>81</sup> See chapter 4, p. 72.

<sup>82</sup> See chapter 2, p. 30-31.

provide an almost radical counterpoint to contemporary urban life. It rejects capitalism's terms, by accepting the ultimate form of capitalist enterprise.

Hyperkitsch can take many forms, whether it be the 'nostalgia' of Caesars Palace (embodied in Greco-Roman inspired architecture) or the *hyperkitschified* New York-New York (marked by its exaggerated, *neutralised* depiction of the great eastern city) (2007, p. 208). The Mohegan Sun, it can be argued, occupies a middle-tier; its engagement with modernism and Indigeneity lacking the extremes of form found in the previously-mentioned casinos. While seemingly contradictory, I suggest that the Mohegan Sun achieves a state of *hyperkitsch* through its exaggerated interpretation of *sophistication* - which is achieved through *subtlety* (a key part of the concept and the word's definition) (Merriam-Webster, 2022). The more obviously kitsch aspects of the hotel can be found in the ways its staff relate to patrons (particularly through its continued engagement with Hard Rock music and imagery), and the performances that take place in its halls. The way behaviours and physical appearances are accentuated is key to understanding the *ritual* that takes place, on a daily basis, at the Mohegan Sun.

### **The Mohegan Sun Ritual: Sex, Self-Presentation and the Carnavalesque**

Among Thomas Hull's primary innovations at the El Rancho was the Vegas Showgirl - feather-bedecked dancers in bathing suits hired to entice and entertain patrons. The tradition of budget-conscious hotels opting for sexually-oriented entertainment stems back to 1957's *Minsky Follies*, which was a bare-breasted Parisian revue at the Dunes Hotel. Unable to compete with the big-name acts being booked at more successful hotels, the Dunes management (whose initial goal was to build a bar/strip club for local truckers) opted for less clothing and - at the suggestion of the building's architect - a

liberal use of "tasteful" umbrellas (Al, 2005, p.72). The Dunes' approach soon caught on and spread throughout the Strip. While the age of the showgirl is over (Palm, 2016), their modern-day equivalent can still be found in similar, if skimpier, outfits parading down the Strip to pose with grinning tourists... for a fee. A variation can be found throughout the 'Fremont Street Experience' and many of the smaller casinos: servers in tight-fitting outfits seeking out gamblers for more rounds of drinks; or the solemn-faced table dancers found on The D's<sup>83</sup> main floor.

This sexual presentation takes a different form at the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, manifesting as the would-be Instagram influencer (a participant in the hyperkitsch dialogue, if ever there was one). The casino serves as an ideal backdrop for this performance, with its desert oasis 'vibe' and pool-side club. Just as galleries and museums now have Instagram-ready staging areas, the larger complex serves as a stage for glamour, and the suggestion of sexuality. Even a cursory scroll through the Mohegan Sun's social media accounts reveals a common pattern: men and women living out gender normative fantasies of glamour, suggestively sipping beverages in bars, against mirrored backdrops and by the pool. One self-declared "Las Vegas Superfan" that I spoke with in an informal conversation at the Mohegan Sun, jokingly stated that "'hotel hot' is a metric specific to Vegas because "[she is] a '[Mohegan Sun] 6' but a 'Jerry's Nugget 10'", emphasising that such performances take different forms in different casinos. The servicescape of the casino, then, allows for varying definitions of sexuality and social identity. These definitions both reinforce and are supported by the urban identity formation outlined by Irazabal in her discussion of hyperkitsch.

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<sup>83</sup> The D Hotel and Casino is unrelated to the Dunes Hotel. In this case, the 'D' stands for 'Downtown'.

Newton, in her landmark ethnography *Mother Camp* (2001) discussed the performance of 'glamour' by female impersonators in 1960s America. In that world, glamour was an abstraction of beauty - a purposeful stylization. The goal of female impersonators was not to achieve a simple imitation of the then-model of feminine beauty, but instead to take the elements further, into a realm that stretched the conventions of glamour: eyebrows and make up accentuated to an extreme degree; wigs taking a larger form than typical. I would argue that these stylizations were a performative interpretation of Irazabal's *hyperkitsch* sensibility, providing a fantasy/liminoid outlet for the socially alienated. It also offered a state of *communitas*,<sup>84</sup> generating a community for those who engaged in the performance.

The self-presentation of sex and glamour seen at the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas occupies a similar terrain. The purpose of the images depicted is not (necessarily) to titillate in the manner of Hull's showgirls, but to 'perform' beauty (for both women and men). One patron that I spoke with was frank about Instagram being an important part of their trip. They chose the casino due to its suitability as a backdrop for social media photography. It can be suggested from this that the casino floor serves as a stage, though with a different focus than that described by Erving Goffman (2013).<sup>85</sup> Goffman's patrons were engaged in a performance with the croupier and other patrons, with gambling serving as the primary focus. In the age of social media, the performance of wealth has different conditions and can be directed to a far broader audience than patrons and staff in the immediate vicinity. It has become more of a solo performance with youth, 'cool', success and 'happiness' as the signalling points (Maghfiroh, 2015) (Freitas & Smith, 2019),

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<sup>84</sup> To be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

<sup>85</sup> See chapter 2, p.p. 29-30.

replacing formal wear and performative spending (Goffman, 2013). They were engaged in the liminoid act of play as *critique*. Just as Newton's female impersonators emphasised "if [you're] going on the street you wouldn't wear [the] kind of make-up [worn on stage]" (Anonymous female impersonator quoted in Newton, 2001, p. 42), the makeup, clothes and styling seen at Mohegan Sun Las Vegas are stylizations designed for consumption at a remove. "It doesn't matter what you look like underneath the makeup," one patron told me, "It's about accentuating what you have". This *accentuation* of the self is key to understanding the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas ritual.

