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Aging and Personhood in the Landscape of the Mega-Casino

Retirement at the Tables

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Abstract

The retirement of the Boomer generation constitutes the largest wave of retirements in US history. This article examines the ways in which mega-casinos as institutions have become new spaces of aging and important sites where the ideals of retirement can be played out. Based on thirty-two months of fieldwork at two of the US's largest casinos, I argue that these facilities help older adults maintain their personhood by engaging them socially, mentally, and physically through the myriad services and amenities they offer. Dominating narratives informed by Western economic and medical trends call for 'active aging,' 'productive aging,' or 'aging gracefully,' and these related paradigms emphasize social engagement along with physical and cognitive activities as the keys to thriving in old age. The casino environment simultaneously challenges and facilitates these narratives, providing an age-diverse setting in which seniors can exercise, entertain family, acquire gifts, and earn status. Drawing on David Graeber's (2001) framework for theorizing value, I assert that it is participation in the many activities of the casino, rather than the monetary wins and losses, that has constituted them as valuable places to sustain personhood and achieve the ideals of an 'active' or 'successful' retirement.

Keywords: *personhood; active aging; casinos; gambling; older adults; value; USA*

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Introduction

It was an early Friday morning in the heat of late August when I joined Nick and Venus in the long, U-shaped line filling a side entrance lobby in Mohegan Sun Resort and Casino. "So how long will you guys usually wait?" I asked, watching the neat queue of mostly seniors creep forward, past the beckoning conveyor belt of freshly glazed donuts behind the windows of Krispy Kreme. "Oh, sometimes a half hour, forty-five minutes even," Venus replied, "but the line is moving fast today." She recognized a familiar face across the way and waved. Soon enough we arrived at a desk where the couple displayed their brightly-colored player's club cards and were handed an XXL tie-dyed t-shirt with the casino logo emblazoned on the back. I commented at the size for her petite frame, but she explained they are one-size only, adding that she wears them to work in their garden. She tucked the plastic-wrapped shirt into her bag and we set off to a new row of space-maiden themed slot machines around the corner.

Despite pervasive beliefs that life after paid labor ends is about rest and relaxation, many anthropologists and age scholars have found that 'successful' retirement in America is about managing activities rather than embracing idleness (Katz 2000; Lamb, Robbins-Ruszkowski, and Corwin 2017; Weiss 2005). A key component of the active aging narrative is the belief that characteristics of youth can and should be preserved well into later life. Those elements that define the person and structure individual identity, such as physical appearance and capabilities, relationships, hobbies or interests, and the maintenance of the home are all, ideally, sustained despite the changes brought by advancing age. Successful aging demands a "permanent personhood", one more or less unmodified through the passage of time (Lamb, Robbins-Ruszkowski, and Corwin 2017,11). In this article, I reveal how older adults respond to the deeply felt changes and challenges to personhood through the utilization of the unusual places of American mega-casinos. I argue that these casino customers have found ways to amend the existing structures, spaces, and services of these vast facilities to effectuate the key element of active aging—the *activity*—and fulfill their desires for a 'good' retirement.

Value, Uncertainty, and the Making of a Person

Before one can understand why retirees will wait in line for impractical 'gifts' or risk limited pension money on slot machines, it is important to contextualize these activities in light of significant changes that have occurred in the institution of work into the 21st century. Economic anthropology has undergone considerable theoretical shifts as local economic systems have expanded into international ones and career paths for many workers have become increasingly unpredictable and dynamic. Uncertainty has become the new 'normal' as international financial speculation, currency exchange, and venture capital continue to dominate global economics. These changes have permeated across Wall Street and into the everyday economic activities of most Americans as they navigate a deliberately perplexing array of financial products to sustain them once formal employment ends. The demands of late capitalism have

rewritten the life course by requiring frequent career shifts in place of rewarded company loyalty, often resulting in relocations, retraining, or even forays into freelance or contract work (Lane 2009). Richard Sennett reflects on the ways in which this transition impacts notions of personhood and family life:

> The problem with all this is that a self oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience is—to put a kindly face on the matter—an unusual sort of human being. Most people are not like this; they need a sustaining life narrative, they take pride in being good at something specific, and they value the experiences they've lived through. The cultural ideal required in new institutions thus damages many of the people who inhabit them. (Sennett 2006,17)

Uncertainty erodes these three elements of personhood- a sustaining life narrative, pride in mastery of specific skillsets, and the importance of experiences- and replaces them with a series of transitions and adjustments that emphasize preparedness for the future and make it increasingly difficult to define a cohesive self. To sit still, then, is antithetical to a system based on constant change and movement, and thus the institution of retirement has also shifted from a period of respite and security to a constant bustle of busyness in an effort to align with expectations about what it means to age *actively* when paid labor ends.

