

“Rabelais does Las Vegas” — Mike Davis

STRIP CULTURES

Finding America in Las Vegas



by The Project on Vegas

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The Project on Vegas: STACY M. JAMESON, KAREN KLUGMAN,
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INTRODUCTION

Riding the Deuce

One late November afternoon, while on our first research trip to Las Vegas, Karen and I decided to take the Deuce.* This is the double-decker bus that plies the Strip from Mandalay Bay to the Stratosphere, then on to the remote Fremont Street area. The Deuce offers the Vegas novice—such as ourselves—a great mobile counterpoint to the paper maps of the Strip that first-time tourists tear out of the free guide and coupon books available at many of the Strip's attractions. Given the particular spatial arrangement of the Las Vegas Strip—a dense urban artery that appears to be wholly divorced from a grid—the Deuce provides end-to-end continuity and articulates the individual megahotel-casinos like a series of spinal vertebrae. Indeed, the Strip is very like a tremendous spinal cord—all neural transmitters bereft of anything that can be considered a brain.

Little did we know on that fateful first day of our research that our project on Vegas would span a decade. We began our intermittent research trips during the boom years just prior to the onset of the Great Recession, and we con-

* Susan Willis

tinued to visit the Strip throughout our nation's slow and uncertain crawl to recovery. During this period, the landscape of the Strip fluctuated between its own booms and busts. Hotels like the Desert Inn and Stardust were imploded and not always replaced. The Aladdin went through years of decline until it finally metamorphosed into Planet Hollywood. And the site where City-Center would eventually be built greeted visitors as a great, gaping excavation site for what seemed like an entire year. Had we been prescient, we would have brought a video camera on board the Deuce to begin to document the Strip's transformations. Instead, we were captured by the moment and eager to get the initial overview of the land. Miraculously, there were two empty seats in the front row of the upper deck. Delighted with our good fortune, Karen and I settled in for an unencumbered bird's-eye view.

"It's her first time." A doughy-faced woman leaned between us and ingratiated herself into our prized space. She motioned toward a shy, somewhat embarrassed adolescent girl. Clearly, the woman wanted us to give up our seats for the sake of her daughter's initiation into the wondrous spectacle of Las Vegas that the Deuce delivers casino by casino as the roadway spools out in front of the bus. I guess she figured Karen and I, by dint of being women of a certain age, had already undergone our initiations. We couldn't help but notice the sexual innuendo implicit in the mother's plea.

Observation is the first step in our research. We fashioned ourselves sleuths of the built environment. As such, we ascended the Stratosphere and took in the lay of the land; we sampled the Chippendales; we visited the flamingos in their cement-lined lagoon; we entered the Coke store and tasted colas from around the world; we lingered at the Bellagio fountains; we witnessed the patriotic light show on Fremont Street; and we invariably tried our luck. But all the ingredients of the cultural landscape—no matter how remarkable—are not fully meaningful in themselves. Rather, they become so in the context of what people do with them. Thus, we sharpened our skills as people watchers. In this, Karen had the advantage of her photographer's eye and camera, while Jane, Stacy, and I relied on pen and notepad. It's remarkable that a simple device like a camera or a notepad allowed us to mingle, even chat, with fellow visitors to Las Vegas, while at the same time making us separate and aware of how words and deeds can be read as signs in a system of cultural meanings. Moreover, the mere fact of defining ourselves as observers had the additional effect of causing certain people and situations to stand out as observable from the immensity of milling crowds and saturated spectacle. *Strip Cultures* underscores what caught the eye, the ear, and, in Stacy's case, the olfactory register.

To read these signs critically is to read against cultural expectations, which are most obviously that *Strip Cultures* will necessarily be about stripping. It bears remembering that although Las Vegas as an adult entertainment destination includes strippers and stripping, the Strip actually refers to the four lanes of roadway that slice through its twenty-four-hour, ever-changing spectacle. Consider the Strip a mobile stage where the performance of seeing and being seen folds spectators into spectacle. Money, sex, and booze saturate the Strip and seem to be the obvious descriptors of its culture. But to fully understand culture is to recognize it as a system of practices that we engage in the process of making meanings and defining ourselves. As such, the everyday rather than the exotic offers the best window into the culture. Thus, *Strip Cultures* gleans the everyday to discover what's not obvious about a lot of things we might otherwise take for granted.

To an extent, our method approximates the strategy for radical theater defined and practiced by Bertolt Brecht. Indeed, it's possible to see the entire Las Vegas Strip as an elaborately staged spectacle, dissimilar only in magnitude from the sort of bourgeois theater that Brecht condemned. As he saw it, a conventional stage play seeks to draw its audience into the performance. The success of a play is, thus, proportional to the empathy audiences feel for the actors and the degree to which audiences suspend independent or critical judgment. Similarly, the Strip is apt to absorb its visitors into a bemused or distracted acceptance of the normalcy of all things exaggerated. What Brecht advocated was a theater based on the "alienation effect."¹ He specifically sought out dramatizations that allowed audiences to recognize elements of the performance while perceiving them at the same time as unfamiliar.

The potential of the alienation effect to generate new and critical perceptions caused Brecht to advocate for its practice in everyday life. As he put it, "The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware . . . from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected."² The mother's comment, "It's her first time," is a stunning example of a statement so commonplace as to be unremarkable, yet so pregnant with the power to alienate as to defamiliarize everything we might take for granted about what Las Vegas means.

"It's her first time." I still hear the woman's voice and feel the shock of recognizing the twofold import of her words—both a desire to introduce her daughter to the wonders of the Strip, and a recognition that "first time" often alludes to sex. First visit, first intercourse—a trip to Las Vegas functions, if only in the imagination, as our culture's rite of passage. This, coupled with many a youngster's first trip to Disney World, grounds the cultural subject



in consumerist constructions of such intangibles as imagination, happiness, desire, and fulfillment.