At the Palms' opening, the carnival was in full swing - with costumes, hair and makeup seemingly mocking and inverting the signifiers of capitalism's ideals. The accentuated performances I witnessed at the Mohegan Sun should not be confused with the Palms' outsized exhibitions; they were, instead, invocations of *sophistication* (which is often taken as a signpost of wealth). Both representations, however, share a spirit in keeping with literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnavalesque' (1984), which he applied to the 'grotesque' and absurd work of Francois Rabelais, who is best known for the 16th century classic, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

Bakhtin saw the tradition of carnival found throughout the world, in areas as remote in time and space as contemporary Brooklyn and mediaeval Europe; stemming back as far as the ancient Roman feast of Saturnalia as serving an essential purpose: a release of social pressure, and a temporary reversal of hierarchical roles in order to *maintain* social order.<sup>86</sup> In humour-based mediaeval rituals like the 'feast of fools' and 'feast of the ass'

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<sup>86</sup> Turner noted that exaggeration and caricature are essential parts of the liminal or liminoid experience. The masks seen in traditional rites of passage are the most obvious examples, though as Turner wrote "innumerable are the forms of topsy-turvydom, parody, abrogation of the normative system, exaggeration

(Bakhtin, 1984, p.29), communities congregated in ways that saw social upheaval tolerated; an anarchic coup taken as jest. In a classic carnival scenario described by Bakhtin which originated in Southern France in the late Middle Ages, the lowest ranking member of the community was crowned 'king' of the fair or carnival (Bakhtin, 1984).<sup>87</sup> The king<sup>88</sup> was then mocked and ritually sacrificed (metaphorically 'dethroned'), and it was in that dethroning that a public restoration of order was demonstrated to carnival participants.

The liminoid state, in Turner's work, leads to *communitas*. It is a state that is analogous to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. *Communitas* is a sense of unity between those in a liminoid state. It is a unity that doesn't erase structural norms, but rather *performs* and *embodies* the inversion or negation of those norms (1974, p.78). It is a state where licence is granted by the group to behave in a way that inverts the social order. It is a licence to *play*, and in that play engage in critique. In many ways, the casino experience can be seen as a communal acknowledgement of the urban alienation described by Irazabal (and caused by capitalism's "crude...auter[ship]") (Soja, 1989, p.147). The present-day manifestation of the carnival tradition turns a mirthful eye towards these disruptive institutions - exposing their instability, while serving as an outlet for lower members of the social order.<sup>89</sup> It is my argument that Las Vegas' social order is a

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of rule into caricature or satirising of rule" (1974, p. 73). Exaggeration takes many forms, as discussed in this chapter.

<sup>87</sup> In the case of Saturnalia in ancient Rome, the role of master and servant would be reversed, with servant dining first. The servant may have also be granted licence to abuse their master (Parker, 2011).

<sup>88</sup> Elvis Presley, whose years were spent at Las Vegas' International Hotel could be considered a modern manifestation of this role.

<sup>89</sup> An analogous, if more explicit, social critique was the Venetian 'homage to the toilet', recorded as part of the Venice carnival in the late 1980s. Outwardly humorous, the ritual involved participants lighting candles for 'lost' public toilets, which was a commentary on the city's lack of facilities. This commentary was made possible by the 'permissive' spirit of carnival (Rubenstein, 1990).

*continued* state of *communitas*; its *societas* (or social order), is *communitas*, or the liminal/liminoid state.

Seen through Bakhtin's lens, the 'king' of the carnival is no longer a solitary figure. Instead, every Mohegan Sun patron enacts their own unique 'festival' and plays out the role of king - a true rite of reversal.<sup>90</sup> Instead of a peasant adopting the garb of feudal royalty, the 'socially alienated' urban dweller (Irazabal, 2007) seeks to achieve an exaggerated reflection of the idealised images found in popular media.

At the Palms, these images took a diverse and often grotesque form, owing to the relative poverty of many of the participants I spoke with, casually (drawn to the casino by the prospect of free drinks and spectacle). At the Mohegan Sun, mere accentuation is the desired goal (though the nature of this concept can vary, from patron to patron), with a radical *hyperkitsch* rejection achieved with only minor distortion.<sup>91</sup> Bakhtin noted that the carnival was forever altered with the introduction of class, writing that "[in] the early stages of pre-class and pre-political social order it seems that the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally 'official' ... But in the definitely consolidated state and class structure<sup>92</sup> such an equality of the two aspects became impossible. All the comic forms were transferred, some earlier and others later,

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<sup>90</sup> The feudal system of Rabelais' time no longer applies, with capitalism promising land and kingly power to all, if only the individual works for it: the American dream of prosperity through labour or good fortune (Weber, 2018).

<sup>91</sup> In some cases, the patron can actually attain a minor, modern day 'kingship' through such performances - via the rise of the 'influencer' - though the majority of patrons merely seek to *emulate* and exaggerate the ideal of capital-based glamour.

<sup>92</sup> While the class system of modern day America isn't as explicitly defined as it was/is in Europe, American subcultural experiences, like those found in Las Vegas and at the Mohegan Sun, enhance and exaggerate Bakhtin's argument.

to a nonofficial level" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.6). It was in this transformation that the carnival tradition took on a class-based form, and (at least in the contemporary west) a form both within and outside institutional structures. You are unlikely to find a ritual of the kind witnessed in Las Vegas in Washington, D.C, for example. It is not endowed with the weight or solemnity of an 'official' institutional celebration. It is sullied by the air of exaggeration and cheap imitation; an imitation that exists in the realm of *hyperkitsch*. Unlike the abstract and diffuse liminality of a presidential inauguration (for example), it is a personal experience - designed to be sought out by the individual. It is liminoid - assigning the ritual, by its very nature, to the private realm. This permits the 'buffet' approach to ritual found on Fremont St. and parts of the Strip. The institutional aspects of the carnival have been privatised (in a commercial sense), with the 'class' or *habitus* of the patron distinguishing one casino experience from another.