David Graeber astutely discerned the importance of action in his influential text on theories of value. Rather than aligning with either of the "two equally unsatisfactory poles" of exchange-based value or value from "meaningful difference," he asserts that both of these models fail to reflect the fluidity and dynamism of relationships, both social and economic (2001,46). "Value becomes… the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves: normally, as reflected in one or another socially recognized form," (2001,47). Departing from the work of other economic anthropologists, he places primary emphasis on the action or activity itself, but also recognizes the importance of an audience, even an audience of one, to observe the act taking place. Sara Lamb (1997) lends ethnographic credence to Graeber's theory in her examination of *maya*, or the emotional and physical ties to kin, among older Indian women. She argues that one of the socially recognized practices of aging in North Indian villages is the act of gradually severing these ties to others in an effort to 'unmake' elements of the person, allowing the transition onward without leaving a lingering (or still socially attached) spirit behind. Thus, the value of *maya* as an element of personhood is sustained from actions that are socially recognized, and, in order for this value to be recycled, it must be deliberately unrecognized in a publicly visible way so the cycle can continue.

Actions are also fundamental to Marcel Mauss's (1985) development of the concept of the person through time. In his classic essay he demonstrates how the idea of the self (*moi*) was produced historically with actions, beginning first with the acts of giving a name and participation in one's role in the clan, and following a series of increasingly complex processes from indigenous groups until arriving at the contemporary European understanding of the individual agent. This definition of the person as both a conscious individual but also one constituted through participation in social groups and institutions is derived from actions, and as Graeber emphasizes, the importance given to those actions to oneself and others. Mauss's definition is also based upon participatory actions in institutions such as kin, politics, and the like.

To extend this to include the institution of work seems wholly fitting, as it is often within this hierarchical setting that ideas about the self are further developed (Jiménez 2003). A person can be a *father* and *son* (a participant in the reciprocal institution of kin) a *husband* (a participant in the institution of the house), and an accountant, or pipefitter, or nurse (a participant in the institution of work). The skills and

relative rank acquired in the workplace can be defining elements of the person that are not easily sustained when careers have reached their end (Savishinsky 2000; Weiss 2005). Traditional employment also provides a somewhat predictable daily routine of necessary tasks, interpersonal interactions, and, importantly, scheduled activities which structure the day and create meaning through achievement or completion (Lynch 2009, 2013). When formal work ends, retirees may initially revel in the abundant free time by socializing, traveling, or dabbling in new hobbies. Once the excitement gives way to monotony, many older adults are left searching for activities, however mundane, to fill the day (Weiss 2005). In this way, the cultural obsession with activity in late life serves as a facilitator of 'permanent personhood' for those who are physically and financially able to participate in the sanctioned behaviors that are socially prescribed. Guided by the work of Graeber and utilizing the construction of personhood developed by Mauss, I argue that it is through this active participation that *value* is created and beliefs about a 'good' retirement are actualized, even in the unlikely spaces of mega-casinos.

Aging-as-Activity

The process of becoming older is an ongoing activity that begins at birth and ends at death, though we often do not think of it in this way. Old age is both relative and specific: it is relative to the perspective of the person assessing it, whether yourself, a child, or someone older than you, but is seen as a specific period of time in the life course: "Every image of a human being is effectively an image of aging, given that it provides a representation of the face and body which is of a person at a particular point on a chronological time scale and therefore immediately marked in terms of linear age," (Featherstone and Hepworth 2009,136). Along with this chronological scale, there are culturally specific activities and behaviors that are associated with particular age sets; in the United States and indeed many other places, childhood is for play and education, young adulthood is for marriage and starting families, and retirement and old age too are accompanied by their own sets of actions.