During the course of our research in Las Vegas, we would encounter many young initiates. There was the awestruck girl of sixteen whose intensely chaperoned birthday vacation included her uncle, aunt, and older cousins. Her initiation wouldn't go beyond a first peek into the wonders of excess. Then there were the slightly older girls who, tipsy, giggling, and clinging desperately to each other, tried to walk down an immobile escalator. "Don't tell me there's stairs! I hate stairs." Theirs was a more immersed rite of passage. So, too, was it for the young man who stood shirtless and grinning, a beer in his hand. He had just opened his hotel room door to a six-foot-tall call girl clad in shorts and a halter. It's worth noting that the escort, as the shaman in this scenario, had already undergone her initiation. What unites these rites of passage is the understanding that in its most fully evolved expression, ours is a culture where sex and consumption are one and the same. Desire can never be extricated from wanting and buying.

For all the initiates, the thrill of the first time may well fold itself into the familiarity of future visits. Many older tourists with whom I chatted spoke fondly of their yearly visits—some proudly claimed a time-share to facilitate more frequent stays. Indeed, as Stacy points out, the Las Vegas time-share industry is inextricable from its wedding industry, thus guaranteeing many happy returns from honeymoon to retirement (chapter 10). In this, Las Vegas seems to mirror popular culture generally. Following Fredric Jameson's reasoning, popular culture is synonymous with repetition.³ Writing about music, Jameson claims that we never really hear a pop song for the first time. Rather, the song becomes meaningful for us only as we hear it over and over again and begin to recognize ourselves in its refrains. If I apply this reasoning to Las Vegas and think back to my first research trip, I recall feeling utterly overwhelmed, unable even to visualize and name the hotel-casinos in the proper order along the Strip. With subsequent trips, we all became old hands—Karen, the kamikaze of photos; Jane, the detective of surveillance; Stacy, the sleuth of the sensual; and me, the collector of the mundane.

As a footnote to the theme of initiation and repetition, I should clarify that my first research trip to Las Vegas was not my first experience of the city. That trip occurred some time ago—in 1967 when my father escorted me, teenaged and pregnant, and my soon-to-be husband to Las Vegas, a city renowned for providing weddings of convenience. But that's a song that fell off the charts and out of repetition. I mention it here only to suggest that the pleasure we



accrue from familiarity may well derive from the unrepeatability of the first time.

As for our subsequent research trips, we decided to approach the Strip as one might an intricately choreographed ballet. For what is the Strip but a multiplicity of intersecting systems of practice? Where the ethnographer would seek to discover its order, we appreciated its complexity. Our aim was not to reduce the Strip to a logical structure, nor to allocate its denizens—the escorts, whales, and smutters—into discrete categories for study. Rather, we scanned the totality of the Strip’s cultures, recognizing that where everyday life is concerned, everything—language, gestures, personal relationships—is part of the same web. To pull at one is to activate the whole.

Our choice of what to study was never randomly determined, although certain fortuitous discoveries like the Jesus cards among the cards for call girls might initiate follow-up investigation. For the most part, each of us focused on those particularities that coincided with our larger intellectual interests. Thus, Karen, whose photography often captures contradictory juxtapositions, was drawn to the problem of reality in Las Vegas and pursued it all the way to greenhouses for artificial plants. Similarly, Stacy’s excursions on the Strip were piqued by sensory cues in line with her extensive work on food, media, and the production of affect. Contrariwise, I was drawn to figuring out the class-defined demographics of the Strip. And because the high rollers are hardly representative of everyday life, I knew I’d be spending time on more popular gaming pastimes—the slot machines, and among them, the truly pedestrian penny slots. Finally, Jane, whose larger research interests involve systems of globalized and virtual exchange, concentrated on aspects of the Strip—like surveillance—that the great majority of tourists, myself included, wholly ignore.

Back to the Deuce

One morning in early April, Stacy and I exited our hotel, coffees in hand, to join the sidewalk queue for the Deuce. A couple of sips into the brew, Stacy volunteered, “I had a dream about cows last night. These huge, obnoxious frat boys were herding cows into the ocean. I had to save them.”

This isn’t your typical Vegas dream. But it makes sense when you consider we had ill timed our Vegas trip for spring break. Indeed, the Strip was packed with broad-shouldered, broad-backed, loud boys walking three or four abreast. The rest of us—tourists of every other stripe—were nothing but a milling herd. Forced to yield the sidewalk, tourists found themselves pressed

into buildings or pushed into the street. No one withstood the formidable girth of these linebacker bands of boys.

Most sipped from the straws of their three-foot-long plastic drink containers. These were fastened to straps and worn slung around their necks for hands-free imbibing. Shaped like bongos, the drink vessels seemed to promise that one could mix hash with booze in the same delivery system and still maintain sexual prowess—or am I the only one to see the entire apparatus as a metaphoric strap-on Extenz penis? Stacy would know better than I. After all, she was the target of at least one young man's inebriated ardor: "You're gorgeous," he proclaimed as he spilled his copious drink down her shirt and onto her shoes.

It's rewarding when dreams transcribe reality with such clarity that we fancy ourselves instant Freudians. But not every Vegas experience so graphically encapsulates the condensation and displacement of Freudian dream analysis. For the most part, Las Vegas presents itself as an uninterrupted hodgepodge of sights, sounds, information, and people. How, then, to grasp what's observable, much less capable of crystallizing a dream?