Habitus (as defined by Mauss<sup>93</sup>) reflects the customs of an actor's culture, as well as their *trajectory* - a strategy of success based on 'effective' physical techniques. Bourdieu took Mauss' concept further, and adopted a model that saw the actor operating within a diverse and complex field. This field encompasses all of the actor's social interactions - shaping every aspect of social presentation, from bearing to attire. An early iteration of Bourdieu's theory centred on the concept of *taste* (1984). Taste, Bourdieu argued, was socially conditioned. Everything from food to cosmetics reflected the actor's position in a larger field, including where they lie on a broader continuum of class. Using 1970s Paris as a case study, Bourdieu concluded that a taste for opera or classical music (for example) placed an actor on the 'upper' end of the class continuum. As with Mauss, Bourdieu's field was dynamic, with actors capable of adopting the tastes of those 'higher' in the

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<sup>93</sup> See chapter 4, p.p. 60-61.

continuum in the hopes of elevating their status. The Instagram-friendly glamour of the Mohegan Sun is an example of this - aspirational, as well as a rite of reversal. In acting out a role, the Mohegan Sun patron not only lives out a fantasy - in a 'fantasy' environment (Lukas, 2007) - but inhabits the very model they aspire to. The kingly visions of the mediaeval carnival were near impossible to achieve outside of the fairground. The fantasies of a Mohegan Sun, meanwhile, can be manifested anytime a patron chooses to visit Las Vegas. They also live on - in two-dimensional form - on social media. Images from a patron's visit become *their own* hyperreality (or hyperkitsch, to follow Irazabal): distortions and exaggerations of a cliched model of an idealised self.

### **Transgression, Crowds and the Body Without Organs**

Patronising a casino is, in a sense, a *mimetic* act. Renee Girard, in his classic text *Violence and Sacred* (2017) wrote of the act of imitation as a form of social release. In that work, Girard discussed the ritual of the scapegoat, where the social pressures of a community were heaped on an individual or even - as in the origin of the term - an animal. In ancient Israel, two goats were deployed to absolve a community of 'sin' and ensure its future smooth running and prosperity: the first goat would be sacrificed as an offering to Yahweh, and the second ('the scapegoat') would be set free in the desolate wilderness; carrying the community's transgressions with it (Leviticus 16:21-22). As the United States still views itself as a - predominantly - Christian society (Straughn & Feld, 2010), it is not surprising that Vegas itself has become associated with transgression (Marek, 2013): its second name is 'sin city', and the city's slogan is "what happens [in Vegas] stays [in Vegas]" (Rizzo, 2020). It gives licence to the enactment of ritual, in the name of

commerce - a ritual site, where the self must be left behind.<sup>94</sup> The Las Vegas ritual is akin to the carnival celebration, identified by Bakhtin, that preceded Lent; a feast that saw the temporary suspension of Lent's solemn observances and prohibitions. The feast was brief, and that very brevity (like the visits of tourists to Las Vegas, which do not typically exceed 4 days) endowed the celebration, and its attendant freedom, with a "fantastical" nature (Bakhtin, 1984, p.89).

The transgressive aspects of the Las Vegas ritual are key to understanding the patron experience. Drinking and debauchery are the primary focus of the Mohegan Sun's email and social media campaigns (which include hints at sexual encounters or the allure of alcohol (@Virginhotelslv, 2022)). *Communitas* can be a state brimming with tension, as ritual participants find themselves unmoored from their place within society. The critique implicit in the liminoid state and the sanctioned inversion of authority found in festivals like carnival possess the seeds of actual rebellion. When transgression is performed it moves beyond the merely mimetic and can be operationalized into real rebellion (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 261). However, in Las Vegas, it appears the pot (metaphorically) never boils over, and transgression serves as an end unto itself. George Bataille, famed philosopher of transgression, countered Freud's theory that repression is a condition that lies with the individual (Freud, 2001) by arguing that repression is a product of modern life and stems from the social world (like the 'alienating' urban environments described by Irazabal). Transgression "produces a pleasure from exceeding boundaries" (Bown, 2012) and is a way of losing yourself. In that 'loss', the individual gains a form of liberty - a freedom from societal repression (Bataille, 2012).

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<sup>94</sup> Las Vegas even lies in the middle of the proverbial desert.

This loss of identity experienced in *communitas* - suspended "betwixt and between" (Turner, 2002) and crossing of limits found in transgression can be clearly witnessed at the Mohegan Sun and is attained via Deleuze and Guattari's 'body without organs'.<sup>95</sup> While a patron's self-presentation is an important part of the experience, it would lose meaning without an audience. Due to the nature of urban living, the local communities who participated in mediaeval carnival are no longer essential. This, however, does not mean the need for community has vanished; they have been replaced by a *new* community - the majority of whom are occupying the same, liminoid state. It is a community of individuals on a similar journey; a journey to indulge in the 'transgressive' and lose themselves to the feedback loop of the casino. The expressive poolside performances of the Sun are a way for patrons to divorce themselves from their 'repressed' (meaning *socially approved*) selves, through acts of exaggeration. They are further divorced from this 'repressed' self when they give themselves up to the intensities of the communal body; intensities supported by the casino's sensescape. Many of the patrons I spoke with stressed the 'freedom' they found in Las Vegas, and the pleasure they took in indulging in extremes of alcohol consumption and spending. Las Vegas, generally speaking, enables the patron to attain pleasure through Bataille's exceeding of boundaries. Each casino provides a different manifestation of this *rite of transgression* (serving as a 'focusing lens', in Smith and Gumbrecht's sense), with differing degrees of intensity; degrees matching the patron's habitus, and the trajectory they are seeking.

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<sup>95</sup> See chapter 4, p. 64.

## Summary

The ritual witnessed at the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas is a rite of reversal achieved through transgression and performance. It is an example of a ritual in which patrons place themselves temporarily outside of society, in a liminoid state, in order to manifest an *upward* trajectory for their habitus through exaggerated hyperkitsch performance - achieving a respite from the alienation engendered by an urban environment. Similarly, the Mohegan Sun is selected as a liminal space as it already reflects this new habitus. The Mohegan Sun 'habitus' - defined by subtlety and its appropriateness as a stage for performance - is one of sophistication; a sophistication borne from compromise and its status as an Indigenous-operated casino. The casino's sophisticated habitus aids the rituals that take place in its halls by serving as a *focusing lens (or ritual centre)*; providing ideal conditions through its unique sensescape.