The cultural paradigms shaping the behaviors of old age in the United States have come to be defined by a set of synonymous terms such as *active*, *productive*, or *successful* aging. These buzzwords are of course deliberate and the product of neoliberal ideologies. In his contribution to *The Cultural Context of Aging*, Henry Moody (2009) outlines the relationship between our fixation on the medical aspects of aging and the circulation of these terms, which exist as a contrast to feared declines in health. Although there are subtle differences between these concepts, they generally emphasize the belief that old age can (and should) be a period of continued social participation and engagement, involvement in new hobbies or interests, and a proactive and preventative attitude towards current and future health problems and their consequences (Cardona 2012; Estes and Associates 2001; Vozikaki et al 2017). Often, older adults are encouraged to participate in activities that are deemed socially appropriate for their age, regardless of their personal interests. In the United States, this is reflected in the types of activities hosted by senior centers or other community programs, which might center around handicrafts (gendered heavily towards women), puzzles, collectibles, and low-impact exercises. However, despite the positive connotation of terms such as "active aging", it is presumptuous to assume they are merely the most 'scientifically validated' approaches to later life. Moody cautions, "taking for granted our individualist, activity-oriented and future-oriented approach to Successful Aging becomes an uncritical kind of cultural blindness (a kind of ethnocentrism) that will not be overcome by empirical investigation itself" (2009, 70). In other words, successful aging is steeped in cultural meaning and laced with a set of accompanying values that require the nuanced insights of anthropologists in addition (or perhaps in contrast) to the louder voices of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), Western medical practitioners, and concerned adult children.

Methodology

Casinos are notoriously difficult sites to conduct academic research for a number of reasons, all of which were encountered in undertaking this project. Given the controversial status of legalized gaming, associated cultural vices (smoking, alcohol, sex work), and increasing awareness of gambling pathology, casino management are resistant to allowing outside researchers poke around. However, after several months of polite persistence, I was able to gain access to Mohegan Sun's non-gaming retail area for recruitment and participant interviews. The group of seniors I worked with were recruited with a variety of methods. Short screening surveys were administered to casino guests voluntarily, and qualified participants (retired adults 65 or older who visited an area casino at least weekly) were contacted for interviews. I also recruited via convenience sampling at area senior centers on bingo day, and used snowball sampling when applicable.

Fieldwork for this project was conducted from January 2015 to August 2017 in both Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods Resort and Casino, two tribal mega-casinos situated in rural Southeastern Connecticut. Interviews with seniors were semi-structured and open-ended, with a focus on narratives and anecdotes to generate an integrated understanding of how casinos fit into the post-retirement lives of these older adults. To support these interviews, all casino-going seniors were shadowed for several casino visits in order to document their movements, choices, and social interactions as they utilized the facilities.

I also formally interviewed casino employees in various positions and had several informal interviews with casino management, security, and marketing staff. Casino employees were interviewed once each with a more structured set of questions regarding casino advertising and outreach targeting older customers, and many employees described their personal (and often long-lasting) relationships with regular senior guests. All members of staff, regardless of position, could think of several seniors with whom they had developed a strong connection and they spoke fondly of these guests during interviews. A total of 13 seniors and 5 casino employees were interviewed for this project. The senior participants ranged in age from 65 to 92 and were diverse in their educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, with careers as hairdressers, chemists, and upper-level management for major corporations, among others. Given the importance of financial issues in retirement, I chose my sample with consideration to household income, and my participants ranged from fixed-income and dependent on state support to highly wealthy and generating income from investments. Some were married with many children and grandchildren, while others were widowed and childless, with few family members still living. Frequency of casino visits was dependent on finances, personal interest, and temporal availability. Participants with a little time to fill usually only went once a week, while others with more abundant free time (and fewer competing interests) visited more often, up to four times a week in some cases.

Trying Your Luck at Active Aging: Casinos and Late Life

We may now return to the meandering line of retirees waiting for tacky, oversized t-shirts. This image is likely very different from the depictions most of us have in our minds when considering the American casino industry. Popular films such as the *Ocean's* series and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* use casinos as glamorous-yet-distasteful backdrops for stories about handsome young men and accompanying dames dashing about from one illegal activity to another under the catchy anonymity of 'what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.' However, the reality of the expansion of casino gambling across the United States is more mundane, and skews demographically much older, with a full 64% of casino visitors being over 50, and 28% over 65 (AGA 2013). In addition, casinos have spread outside of their designated hubs of Las

Vegas and Atlantic City to 40 states due in part to state budget woes and rising public approval of gambling (AGA 2017). This increase also reflects shifts in federal recognition of tribal sovereignty, beginning in 1979 with the Seminole Tribe in Central Florida, which won the right to operate a small bingo hall on reservation grounds (Cattelino 2008). Within a few short decades, dozens of other tribes followed suit, including the Mashantucket and Mohegan, owners of the field sites for this project. Cattelino cautions in her ethnographic account of the Seminole's rise to success that only a handful of tribal casinos earn the majority of tribal gaming revenue (2008,4). Many other tribes, due to interacting factors such as local governmental regulations, location, and management, fail to see the same successes. Regardless, tribal casinos continue to represent a significant portion of the expansion of casino gambling nationally.