Distance is what's necessary. Stacy's dream was born in anger and gave expression to her unwillingness to identify with either cows or cowboys. The dream bespeaks the dreamer's fundamental sense of estrangement. I don't know if Jane or Karen experienced Vegas-inspired dreams; but I do know that we all sought and benefited from a sense of distance from the field of our research. In this, we take instruction from Zora Neale Hurston, one of our nation's first anthropologists, who wrote extensively on the rural African American folk tradition during the first half of the twentieth century. Hurston emphasized that until she left the South to study at Barnard College, she had no way of seeing the culture of her upbringing as remarkable. The world of tall tales, foodways, herbal curing, religious and secular practices—it was all too close, too familiar to be noticed, much less critically apprehended. Distance—geographic, social, academic—jolted Hurston into seeing and deciphering the world she had left behind.⁴

Our book offers a model for a twofold estrangement. First, there is the impact of arriving in Las Vegas that grounds each of the chapters and jars readers out of the so-called ordinary. One of the challenges we faced as researchers was to maintain the experience of having freshly arrived throughout the sensory onslaught of a four- or five-day stay. It's important to note that all four of us found ways to leave Las Vegas, even while staying there, by taking miniretreats into nature. Here, the proximity of the Grand Canyon, Zion, Red Rock Canyon, and even, as Karen describes it (chapter 8), Springs Preserve,



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BAR-B-QUE
IN LAS VEGAS

OPEN YOUR EYES
TO SEE
THE BEST
OF LAS VEGAS
AND THE
WORLD
FROM
THE
COMFORT
OF YOUR
BUS

PUSH BUTTON
FOR
[Arrow pointing right]

THE BEST
OF LAS VEGAS
AND THE
WORLD
FROM
THE
COMFORT
OF YOUR
BUS

the city's instructional garden, all provided a necessary antidote to the mind-numbing intensity of the Las Vegas Strip. Indeed, we followed a pattern of research already mapped by Rebecca Solnit, whose book *Wanderlust* includes a chapter on Las Vegas. According to Solnit, walking is a great democratizing activity because it implies and demands public access to space. With the hotel-casinos staking claims to their adjacent sidewalks as extensions of their private property "to give themselves more muscle for prosecuting or removing anyone engaging in First Amendment activities," Solnit was hard pressed to construe her walk on the Strip as subversive, let alone democratizing.⁵ She concluded her sojourn in Las Vegas with a day spent hiking in Red Rock. From a high point in the canyon, she looked back to see the city submerged in the brown haze of its smog. Indeed, when seen from the perspective of the surrounding desert, the imposing built environment of Las Vegas withers to a puny aberration upon a landscape long shaped by harsh elements.

The second and even more challenging feature of our research was, then, to turn halfway around and use Las Vegas as a lens for looking back on the world we left behind. This is a tactic Karen developed when we conducted research in Walt Disney World.⁶ The halfway turn allows all those daily life pursuits that we think of as ordinary to emerge as the means for seeing what's odd about Las Vegas. Conversely, everything we took as extraordinary about the Strip and its cultures enabled us to reconsider the so-called normalcy of the lives we left behind. The second half of our title, *Finding America in Las Vegas*, instructs readers to be in two places at once. The journey there collides with the journey home again to reveal the exceptionality of what we left and the predictability of what we journeyed to find.

The construction of a critical distance suggests that there must be something of a gap between the observing subject and the field of research. This is the space that theory fills. Here we draw upon our separate and distinct readings in the broad area of cultural studies. Various, we can claim an understanding of the image, framed and described by writers like Susan Sontag and John Berger.⁷ The latter's emphasis on the gaze as an objectifying force is particularly important on the Las Vegas Strip, where the culture of celebrity conditions a generalized sense that we are all somehow being defined by another's gaze. Berger recognized that women are most especially socialized as objects of a societal gaze, which is invariably constructed as masculine. The relevance of gender points to another of our embedded theoretical underpinnings in the burgeoning work done by feminist scholars to imbricate gender and sexuality in the construction of identity. What makes Las Vegas interesting in terms of gender and sexuality is that its ardent espousal of red-hot



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heterosexuality—blatantly celebrated in its strip clubs, lap dance parlors, and escort services—floats atop a half-recognized gender-bending subtext that lends itself to the queering of many of its famous acts, including male strippers like the Chippendales who play to women, but for each other.

Also fundamental to our work in Las Vegas is the understanding of culture as a system of signs and symbols that yields itself to interpretation. Here we look to Roland Barthes for his groundbreaking essays on such topics as advertising, photojournalism, toys, cars, sports—the very stuff we use to fashion our “mythologies.”⁸ Barthes taught us how to unpack the trivial to reveal the culture’s bedrock ideologies.

However, Barthes ought to be read not in isolation, but rather in conjunction with other related traditions at the core of cultural studies. Foremost among these is the extensive body of work produced by the Marxist scholars associated with the Frankfurt School whose elaboration of the history of the culture industry underscores the significance of the commodity form as crucial for any understanding of the culture. It goes without saying that on the Strip the commoditized environment achieves supersaturation. Indeed, as Karen points out, even the plants—whether organic or plastic—are commodities (chapter 8). Moreover, as I argue with respect to the slot machines (chapter 2), electronic transactions have redefined exchange, which was once a personal interaction, as an extension of the commodity form.

In fact, it may be that the basic Marxian notions associated with the fetishism of the commodity and the subsequent reification of the subject are now inadequate to understand all that’s at stake and on display in Las Vegas. Along these lines, Jane’s observations about Facebook and the *Bodies* exhibit seem more in accord with Jean Baudrillard’s identification of the simulacrum as the iconic figure for a world where the virtual has eclipsed workaday contingencies and consequences (chapter 9).