## Chapter 7: Discussion Part 2 – Personhood and the Habitus of Space

In this chapter I will build on the discussion in Chapter 6 and assert that the Mohegan Sun casino possesses a habitus, which is typically associated with personhood. This discussion will therefore and necessarily begin with an exploration of Mohegan notions of personhood as manifested in the landscape of Connecticut, the ancestral territory of the Mohegan Tribe. This will then lead into Thomas Tweed's understanding of personhood, as applied to religious space and how the concepts he deployed relate to the Mohegan Sun. I will then draw connections between Tweed's concepts and Pierre Bourdieu's vision of habitus, which acts as a worldview or perceptual lens for those who embrace or are assigned a habitus. Building on this, I will circle back to the concepts of Yi-Fu Tuan, discussed in chapter 4, and will examine how Indigenous notions of time and space support the Mohegan Sun's *placehood*, which endows a form of personality. Tuan's ideas will be brought into conversation with, and built upon, using Tweed and Bourdieu's concepts, both of which make allowances for the emergence of personhood through generative ritual action, interactions, and relationships to and with spaces. I will conclude by discussing how the 'body without organs' of the casino ritual, working in alignment with capitalist structures and the wider field of Las Vegas, supplies this generative action.

### **Path of the Sun: The Mohegan Relationship with Space and Place**

While the Mohegan Tribe's relationship with the land and specific features of their mythology bears a similarity to that of the Paiute of Southern Nevada, the dramatic differences in environment between their home territory of Connecticut and Nevada make it unlikely that you will find narratives akin to Tawvoot's battle with the sun, which

led to a scorched earth. Unlike the arid Mojave Desert, Connecticut is 61% forested and possesses a continental climate with cold, snow-blanketed winters and hot, humid summers (Shay, 2020). During the period when I lived in New York, I spent numerous summer and spring trips in the state and can attest that the two environments could not contrast more strongly. The differences between the two can be seen clearly in Mohegan mythology, which contains a richly populated woodland spirit world. According to Mohegan tribal historian Melissa Jayne Fawcett, Mohegan territory is dominated by the towering giant Moshup (whose footprints can be seen all over the landscape), and his wife Granny Squannit, who leads the Little People of the Woodland - The Makiawisug. Both provide magical support to the Mohegan people, in matters ranging from love to horticulture (Fawcett, 2000, p. 25). The Makiawisug, like many of the figures populating Mohegan mythology are borne of stone, but leave traces of their movement in the form of dewy webs in the morning grass - their laundry left out to dry (Fawcett, 2000, p. 31). Heroic and historic figures of the past, too, are wed to the rocky landscape and continue to provide aid and support; the legendary Uncus (the father of the Mohegan people, who led the tribe in their separation from the Pequots in the 17th century) (Speck, 1927), still protects his people from Fort Hill - sending down rock falls onto dangerous intruders.

The Mohegan *trail*<sup>96</sup> does not end with death; death is part of a larger journey. Each individual follows their own life trail and is supported on that journey by tribal elders. At the conclusion of life, an individual continues their journey west. According to Fawcett this trail is known as the Path of the Sun, "for it follows life's circle from birth and sunrise (in the east) to death and passage into the spirit world (in the west) - then on again to rebirth and dawn of the next generation" (2000, p.4). This path, however, is intimately

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<sup>96</sup> Included in the Mohegan vision statement discussed in chapter 5.

connected with the trails followed in other states of being: the celestial and spiritual. It is in this way that Uncas' return east, to protect his people from a cliff face, becomes intelligible: he is merely walking his own spiritual and celestial trail.

The rugs on display at the Mohegan Sun, Las Vegas are not merely ornamental; they too, depict the path of the sun. The very name of the casino encapsulates this philosophy, and the casino can - from this perspective - be viewed as a staging point for life trails. However, the casino *itself* is not necessarily sacred. As Fawcett wrote regarding Mohegan beliefs, "sacred places are unaffected by the man-made structures set upon them. What makes them sacred are the rocks and earth beneath" (2000, p.25). The building itself is less important (for the Mohegan) than the territory it inhabits: in this case, the mythical space of the Las Vegas Paiute. The relationship between the Mohegan Tribe and Las Vegas Paiute and how their views on the Las Vegas terrain overlap is difficult to establish,<sup>97</sup> but Fawcett did note that (at least, as of the early 20th century) there was a friendly rivalry and competition common to tribes that prevented full collaboration; a game of questioning between tribal members that allowed them to assess the relative value and position of another tribe (2000, p. 66).

### Personhood of Space

The concept of *personhood* is deeply entwined with animism. In his pioneering work with the Ojibwe of Manitoba, Canada, Alfred Irving Hallowell (1964) found that animism

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<sup>97</sup> The precise nature of the relationship between the Mohegan Tribe and the Southern Paiute is difficult to ascertain due to the difficulties I experienced arranging an interview. While I received a response from their sister tribe, The Moapa Band of Paiutes (who, while cordial, were not open to interviews due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic), the Las Vegas Paiute did not respond.

was often both personal and circumstantial.<sup>98</sup> The Ojibwe, Irving Hallowell held, did not attribute animistic qualities to *all* things and beings at *all* times. Stones, for instance, are not believed to move, though can during ceremonial situations. Not everyone can perceive this movement either and animism is most typically perceived in dreams. Such animistic beliefs have been documented in many Native American cultures, with the Mohegan Tribe being no exception. As Amy Whitehead emphasised, animistic personhood is *relational* (2018, p.222). Using the example of a shrine to the Virgin of Alcala in Andalusia, Spain, Whitehead noted the potential for a multiplicity of perspectives, from the doctrinal view that the depiction of the Virgin at the shrine was merely representational, to a view endowing it with an animist personhood. Personhood, in Whitehead's words, is: "a negotiated, volatile, relational, and fluid term. It is not static but generative and relevant to place, space, time and location" (2018, p.222). Personhood, then, bears a relation to the volatile liminoid state of *communitas* found at the Mohegan Sun, Las Vegas, with the casino's status as a ritual centre enabling the kinds of *ontological transformations* (Whitehead, 2018, p.222) seen in Andalusia or among the Ojibwe or Mohegan.