This spread has not occurred without debate, especially about problem and pathological gambling and the impacts this may have on those with fixed or limited incomes (Back, Lee, and Stinchfield 2011; Nichols et al 2002; Quinn 2001). The rates of these disorders in the general population, however, are low, with estimates ranging from 1-7% (Quinn 2001; Shaffer *et al* 1999). Natasha Dow Schüll critiques such figures in her book *Addiction by Design* and argues that these statistics are misleading; gambling addiction is likely much more prevalent among regular casino gamblers, with some studies asserting as high as 20% (Schüll 2012, 15; Zaranek and Lichtenberg 2008). Such wide variations in percentages are reflective of significant complexities involved in assessment, such as the reliability of self-reporting, the validity of screening instruments used to diagnose problem/pathological gambling, and the different rates of pathology across types of gambling games (Volberg *et al.* 2001). Given these challenges, and in light of my role as ethnographer rather than psychiatrist, it is not my intention to classify the gambling habits and decisions of my participants or assign to them any diagnoses. Instead, I focus on mega-casinos as institutions facilitating a variety of activities for senior guests, including, but not restricted to, gambling. Occasionally during fieldwork, a participant would meet me looking flustered from having lost more money than anticipated, but none of my interlocutors ever reported self-diagnosing or seeking treatment for gambling addiction. More frequently, I encountered participants using self-limiting strategies to keep spending in check, such as not visiting casino ATMs and only bringing the amount of cash they felt they could afford to lose. For these reasons, gambling addiction and associated outcomes, while critically important areas for ethnographic research, are not the primary focus of this article.

The field sites for this project were two of the largest casinos in the United States. In the early 1990s, they opened as small bingo and slots facilities run by two Native American tribes, the Mohegan (of Mohegan Sun Resort and Casino) and the Mashantucket Pequot (of Foxwoods Resort Casino). Today, these vast facilities have sprawled well beyond their original boundaries and both are all-inclusive, family-friendly resorts with an abundance of non-gambling entertainment options, ranging from concerts and comedy shows to shopping, ice skating, and golf. That is not to say that gambling is not the primary draw for most regular visitors, including older adults. Both facilities house over 3,000 slot machines, hundreds of table games, designated poker rooms, and race books, in addition to selling state lottery tickets in a variety of forms. Foxwoods also boasts the largest bingo hall in the United States with 3,600 seats and a minimum of three games daily. Senior gamblers enjoy all these games, but generally slot machines and bingo are the most popular, as they are easy to understand, low-pressure, and fast-paced (Chapple and Nofziger 2000; Munro 2003). This was reflected in my participants as well, with three playing poker exclusively, one dedicated to craps, and the remainder spending their time on slots or the occasional bingo game.

For each of my participants, regardless of his or her preferred game, the casinos offered valuable opportunities to be busy and make plans. The promotional calendars mailed out by Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods each month provided physical reminders of things to look forward to, and always presented

another chance to potentially win big next time. Casino visits had become a way to 'get something on the books' and avoid staying home again, succumbing to the monotony of daily routines. With the variety of events and activities offered, a single facility could be transformed into an entire day's worth of entertainment, socialization, meals, errands, and even exercise. Older adults are keenly aware of the stigma associated with being a 'shut-in' and finding oneself cut off from the outside world (Buch 2015, 2017). This fear was especially acute for my participants in their eighties and nineties who were less mobile and had experienced the passing of spouses and relocation of children. Maintaining a schedule and having upcoming plans helps to stave off loneliness and brighten one's outlook on the future, but it also reflects the 'active' component of the active aging paradigm. Activity is a generalized term, and each of my participants interpreted it differently, defining activity in the context of their individual interests, physical abilities, and financial limitations. Regardless of *how* activity was invoked, the underlying importance of *doing* rather than idling, *going* rather than staying, and *playing* rather than watching was frequently reiterated. In the following sections I draw on my observations, field notes, and interviews to situate the mega-casinos as valuable places for older adults to fulfill their desires for busyness, activity, and potential in late life.