Yet one more aspect of cultural studies underpins our work and also dovetails with Barthes. This is the recognition of daily life—the quotidian—as not just worthy of intellectual engagement but absolutely crucial to understanding how we use culture to define ourselves. Michel de Certeau paved the way in defining culture as a body of practices rather than an assortment of objects. As he saw it, a city may be structured by its built environment, but it is defined by the routes through it that are developed by people during the course of their daily pursuits.⁹ Where de Certeau applauded the way people carve out routes to disrupt a city’s grid, he would be hard pressed to discover utopic pedestrian practices on the Las Vegas Strip, where the rigid contours of sidewalk and roadway leave little possibility for detours. Nevertheless, de

Certeau's identification of agency coincides with some of the newer writing by postmodern geographers who explore how people make sense of the amorphous landscapes that typify postmodern architecture. For these writers, more is at stake than simply getting lost in a postmodern hotel or sprawling casino. Where power—both political and economic—was once imposed in the design of the urban grid, it is now imbricated in the folds and contours of spaces that seem more incomprehensible than imposing. According to theorists of the postmodern such as Fredric Jameson, we engage postmodernism's built environments both physically and mentally. Through a process dubbed "cognitive mapping," we register the inscription of power in spaces where it would otherwise be occluded.¹⁰ Along these lines, Stacy separates our five sensory registers and charts each as a means for mapping Las Vegas (chapter 7). In line with the postmodern geographers, her maps reveal systems of control that bespeak programs and concentrations of power.

In sketching the broad outlines of the theories that underpin cultural studies as a critical practice, we don't want to imply that we go into our research with a toolbox full of trusty implements. Nowadays, common parlance casts everyone who faces a challenge as having a box full of means and measures to be applied as tools. The attribution of a toolbox to people in all walks of life may well function as resentment for a bygone era when a considerable portion of the population worked in manual labor and actually had a toolbox. Today, even people in the professional classes can be expected to have tools. Thus, a diplomat facing a tough negotiation will boast of the tools in his toolbox. Or a politician running for reelection will claim a hefty war chest and a reliable toolbox. Such utilitarian reasoning would have us as critics of culture merely reaching for our "Derrida" to deconstruct an object, or grabbing our "Adorno" to get at a tight contradiction. Michel Foucault may be the one to blame for introducing the idea of a toolbox into popular discourse, although his translator called it a "kit," and, unlike its simplification in the hands of the media, Foucault saw the tools as a set of "true propositions" that one would build up over a lifetime of study and thought.¹¹ Similarly, we see theory as a network of intersecting discourses that can be brought to bear during the processes of viewing, reading, observing, and interpreting. Theory forms a body of knowledge that can't be reduced to selective particular applications. Indeed, theory is so integral to perception as to constitute a way of being in the world. A foundation in critical theory provides a situatedness in an outlook that is always engaged. And it defines the subject as someone who processes the culture instead of merely consuming it.

Back on the Deuce

Not all children on the Deuce are being initiated. Some know the Strip from end to end. Like conductors on a train, they call out the names of the hotels, giving testimony to their frequent visits. Such children often interject themselves into their parents' conversations about the day's lineup of events. And they know when their parents are pawning them off on the free exhibits and when they've sprung for a pricey ticket.

One such savvy child—a bouncy girl of about ten—climbed aboard the Deuce with parents in tow. Unable to stay seated, she cavorted in the aisle and engaged another couple in conversation—presumably friends of her parents. Irrepressible in every way, the chatty child was not in the least put off by a bus full of strangers. Many were silent and possibly listened in on the conversation that the girl avidly broadcast. At one point, apparently out of boredom for the bus's grinding slowness, she announced for all to hear, "We're going to see Barry Manilow." Her dad's properly parental riposte, "If there's any money left," opened the door for the child's memorable quip, "If he's not dead. Isn't he about a thousand years old?"

The child said what adults might fear to say; that is, as one of the Strip's perennial performers, the star could be dead before the performance. As if to echo the child's intuition, the Strip concurrently sported ads for Wayne Newton's *Once before I Go* show. Indeed, Las Vegas seems to reserve a special place in its heart for over-the-hill performers. Witness the building-high images of Donny and Marie Osmond that have long adorned the Flamingo or the digital billboards of Cher. Consider Elvis—the bloated, not the hound dog—and all those Elvis look-alikes who troll the Strip. Peel back the brashness and the glitter and Vegas is apt to emerge as a morgue for Tinseltown has-beens.

Even a lot of the music is dated, like the notions and dry goods that once filled the shelves of a five-and-dime. Would we call the music pop? Or is the Strip a spectacular emporium of adult contemporary, or, worse yet, elevator music? Perhaps the ghost of Frank Sinatra so permeates Las Vegas as to render all contemporary crooners dated, if not dead.

Look around. Does Las Vegas pulse with vitality, or is it embalmed in its reverence for the past—the Rat Pack, Bugsy, Elvis, and the soon-to-join-them? Consider the Legends impersonators, a group of look-alike, sing-alike performers who breathe new life into deceased stars. Doesn't death undergird the spectacle as surely as drought rims the walls of Lake Mead?

Death and celebrity—the conjoined truths of Las Vegas—are nowhere

more in evidence than in Madame Tussauds Wax Museum, where stone-cold effigies of currently living stars share scenes with lifelike renditions of the dearly departed. All inhabit walk-in, diorama-like tableaux where tourists mingle with the undead. Marry George Clooney, hop in bed with Hugh and his Bunny. Touch, embrace, even kiss the unyielding smoothness of wax. Follow Stacy's essay on all the dimensions of touch (chapter 7), but consider here the exquisite smoothness of wax.