Thomas Tweed, in his essay *Space*, described religious space as "differentiated, kinetic, interrelated, generated and generative" (2015, p. 225). Space (particularly of the religious kind) is *differentiated* and stands apart from generic and undifferentiated space via its role as a ritual centre (in the way that a small chapel, or a cathedral stands apart from its surroundings). For Tweed, a differentiated space inhabits a realm similar to the 'place' of Tuan and Bachelard. As noted in chapter 4,<sup>99</sup> place is *space* imbued with

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<sup>98</sup> Unlike Tylor's less nuanced 19th century reading of animism which ascribed a general belief that objects were inhabited by spirits to small-scale non-complex societies (1958).

<sup>99</sup> See p. 72.

meaning; a terrain in which to pause and take stock.<sup>100</sup> It is a meditative space, defined by its focusing properties. It is a ritual centre, whether of the religious or domestic variety. For Smith, the focus is worship; for Bachelard, it is the clutter of memories of bygone days, reflected in a home's design (and accentuated by principles akin to wabi-sabi). This same focus, supported by ritual behaviour, leads to differentiation like that observed at the Mohegan Sun. Tweed stresses that space (if inhabiting what we would consider the role of place) is kinetic; a centre of activity, defined by cultural flows. While Tweed is somewhat cursory in his discussion of the term 'kinetic', the concept can be easily applied to the Mohegan Sun; it is a site where *ritual action* is essential for the casino's long-term maintenance of placehood. The sophistication of the Mohegan Sun means nothing without a *display*. Without visitors, it reverts to a mere staging area - vacuous and empty, without the performances of patrons. A place's *interrelated* nature is also important. While a private enterprise, the casino experience bears relation to the seats of public ritual found in D.C and other cities.<sup>101</sup> The Mohegan Sun also bears a relationship with the churches frequented by many patrons, as well as their dance halls and resorts - reflecting a dual identity.

Most importantly, according to Tweed (2015), religious spaces are *generated* and *generative*. For Tweed, the kinetic and interrelated aspects of a space act as a kind of fuel, and serve as a causal influence, swirling and mixing together in a manner akin to the sensory elements described in Lynch, Howes & French's ethnographic study of

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<sup>100</sup> Fawcett noted that when traditional Mohegan are separated for too long from their ancestral home, they fall ill - missing the rocks and spirits of the Mohegan Hills. For the Mohegan, the landscape itself is *differentiated* (2000, p. 127).

<sup>101</sup> These include federal government buildings and institutions in Washington D.C. as well as major tourist attractions, like St. John of the Divine Cathedral in New York City.

Montreal casinos (2020).<sup>102</sup> In their work, it is a meeting of sensory flows and rhythmic intensities<sup>103</sup> - in other words, the 'body without organs'. Tweed sees the mixture of the space's *interrelatedness* and its kinetic 'body without organs' as being central motivators for a generated and *generative* nature. Following this line of thought, the Mohegan Sun could be said to possess its own generative movement or *trajectory*. You could even go so far as to say that the casino possesses its own *habitus*. While Tweed stopped short of endowing space with personhood, he did remark "playfully" that "spaces are people too. Some scholars have suggested that images perform actions - weep, cajole and comfort - and, in a similar way, spaces are structures that exert agency" (2015, p. 228).<sup>104</sup> But what kind of agency do they exert? While a depiction of the Virgin Mary in a religious setting could be viewed as extending comfort, the agency of space is less easily apprehended. It is my argument that this personhood is manifested through a space's *habitus*. *Habitus*, in this sense, can be understood as both the generative trajectory of the casino as well as the various facets of its *placehood*.

As with the patrons described earlier in this chapter, the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas casino possesses its own form of *habitus*, which was defined by Bourdieu as a "subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 86). This definition need not be limited to human actors - the Mohegan Sun is subject to as many institutional processes and 'class' pressures as any individual. From its status in relation to the larger group of casinos in the Las Vegas ecosystem, to its position within its own 'middle tier' class, the Mohegan Sun possesses a unique identity; an identity that aligns

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<sup>102</sup> Discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>103</sup> Like those described in chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>104</sup> One example is the Whanganui River, discussed in the chapter 1, p. 20.

with a *worldview* (Bourdieu, 2010, p.86) - a worldview that confers judgement on the material world. This worldview is manifested in its middle-class *sophistication* - its desert sleek ambience and performative staging. Unlike the traditional Mohegan understanding of personhood, which sees a rich spirit world inhabiting the rock and crags of Connecticut's Mohegan Hills, the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas' personhood is borne from capitalism; all of the systems described by Soja and Harvey shaping its distinct worldview.

### Indigeneity and Placehood

The Mohegan's tribal conception of personhood bears more relation to the mythical space and *cosmogonic time* of Tuan<sup>105</sup> than Bourdieu or Mauss' habitus with deeds, the natural world and spiritual figures mingling in a landscape that exists outside of *human time* (though depends upon it). At the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, mythical space is an essential part of the casino's habitus. For sociologist Nick Crossley, Bourdieu's conception of habitus represents *time* indirectly - a time moulded by an actor's responses<sup>106</sup> to the conditions that arise from the movement of larger structures and their position within a field (Crossley, 2001). While the Mohegan Sun's habitus is directly impacted by *human time* with its effective strategies altered (via events, marketing and adjustments to gaming machines) to meet the challenges of COVID-era conditions and capitalist-driven structural pressures, it is also shaped by the cosmogonic time of the Mojave Desert (the ritual centre's cardinal points) as well as the Mohegan tribal beliefs that are guiding its *trajectory*. *The Trail of Life* taught to Mohegan Sun Las Vegas employees via the Mohegan Tribe's vision statement<sup>107</sup> is not just a set of beliefs or a

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<sup>105</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>106</sup> Mauss' *effective techniques* (Mauss, 2020).

<sup>107</sup> Discussed in chapter 5, p.84.

code of conduct; it is a strategy that defines the casino's trajectory within the Vegas field. A trajectory that acknowledges 'progress'<sup>108</sup> but also contemplates a larger and *circular* trajectory; a trajectory that places the habitus of the casino in *cosmogonic time*. In other words, engaged in dialogue with Mohegan ancestors. The cosmogonic time of the Las Vegas Paiute, too, is embraced through the Mohegan trail's respect for 'Mother Earth' (The Mohegan Tribe, 2022) - the land the casino rests on.

The Mohegan Sun, then, inhabits the cosmogonic, astronomic and human times of *place*: together manifesting as the endowment of personality on space (Tuan, 2011, p.91). The Mohegan Sun is a *place* in dialogue with Las Vegas' history, but also the 'Hard Rock Indigeneity' discussed in the previous chapter - a place where mythical time and capitalism's continual rewriting of the landscape meet. The casino's placehood recalls a house filled with memories, as described by Bachelard in reference to *place*<sup>109</sup>; a house where every cupboard and staircase evokes memories for the occupant; overlaid with cultural memories and the actions of past occupants (2014). In the case of the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, it is a dialogue with the dark halls of Thomas Hull's El Rancho, and the taverns of the 19th century West, as well as the corporate Indigeneity of both Mohegan Sun Enterprises and the Seminole's Hard Rock chain. The Mohegan Sun's *personality* (in Tuan's sense) is borne from this ongoing and ever-shifting dialogue. A dialogue where Indigeneity exists as mythical space and trajectory and is infused in the trappings of the Hard Rock brand (a brand that symbolises Indigeneity due to capitalism's assignation of Indigeneity through ownership).<sup>110</sup> While this melange of memories and symbols endow

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<sup>108</sup> In the style of Mauss' effective techniques, though framed as the acknowledgement and healing of 'old and new' wounds (The Mohegan Tribe, 2022).

<sup>109</sup> See chapter 6, p. 72.

<sup>110</sup> See chapter 6, p. 99.

personality upon space - make it a 'place' - they do not make it a 'person'. It is the effective techniques of habitus within a capitalist field that help it make that final transition.

### **Habitus and the Body Without Organs**

Key to Tweed's concept of personhood is the *generative* and *generated* quality of space; processes witnessed daily at the Mohegan Sun. The casino's 'carnival of sophistication' - a ritual in search of an *upward* trajectory via hyperkitsch performance, is indeed generative, and via the feedback loop acting the 'body without organs', it is also *generated*. The conditions of the casino space (dictated by the casino's position within the field, as well as its trajectory) decides the kind of ritual that will take place within its halls, and the individuals who are drawn to that ritual, in turn, inform the casino's trajectory. The wants and needs of the 'body' as well as the number of patrons who are attracted to the casino's self-presentation (or habitus) generate changes in the casino's self-presentation, as well as its effective techniques. The complex and symbiotic relationship between patron and space shifts the Mohegan Sun from placehood to personhood; from static 'personality' to a space in possession of a habitus.

This process is not unique to the Mohegan Sun, and can be witnessed throughout the city of Las Vegas. The Palms has its own distinct, symbiotic relationship with patrons, as do the lower tier casinos of Fremont. Another vision of an Indigenous casino's habitus is the *Moapa Paiute Travel Plaza* near the Valley of Fire (which borders the Moapa River Indian Reservation). On the way to view the valley's petroglyphs, I stopped off at the Plaza, which doubled as a gas station and supermarket. It was the early days of Covid-19, though wearing a face mask was already a norm. Upon entering the casino - stepping

in from the desert's glare and stifling heat - I was bombarded with sensory information (though in a very different way to the Plaza's Las Vegas equivalent). The room was dark and poorly lit; the isles were cordoned. The dull hum of electric lights grated against Jimmy Buffet's *Margaritaville*. The smell of day-old chilaquiles and disinfectant hung in the air, side-by-side. This 'casino' stretched the idea of the casino as a ritual centre (in much the same way as Auntee M's<sup>111</sup>) but undoubtedly possessed its own habitus. Many customers went without masks, and had little regard for distancing. This reinforced a larger impression of sensory impoverishment, which in turn conveyed an absence of social capital. The casino's deployment of space also played a part, with slot machines stacked against packets of instant noodles, paper towels and hard liquor. However, the larger impression was layered: BMWs idled in the parking lot, and polished West Coast accents ran up against less 'refined' local varieties.

The Moapa Paiute Travel Plaza exists on the periphery of the Las Vegas field, though its unique position further cements the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas' 'middle tier' position. It also demonstrates that the community who frequent the casino helps to shape the space's habitus; its social purpose defining its social 'class' as well as trajectory. In the case of the Moapa Paiute Travel Plaza, the casino served a dual role; functioning as a gas station and travel centre for visitors, as well as local gaming centre and grocery store in an impoverished area lacking many of the amenities of the city. The same can be said of Auntee M's - it's a social hub, laundry and grocery store as much as it is a casino catering to low-income locals. The capital available to the owners, as well as their patrons, defines habitus - a scheme of perception, informed by the casino's placehood.

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<sup>111</sup> Discussed in the chapter 1.

## Summary

It is my argument that the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas possesses a form of personhood. Unlike the personhood of the Mohegan Tribe or the Southern Paiute (which grants personhood to the landscape but not man-made dwellings), the Mohegan Sun's personhood is manifested in the form of *habitus* - a process borne from capitalism. In his discussion of personhood, Thomas Tweed defined spaces in possession of personhood as *differentiated, kinetic, interrelated, generated* and *generative*. Bourdieu's conception of habitus aligns neatly with this model, allowing for movement within a field and both differentiation and interrelation within a 'class' (the casinos of Las Vegas, as per this thesis). While the placehood of Tuan (a ritual centre within a mythical space) takes the first step of endowing personality, it is the kinetic and generative aspects of Tweed's model that endow personhood. The ritual nature of the casino drives these kinetic and generative aspects, which in turn conforms to capitalist structures. Ritual, in this thesis, is the casino's function and it is social function that guides the casino's trajectory within the field.

## Chapter 8 – Conclusion

I began this thesis, and my research, asking "what purpose does the Las Vegas casino space serve for those who frequent its halls and how does that space differ for different communities?". I followed this with the then-timely question "how have these spaces been altered by COVID-19"? In my introduction, I noted that the first question turned out to be more complex than initially anticipated. The field site that I came upon, by pure luck, was shaped by a number of outside forces, with just one of them being COVID-19. My question regarding community purpose, as well as the methods I deployed - including autoethnography, walking ethnography and photo elicitation - led me on a long and irregular trail, from casino atmospherics to the nature of identity and personhood. In this conclusion, I will summarise that journey and re-cap the unique processes at work in shaping the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas casino.