It has long been recognized that the culture of the commodity is a culture of surfaces, and the more developed that culture, the smoother and more impenetrable those surfaces. Back in the 1980s, the epitome of commodity smoothness was the hard plastic bubble that encased everything from razors to Barbie dolls. Today, the bubble has been incorporated into the skin of the commodity itself. Imagine a smartphone as it glides into palm or pocket. Consider the screen as you slide your fingertips across a host of icons and summon images and texts whose depthless one-dimensionality belies a fetishism more profound than Theodor Adorno dreamed possible when he wrote *Minima Moralia* and mourned the passing of antique levers and door latches whose mechanics put us directly in touch with the actual production of our daily lives.¹² Bereft of moving parts and utterly sealed off from anything that smacks of interiority, the smartphone presents itself as miraculously self-produced. Even if we've heard of Foxconn, said to be as big as a city, where tens of thousands of workers assemble our phones in less than desirable conditions, and even if we know about the rare earth metals that are mined in the blood and war of Congo to make our communication possible, these grim realities leave nary a trace on the marvelously smooth surface of our handheld devices.

Now consider a different enactment of smoothness. Some forty years ago, Donald Barthelme, master of wry modernist short fiction, conjured the tale of a giant balloon that settled over Manhattan and engulfed the city's grid of streets and buildings in its new architecture of amorphous smoothness. Gone were angularities, hard edges, the grist of toil, the detritus of life—in their place only the smoothness of the balloon. Children accepted the balloon and played on its surface. Adults began to map their activities and assignations according to its bulges and bubbles. But the balloon was impermanent. Indeed, the tale ends with the revelation that the narrator inflated the balloon as a prank and will similarly dispose of it, thus allowing the city to resume its grid.¹³

As a city of surfaces, Las Vegas embodies the smoothness of the balloon and smartphone, even though the cacophony of façades that adorn the Strip





have nothing to do with a balloon's rounded surface and instead imitate the shape and angles of a jumble of billboards. The landscape's consummate elaboration of exteriority seems to preclude the possibility of anything that smacks of interior sanctuary or hidden meanings. Nevertheless, we as researchers challenged ourselves to prod, poke, and probe the obdurate surface of Las Vegas, our aim to prize it open and, if possible, turn it inside out.

To that end, I recall that when I visited Madame Tussauds on the Strip, the museum included a video exhibit that demonstrated how the wax statues are made. It showed how the living and breathing real celebrity is photographed from every angle and digitally measured so as to produce a precise body map, which provides the basis for the wax clone. In detailing the production process, the video offered a celebration of technology whose effect was to cancel the impact of the uncanny that shaped my initial apprehension of the statues. In fact, the video demystified the statue as a fetish (something that we perceive to be endowed with a magical reality), even while it affirmed its existence as a commodity (something that is produced for mass consumption). In this, the video, like other seemingly incidental cultural artifacts that the four of us happened upon during the course of our research, would prove to be a lever capable of prizing open not just Madame Tussaud's house of wax, but Las Vegas more generally. Consider that if the Strip is the place where death and celebrity cohabit, so too is it the place where the deeper meaning of celebrity is made tangible as a surface reality. For what is celebrity but the most profound reification of personhood—the transformation of all that's vital into a thing? Does this not spell the death of self as surely as Madame Tussauds is a mausoleum to the entombment of stardom?

Back on the Bus

Given the jammed traffic on the Strip and the delays associated with frequent stops, the Deuce travels at a snail's pace and affords tourists ample time to survey the blockbuster hotels. Being stuck in traffic can deliver compelling views of standout features like the Sphinx, Eiffel Tower, or Statue of Liberty. Indeed, I've overheard more than one tourist proclaim a desire to add a particular site to a vacation's roster of attractions simply because he or she noticed it while stuck on the bus. Such was the case during one midday ride when the two women seated in front of me remarked Caesars Palace and expressed their desire to visit the Forum Shops.

"Is that where they have lions attack someone?" I hadn't noticed the little boy squirming between the legs of one of the women. But who could over-

look his comment — especially given his mother’s non sequitur reply, “No, it’s actually Jerry Seinfeld.”

Clearly, the two were speaking at cross-purposes. And of the two, the boy demonstrated a much bigger field of knowledge and references, connecting the Forum to Rome, and these to gladiators and lions, and finally to the Siegfried and Roy mishap, which did involve a lion that tried to eat someone — only at a different hotel. The boy confirmed what I’ve detected elsewhere in my studies of the culture. Kids, possibly owing to their incomplete acculturation, speak without a filter, and, in so doing, indicate that they grasp the truths that adults have chosen to avoid. Indeed, the mother, pulling herself away from conversation with her friend, merely read the marquee and named the night’s performer.

I mention this vignette because the exchange between mother and child maps an important feature of our book that bears on how it can be read. On the one hand, there is the conventional linear front-to-back reading that offers topics and interpretations in a straightforward manner. Such a reading approximates the mother’s appeal to facts. In contrast, another reading hopscotches like the little boy across syntagmatic synapses and pulls together a variety of meanings and associations that appear to be disconnected, but are, instead, linked by a deeper rhetorical logic. My choice of the word *hopscotch* is not gratuitous. Indeed, this is the English title of Julio Cortázar’s counternovel, published in 1963 under the title *Rayuela*, whose 155 chapters can be read either progressively or, as the author suggests, by hopscotching about. Cortázar was a master of serious play. Needless to say, there are multiple endings.¹⁴

So too do we invite our readers to assemble our book through a multiplicity of readings. Bear in mind that the sorts of meanings that emerge will vary according to the reader’s propensity for hopscotching among the book’s varied elements. First there are the photos and the interplay between words and images that ask readers to test literal and nonliteral relationships. Then there are the chapters themselves, whose distinct approaches testify to the different perspectives of the four authors. The common factor throughout is the pedagogy of questions raised but not directly answered. Here we invite readers to puzzle over the implications of what our trips to Las Vegas reveal. And finally, there is the dictum voiced by one Las Vegas resident, “Nothing exists here that doesn’t come from elsewhere.” Stacy overheard the woman’s remark as the plane in which they were both traveling was about to land at McCarran Airport. Stacy was journeying to Las Vegas; the woman, returning home. In transit, the here and the elsewhere came together. Readers who

hopscotch from chapter to chapter may find themselves bouncing in and out of Las Vegas. Some may even turn it inside out and end up finding America in Las Vegas.¹⁵