### The Las Vegas Landscape

Las Vegas is a region shaped by capitalism. It is an outpost in the desert, whose primary purpose is to support a *liminoid* state for some 40 million visitors from across the globe. It is an environment divided into various strata, with tiers reflecting both economic potential and the habitus of its patrons. The highest tier is occupied by large-scale and heavily themed hotel casinos like Caesars Palace and the Venetian, who offer high-end shopping and dining experiences and cater to a large, transient population. The lowest tier consists, largely, of saloon-style hotels rooted in Las Vegas' past, which cater to locals or patrons on a budget. Boyd Entertainment is the owner of the majority of these hotels,

which include the Main Street Station Hotel and Sam's Town Las Vegas.<sup>112</sup> The middle tier falls off-Strip, with its territory bisected by freeways, byways and the homeless activity that takes place on the Strip's periphery. The Mohegan Sun, which was borne in the midst of and was indelibly shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, inhabits this tier - an unstable space competing with the higher tier for new visitors as well as the lower tier for the local market.

### The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas as Ritual Centre

The Mohegan Sun, as with other Las Vegas casinos, serves a unique role for patrons. It acts as what Smith dubbed a 'ritual centre'. In other words, the casino space is a focusing lens for sensory phenomena, which facilitates a specific ritual experience. For Smith, the sacred setting of a ritual (whether it be a chapel or configuration of stones in the desert) is situational. It is a domain that encourages the participant to view the setting as 'apart' from day-to-day life. The focus brought about by ritual is what endows the space with 'sacred' qualities (Smith, 2010, p.105).

The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas manifest the 'focusing' qualities of a ritual centre via its *servicescape*.<sup>113</sup> The Mohegan Sun *servicescape* is defined by its spare approach to experiential design. It is a sparsity that translates to *sophistication* for many current and potential patrons. A number of 'lower tier' casinos, like the Four Queens, adopt an approach that sees the entire space utilised, with slot machines occupying every corner, with music blasting. By contrast, the middle-tier Mohegan Sun keep their space clear and open, with a heavy focus placed on concerts and an outdoor 'club' space, in an area

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<sup>112</sup> See chapter 4, p. 52.

<sup>113</sup> See chapter 5.

that blurs the lines between the desert, poolside and the interior of the resort. The guiding hand of the experiential designer, described by Lukas (2007), is a gentle one at the Mohegan Sun and operates in a symbiotic relationship with the patron. Rather than adopting a pure 'desert sleek' strategy, the Mohegan Sun team cater to the hotel's prior audience, who still view the casino as a representative of the Hard Rock franchise. The music and atmospherics of the hotel endeavour to balance the unique confluence of identities that make up the casino space.

The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas facilitates a liminoid state, via its location and sensory atmospherics, which are in turn defined by the casino's position in relation to other casinos in the Las Vegas landscape and the unique compromise of an Indigenous nation working in partnership with Virgin Hotels and JC Hospitality. The liminoid<sup>114</sup> is a state where individuals are unmoored from their day-to-day status and social role. Unlike the liminal state found in rites of passage in smaller-scale and less complex societies, the liminoid is closely associated with consumerism and can be purchased as a commodity. The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas is a perfect example of this, as it offers a sensory environment and crowd-focused experience that facilitates *communitas* amongst its patrons. The liminoid also serves as a form of critique through play, with the stage for temporary roles that the casino offers being both aspirational and *critical*.

The critique implicit in the Mohegan Sun ritual can be found in its patron's embrace of hyperkitsch. Irazabal's notion of hyperkitsch (2007) is a wedding of the prismatic holograms of Baudrillard's hyperreality and the distorted, clichéd symbols of kitsch. The exaggerated depictions of *sophistication* found at the Mohegan Sun are, in many ways,

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<sup>114</sup> See chapter 4.

akin to the performances of femininity and glamour found in Newton's landmark ethnography *Mother Camp* (2001). The performances are simultaneously authentic manifestations of individuality, gender and class status as well as critiques of their model. The Mohegan Sun acts as a stage for the enactment of hyperkitsch fantasies that fill an important gap in the lives of modern city dwellers. Hyperkitsch provides a sense of *place* in an unstable environment that is perpetually refashioned by the very capitalist forces that serve to renew and regenerate the city of Las Vegas. The enactment of ritual at the Mohegan Sun supports 'urban identity formation', which suggests identity and place are intimately linked.

The Mohegan Sun ritual would not be possible without the crowds the individual patron joins with in a state of *communitas*. These crowds are united via the feedback loops discussed in chapter 4.<sup>115</sup> The loops connect patrons with the wider environment via the servicescapes developed by casinos, and with other patrons who are occupying the same space. They form what Gumbrecht equated to the *mystical body* of Catholicism (2021), or Deleuze and Guattari's *body without organs*. This goes further than the *actor network* described by Schull.<sup>116</sup> Rather than a network, patrons and the environment form a *body* that maintains a state of homeostasis via the feedback mechanisms of *intensity* and *rhythm*. This feedback cycle has a historical dimension that works in tandem with the capitalist forces and frequencies that feed into the loop.

The Mohegan Sun's *body without organs* supports *communitas*, which is further supported by transgression. Bataille argued (2012) that transgression is the crossing of boundaries in order to lose oneself, so as to attain a form of freedom in that loss.

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<sup>115</sup> See p. 59-60.

<sup>116</sup> See chapter 2, p.p. 25-26.

Following Irazabal, it could be seen as a loss in order to continue the ever-developing work of social identity formation. For Bakhtin, transgression pushes the ritual beyond mere mimesis into seeds of real rebellion (1984). As in carnival, where authority is parodied and roles are reversed, the performances witnessed at the Mohegan Sun *realise* the reversal. In this way, the state of *communitas* brought about in the liminoid space carries what Bakhtin considered the seeds of rebellion. This tension, however, is diffused by the pleasures found in excess and the crossing of boundaries.