NOTES

1. Brecht on Theater: *The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 192.
2. Brecht on Theater, 143.
3. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992), 17–21.
4. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 8.
5. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 283.
6. Karen Klugman, “The Alternative Ride,” in *The Project on Disney, Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 166.
7. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin, 1990).
8. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).
9. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
10. Fredric Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 9.
11. Michel Foucault, *L’herméneutique du sujet, Cours au Collège de France, 1981–1982* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001), 341.
12. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1984), 40.
13. Donald Barthelme, “The Balloon,” in *Sixty Stories* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982), 53–58.
14. Julio Cortázar, *Rayuela* (New York: Random House, 1966).
15. Those who wish to learn more about the political, social, economic, and cultural histories of Las Vegas and the Strip may wish to consult the following suggested readings: Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Las Vegas* (New York: Vintage, [1990] 2006); Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999); Barbara G. Brents, Crystal Jackson, and Kathryn Hausbeck, *The State of Sex: Tourism, Sex, and Sin in the American Heartland* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Marc Cooper, *The Last Honest Place in America: Paradise and Perdition in the New Las Vegas* (New York: Nation, 2004); Sally Denton and Roger Morris, *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America* (New York: Vintage, 2002); John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Joanne L. Goodwin, *Changing the Game: Women at Work in Las Vegas, 1940–1990* (Las Vegas: University of Las Vegas Press, 2014); Mark Gottdiener, Claudia C. Collins, and David R. Dickens, *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); James P. Kraft, *Vegas at Odds: Labor Conflict in a Leisure Economy, 1960–1985* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Barbara Land and Myrick Land, *A Short History of Las Vegas* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004); Matthew O’Brian, *Beneath the Neon: Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas* (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 2007); Hal Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Hal Rothman, *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec, eds., *Relearning from Las Vegas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

ONE

Framing Las Vegas “Reality”

To approach [reality], one has to strip away clichés that keep it hidden from sight. —Michael Ignatieff

On my first day of photographing in Las Vegas, I took a picture of one of the locals, a waitress who was taking a break from her shift at the Harley-Davidson Cafe.* My intent was to make a documentary-style portrait of a particular individual who lives in Vegas and works along the Strip. So I focused my subject in the frame, pushed the button, and said, “Thanks for letting me take your picture, Brenda.” Brenda gave me a puzzled look, then glanced down at her bodice, fingered her badge, and replied, “Actually, my name is Angel. I forgot my name tag today, but luckily Brenda left hers in the drawer.”

Yes, a waitress anywhere might borrow a name tag, but Angel had so casually slipped into this alternative identity that she seemed to have forgotten about it. Could it be that, in this city where so much is fake, people reinvent themselves as freely as you and I get dressed in the morning? By Angel’s reckoning, the recurrent Vegas theme of luck had played a big role in her name that day. However, I suspected that the odds of someone wearing a misleading name tag were greater in Vegas than in other cities.

* Karen Klugman

Earlier that morning, as the check-in clerk at Harrah's Las Vegas handed me a book of discount coupons, she said, "Now figure out your game plan. And good luck!" She meant, of course, that I should think about how I was going to optimize my money on gambling, shopping, entertainment, and eating, but my game plan was to take pictures along the Strip in the hopes of uncovering some truths about Vegas. Programmed by the hotel clerk to believe that, no matter how well I strategized, chance would play a role in my day, I indeed felt lucky to have stumbled upon that little white lie of a name tag. But the longer I explored the culture of imagery in Vegas, the more I came to realize that the misleading evidence in my so-called documentary photograph was emblematic of the game of deception that is everywhere in Vegas. The portrait of Angel (a.k.a. Brenda) would resurface in my vision not as a lucky find but as a constant reminder, like the inscriptions on wide-angle mirrors, that in Vegas, nothing is as it appears.

As a teacher of photography, I frequently remind my students that, once a photograph has been taken, what is inside the frame is all that we know. Even though a picture might seem to represent a one-to-one correspondence to the materials of the real world, there is always something missing. A photograph is, after all, a two-dimensional rectangle of visual information that has been removed from its original context in time and place. A photograph is based on the stuff of the real world, and yet it has the potential to deceive. In the picture of the waitress, one might note the woman's expression, her makeup, her hairstyle, her clothing, her gesture with the cigarette, and that little rectangular piece of evidence naming her Brenda. From the information contained within the frame, however, a viewer could not possibly know that outside of her existence in this frame she was known as Angel.

With its reputation for seeming to present evidence and its potential for creating fiction, photography is a perfect medium to play games with notions of reality. In Vegas, renowned for elaborate fabrications, a culture of picture taking has evolved that reinforces the idea that nothing is real. Like every entertainment center, Vegas takes advantage of the hordes of camera-toting visitors to promote an image that supports its main industry. Just as we might primp in front of a mirror before we pose for a picture, Vegas is camera-ready with backdrops, costumed characters, and visual games that tout its reputation for being fake. In other parts of the country, when I ask if I might take someone's picture, the disclaimer "Careful, I might break your camera" is the cliché of choice, conveying both modesty and tacit permission for me to press the shutter button. But in Vegas, the city's motto, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," is recited facetiously as a preamble to picture taking. With