An important aspect of the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas ritual is the notion of *habitus*. *Habitus*, for anthropologist Marcel Mauss, was firmly rooted in the physical and manifested in both 'traditional' and 'effective' techniques (2020). Where traditional techniques are learned behaviour, effective techniques fall into the category of evolutionary strategy. Mauss' effective techniques are what Bourdieu branded *trajectory*; a movement within the larger social field. Taste, and the way a person carries themselves all reflect the individual's position within the field. The ritual of the Mohegan Sun, Las Vegas can be viewed as a means of achieving an *upward trajectory*. The rite of reversal is aspirational, as well as a 'release valve' for social pressure. The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, too, has its own form of *habitus* and position within the wider social field of Las Vegas.

### **Place and Personhood**

Central to the ritual is the position of the Mohegan Sun in what Tuan labelled mythical space. The desert surrounding the city of Las Vegas was long inhabited by the Las Vegas Paiute. Mythical space is informed by both *astronomic time* and *human time* - the movements of the stars and seasons, as well as human activity. Both help to shape the

terrain, and leave their traces in rock formations and petroglyphs. Mythical figures, too, inhabit the space in *cosmogonic time*, and leave their traces.<sup>117</sup> It is in this terrain that the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas serves as a ritual centre of the Southern Paiute *symmetry of cardinal points* (Tuan, 2011, p.132). The cardinal points of the mythical space of the wider terrain of Las Vegas play an important role in facilitating the liminoid space of the Mohegan Sun and *differentiate* the Las Vegas casino space from rivals like Atlantic City in New Jersey or the casino spaces of Detroit, Michigan.

Like the Southern Paiute, the Mohegan possess their own animist mythology. This mythology divides the world of their home territory in Connecticut into the camps of two beings: the coastal world of the giant Moshup and the woodland domain of Granny Squannit. The Mohegan ontology, as with that of the Southern Paiute, endows the inanimate with a form of personhood. The concept of personhood is intimately linked with animism.<sup>118</sup> As Whitehead argued, animistic personhood is relational, allowing for a multiplicity of perspectives "relevant to place, space, time and location" (2018, p.222). It is my argument that the focusing nature of the Mohegan Sun ritual in the mythic space of the Mojave Desert, along with the capitalistic forces that serve to shape the Sun as a ritual centre endows the casino with a very specific form of personhood, related to sophistication and what I labelled *Hard Rock Indigeneity* in chapter 6.

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<sup>117</sup> See chapter 4, p. 69.

<sup>118</sup> See chapter 6, p.p. 119-120.

## Hard Rock Indigeneity and the Habitus of Space

Tweed argued that religious (or ritual) space is *differentiated* (2015). A space that is set *apart* is similar to Tuan's idea of *place*, in that it brings meaning through focus. However, rather than a meditative space defined by pause, the differentiated space of Tweed is kinetic and generative. It is also *interrelated*. The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas is a site that possesses a composite identity, stemming from the complex relationships between Virgin Hotels, JC Hospitality and the Mohegan Tribe. Another layer of complexity is added with the casino's prior identity as part of the Seminole-owned Hard Rock franchise. The compromise inherent in these arrangements led to the thematic *sparseness* of 'desert sleek' sophistication, and a manifestation of what I labelled *Hard Rock Indigeneity*.

In this thesis I argued that the identity discussed above is a form habitus. The Mohegan Sun Las Vegas possesses its own habitus that sets it apart from other hotels and casinos, like the lavish and heavily-themed Caesars Palace or the utilitarian Moapa Travel Plaza. In fact, the habitus of other casinos help *define* the habitus of the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, as they place the casino in a field. As in Tweed's notion of spatial personhood, their identities are both interrelated and differentiated. They are also generative, in that every casino has a *trajectory*, much like the effective strategies of Mauss. In the case, of the Mohegan Sun Las Vegas, the casino's trajectory is intimately linked with the Mohegan Path of the Sun, which places great importance on "break[ing] arrows of peace to heal old and new wounds" and views the 'Trail of Life' as circular and ultimately leading to a return to *wholeness* (Mohegan Tribe, 2022).

The kinetic, in Tweed's discussion, is the ritual that takes place in the Mohegan Sun's halls and the interaction between patrons and the environment. It is the *body without organs* of Deleuze and Guattari that spurs change and evolution in the casino space, guiding the casino (just as the ancestors of the Mohegan's provide guidance on the path of the sun) along its trajectory within the Las Vegas field. Both habitus and trajectory are shaped by community purpose. Just as the Moapa Travel Plaza is a multi-use site that offers gambling, the Mohegan Sun serves a social purpose through the ritual that is offered within its halls: a complex interaction between larger social forces, capital, identity formation and Indigeneity.

### **Future Directions for Research**

It is my belief that my research has opened a rich vein, worthy of further investigation. This includes a more holistic approach to experiential design that allows for agency on the part of the patron. The application of habitus to space also warrants further consideration, as it potentially frees personhood from the religious and legal spheres it has occupied, and allows for interaction and exchange between social forces like capitalism and religious conceptions of space. It is my hope that other researchers will pick up on these threads and begin to think of designed spaces (outside of the realm of casinos) in terms of their *social identity*, as well as function. This is not to say that I consider my research wholly successful. My access to patrons and tribal members was shallow, and these obstacles hindered my insights; forcing me to place excessive emphasis on my own experience. If I had the chance to repeat the experience, I would have followed several groups of visitors over their entire journey, in order to gain deeper insights into the experience, from the perspective of patrons.

## Summary

To return to my core question, *the purpose a casino serves* differs from casino to casino. In the case of Auntee M's or the Moapa Travel Plaza, they are multi-use sites that provide important social services, from laundry to gasoline to much-needed company. In the case of the Mohegan Sun, as well as many of its competitors on the Strip and Fremont, it serves a ritual purpose: a ritual that serves both the patron and the casino itself. In the case of my secondary question, *how have these spaces been altered by COVID-19?*, the impact has, similarly, varied. While many hotels closed entirely, the Mohegan Sun is the rare example of a casino that opened in the midst of the pandemic. As such, the pandemic altered both the way the casino engages with patrons as well the makeup of its patron base.

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