every repetition of this catchy phrase, an imaginary frame forms around the people within earshot to cordon them off from the rest of the world. It's as if they are reciting a mantra to remind one another, just as I remind my students about photographs, that what is inside the frame is all that exists. These days, people are surely aware that any pictures could end up on the Internet, yet the shopworn motto still has the power to invoke temporary amnesia about the present day and conjure up images of Vegas in an era when it might have been possible to control information. When I asked a young man who wore his alcoholic beverage in a plastic guitar strung around his shoulder if I might take his picture, he recited the motto as one might utter a prayer before a risky act, then struck an in-your-face pose as a rock star. A beer-toting man responded to my request for a picture with an abbreviated, "Okay, baby, but remember . . ." as he swelled out his chest for me to read the Vegas motto printed on his T-shirt. I overheard the phrase recited by two young couples who took turns posing with their hands on the brass frieze of female buttocks—a favorite photo spot in the hallway of the Riviera Casino Hotel. A middle-aged man who was imitating a "smutter" (Las Vegas lingo for a distributor of "calling cards") by flicking his own collection of porno cards and pretending to offer them to passersby, paused to pose for his wife's camera and then (because he noticed me watching?) recited the magic protective words.

A hodgepodge of costumed characters located throughout Vegas helps to create this "anything goes" atmosphere that encourages people to momentarily suspend the notion of reality. Costumed actors within the resorts, such as groups of gladiators in the shopping area of Caesars Palace and the dwarf in a leprechaun suit advertising cheap beer outside O'Sheas Casino fit the theme of their territory. But on the sidewalks of the Strip, the cast of costumed characters resists classification. There are the characters paid to advertise for events and resorts—rows of Rollerbladers in sleek silver outfits bearing flags to advertise the Russian Ice Capades, scantily clad women with feather head-dresses handing out coupons for bars and restaurants, men draped in sandwich boards depicting helicopter rides over the Grand Canyon, and of course Liberace. The everyday street party includes a rotating crew of costumed visitors—pairs of brides and grooms, groups of guys wearing fraternity letters, and squadrons of bikers clad in silver-studded black leather. Amid this cast of regular characters, individuals parade the streets wearing T-shirts with messages that normally wouldn't be seen outside a bar, such as "My Mother Wanted Me to Be Something, So I Became an Asshole" or "I ♥ to Fart." On St. Patrick's Day, women stroll the sidewalks wearing skirts with sewn-in nude butts on the back. Within this Felliniesque setting, even the Catholic priest

who silently holds a donation basket outside the Excalibur Resort seems to be just another character playing a temporary role.

In an area of the Strip lined with cheap souvenir shops and rent-me convertibles, one of the costumed regulars, an Elvis impersonator, implores tourists to pose with him for a picture. But, unlike Mickey Mouse, whose simultaneous appearances in several places in the Magic Kingdom are carefully choreographed to make it seem as if there is only one Mickey, two Elvises often work as a team. A visitor can pose with Elvis or, for the same price, pose with two Elvises. In exposing the Elvises as actors, Vegas works like the MGM Studios portion of Disney World, where everything is acknowledged to be fake. Over and over again, by posing together, the two Elvises invite visitors to share the joke that they are only pretending to be Elvis. Their mirror-image poses frame the take-home photos (suggested price of \$5) as a true Las Vegas souvenir that flaunts the idea that everything is artificial.

The idea that no particular Elvis is authentic is also promoted by wedding businesses that encourage prospective marriage couples to select the Elvis of their choice. Clients are encouraged to read the actors' bios, learn their real-life names, and view pictures of them in costume in order to select the style and age of Elvis that suits their tastes. Not only will a particular business offer multiple Elvis packages (options to ride in the convertible, have Elvis sing and officiate the ceremony, or even ride in a helicopter with him), but many of the packages include multiple Elvises. In one of the Vegas wedding videos posted online, a bride was accompanied by four Elvis impersonators—the wedding minister, the Cadillac driver, an escort, and the groom. I couldn't help but wonder if the Elvis-themed package included the husband as part of the deal.

The two sidewalk Elvises often work alongside a woman who looks as if she stepped out of the Folies Bergère in a long, tight, sequined skirt, a bra-like top, and a feathered headdress. Like the Elvises, she works the Strip posing for pictures. She has a huge smile for everyone's camera and adds sexual innuendo to her pose with men, who often recite the Vegas motto to acknowledge their embarrassment as their wives snap the photo. After each picture, the Folies Bergère woman discreetly pulls down the waistband of her skirt from her bare midriff and adds a bill to her growing wad. One day I watched her pose with a family that included two young boys, one of whom attempted to pull down her bra top as she held the toddler in her arms. She and the family laughed at the boy's indiscretion, but no one seemed to feel that posing a child with this sexual charmer was out of the ordinary. It was simply what was done here, as if the woman herself were merely another backdrop indicating that one had been to Vegas.



I took several pictures of the Folies Bergère woman posing with various men before her smile turned downward and she suddenly asked if I personally knew the man around whose body she currently had her leg curled. “What kind of creepy person are you, anyway?” she yelled. “Taking pictures of another woman’s husband! What are you going to do with the picture? Put it under your pillow?” At this point, the wife of the posing man became alarmed, and suddenly everyone in the vicinity imagined that I was a pornographer. Even the Elvises broke character and glared at me. Here I was in Las Vegas, accustomed to a public persona as a nearly invisible older woman in a society that worships youth and beauty, and, simply by breaking an unspoken code about photography, I had achieved the status of sexual deviant in Sin City. I might as well have been wearing a badge naming me “sexual predator.” Like Angel, I wanted to explain that there had been a misunderstanding—that I would never put the photo under my pillow. But it seemed way too complicated to explain that I might put it in a book.

I had a similar experience of stealing attention from a Vegas attraction when I tried to take a picture of two Chippendales (again, like the Elvises, this Vegas species occurs in pairs) in the very public plaza of the Fremont Street Experience north of the Strip. When the bare-chested Chippendales pose for pictures with women, they select from a menu of choreographed poses as predictable as the order in which they remove their clothing in their performances at the Rio. They pull their signature black sleeveless vests off their shoulders and, depending on the woman’s age and probable agility, they either hold the woman’s leg against their bodies or place her hand on their nipples or flat against their six-packs. On this particular day, they were each holding a young girl, one perhaps eight years old and the other a little younger, whose mother had volunteered them for a picture. When the Chippendales opened their vests and arranged the girls to reveal more skin and breast for the mother’s camera, I was truly shocked—shocked by their suggestive pose with the girls, shocked that the mother was delighted, and shocked that no one else in the crowd appeared to be shocked. Had the Chips realized that they had crossed a line when they spotted my camera in the midst of a crowd and yelled, “Stop! No picture taking”? Or did they just want to be paid?

Observing strangers in the act of fantasy play seemed to be perfectly acceptable and even encouraged. The Elvises, the Folies Bergère actress, and the Chippendales attracted crowds of people who watched groups of friends or families mug for the camera. Even though these performances occurred in public places, where free speech laws include the right to take pictures, there seemed to be some prohibition on picture taking in Vegas that overrode the

First Amendment. Was the rule a variation on the Vegas motto allowing for what happens in Vegas to leave Vegas so long as it stays in the family, as the *Folies Bergère* poser had implied? Or did these performers claim to be immune from free-speech laws simply because they too wanted to be paid?

The unspoken rules of photography in Vegas were confusing. Costumed street workers hired by businesses—those employed to hand out monorail discounts, restaurant advertisements, and theater specials—happily posed for pictures for free. Selling a commodity other than their appearance in photographs, they were paid either by the hour or by the number of tickets that would be cashed in. None of them seemed to mind or even notice that I took pictures of multiple people posing with them. The problem is that it is hard to distinguish the posers whose reproductions were the commodity being sold and those whose images helped to sell another product. For example, when I snapped a picture of two women in green sequins and feathers who were dressed almost exactly like a woman who had been posing near Bally's for free, the pair yelled at me indignantly, saying that they "only allow pictures for money." Was I supposed to recognize that because they, like the Elvises and the Chippendales, were already identical reproductions of one another, they had some the authority to charge people for making yet another reproduction of them?

On the same day that I was publicly humiliated in front of the *Elvis-Folies Bergère* crowd, I was called a whore by a smutter wearing a Santa Claus hat. Again, my transgression was trying to take a picture of a public act in a public place. Smutters are men and women usually wearing brightly colored T-shirts advertising "Girls Direct to You," who hand out small cards with phone numbers and pictures of nude women flaunting large breasts, often in spread-eagle or bare-butt poses with tiny stars in crucial spots. In keeping with other duplicates in Vegas, some of the cards advertise two women, such as the Barbie twins or the Asian schoolgirls. One card offered a special for \$65 or two for \$99. Like many other street workers in Vegas, smutters also work in groups. They stand in a row, offering cards to males of a certain age (I don't know how they assess the lower limit, but there is definitely no upper age limit for the men they target). The solicitors all flick their stack of cards in the same manner, which produces a regular clicking noise as if they are using sound to reinforce an addiction. Their hands operate quickly, so that it is very difficult to get a picture of one of these cards actually being handed off to a potential customer. I had various experiences trying to photograph them. A few distributors reluctantly let me take their pictures while they hid their deck of cards from the camera as if they were concealing a poker hand.

A few smiled for the camera and splayed the cards at crotch level. But most scattered like pigeons when I raised the camera and settled back into formation after I passed. On this particular day in December, Salvation Army workers were huddled around collection baskets and ringing bells, forming a second battalion behind the line of smutters. I especially loved the image of the smutter with the Santa Claus hat passing out escort cards near a Salvation Army person collecting money from a family. And so I raised my camera to take the picture. And that's when the smutter swore at me. "Whore!" he yelled. My mind shuffled through a rapid sequence of possible responses, such as, "Why am I surprised that you detest the product you are selling?" and "Another first for me!" Instead, I essentially put myself in the same category as a smutter. "Hey, I'm just doing my job," I retorted. "You work the streets and I work the streets."

No guidebook tells people that smutters are as opposed to having their pictures taken as the Amish in Pennsylvania. Yet everyone seemed to understand that this quintessential Vegas phenomenon needed to stay in Las Vegas. The smutters were real people, mostly Latinos, and photographing social reality was not part of the Vegas game plan. Not only did people not take pictures of them, most dared not even look their way. For a man, looking at a smutter would be an invitation to have the escort card flashed in his face for a longer period. The smutter might even walk a few paces beside a man who did not keep his eyes averted.

True, there are exceptions to the prohibition on looking at smutters or showing interest in the porno handouts. Some men flaunt their collections of cards and flip through their pile like boys admiring baseball heroes. Other men accept every card offered to them, take a quick peek, and then throw them away. Perhaps they are trying to get a complete collection and they already have Joanie or Cheryl. Or perhaps they are window shoppers "just looking." Some men, presumably on their first visit to Vegas, accept the handout thinking it is a discount coupon for dinner or a show, then react as if they've been handed a hot potato and drop it onto the sidewalk. For one reason or another, therefore, sidewalks, streets, artificial ponds, and cactus planters are littered with rejected escort cards.

Most people train their eyes ahead and consciously avoid looking at the hundreds of cards strewn on the walkways or the dozens of porno cards strung at eye level on utility poles at major intersections. But there is a notable exception to this collective taboo against looking at discarded escort cards. Boys between the ages of eight and fourteen often hang back from their families to steal glances at the sidewalk. I trailed two women in fur coats, hoping