Aging in Places

Many age scholars have observed the ways in which physical places develop or change in significance during late life (Rowles and Bernard 2013; Stafford 2009; Vesperi 1985). Often these places are valued because of the connections to family or association with memories, or because they are meeting places that allow community interactions and support. In her seminal ethnography on a Jewish Center, Barbara Myerhoff (1980) described in moving narrative accounts the way this institution facilitates connections, social life, and a shared sense citizenship for its members. Members of the Center were united by a sense of mutual history and the cultural, ethnic, and religious identities of Judaism. Identification with a group, especially a group with a shared sense of place, is becoming critically important in light of economic uncertainty and the increased mobility that accompanies it. In his discussion of 'lifestyle migrants' in northern Michigan, Brian Hoey (2010) highlights this desire in workers and retirees who relocate to find a greater feeling of community in contrast to the demands of corporate life: "Under current economic conditions and imperatives, people are expected to live in a perpetual state of becoming. This may lead to a crisis of individual identity not easily remedied by jobs in the contingent workforce. Relocating to personally meaningful geographic places becomes the basis for defining self-identity within narratives essential to personhood" (238). Yet even the most generic of public settings can attain significance, becoming 'third places': not home or work but other facilitators of sociability, such as McDonald's restaurants or auction houses (Stafford 2009). These third places are sites of activity, and often exist within geographic areas of personal meaning.

Since their opening nearly three decades ago, the two mega-casinos I observed had become, through a combination of marketing strategies and convenience, valuable places in the lives of older adults in the region. The abundance of activities available in one location is 'too good to pass up,' as Nick and Venus explained to me over coffee one morning. "There's always something going on, something new to try," Venus said excitedly. They enjoyed looking for new machines to play, taking advantage of gifts and coupons, and chatting with other seniors at the food court. The casinos, eager to fill their vast gaming floors during the slow workday hours, view seniors as the ideal demographic solution to this problem. Every Monday, as part of a seasonal promotion (branded 'Forever Young' Mondays by Mohegan Sun) adults over 60 could get a free coffee and pastry at many casino cafés. This morning gathering was known as the Senior Coffee Club, and I often met participants there. The t-shirt giveaway from the opening vignette was yet

another seasonal promotion that occurred every Friday throughout the summer, generally the slowest time of year. These events acted as 'filler' activities, or ways to spend time at the casinos without spending any more money, even if it was just time in line to pick up a gift. Over the course of this project I began to see the importance of the casual but meaningful interactions between the older guests coming to take advantage of these promotions, and often the topics discussed were quite personal, such as health concerns or the loss of a spouse. That is not to say that the relationships were particularly intimate, nor did they often result in friendships that extended outside the casino walls, but it is precisely this background neutrality—the shuffle of comings-and-goings, constant cycle of activities, and unwavering functionality of the space—that made the casinos valuable 'third places' for seniors outside the home.

These facilities are unique, both among other entertainment options as well as in the very nature of their design and construction. They never close, never lose power (despite seasonal snowstorms and hurricanes), are climate-controlled, and, unlike other institutions specifically dedicated to senior activities, one could make a whole day of a casino trip. Many participants expressed distaste at the thought of going to a senior center because it is an age-exclusive setting. Tim, a retired delivery driver and regular poker player in his sixties, chuckled when I asked him if he ever went to the senior center. "I'm old, but I'm not old-old," he said. "I could never get into Zumba or whatever that is they do over there." His laughter was accompanied by a dancelike gesture, emphasizing his disinterest. Interestingly, his daughter worked with senior services for the state, and would occasionally come play poker with him on her day off. Many senior centers even run bus trips to the casinos, though several center employees I spoke to seemed to hold them in poor regard, reflecting media and popular discourse about older visitors overspending on gambling. Tim strongly disagreed with this attitude. "Yeah, but you know what, they're all bingo players. A lot of them just come up to play bingo, or slots. They're 70, 75, and they are living now, you know, they got money and they want to spend it and enjoy themselves. I don't think there's anything wrong with that." Tim's comments are revealing on several fronts. By noting that these older gamblers are "living now" and have the right to spend their retirement participating in activities they enjoy, he places emphasis on the positive experiences that can be had at the casino, rather than dwelling on potential risks or losses. Despite his daughter's career in senior services, he is situating elder-exclusive settings as undesirable or a 'last resort'; the casino is, for Tim, the less-stigmatized of the two facilities, and he can clearly empathize with people choosing to spend an afternoon at the slots instead of resigning themselves to 'official' places of aging.

The all-inclusivity of the casino experience actually parallels many of the characteristics of elder-friendly communities. They are accessible to people with physical disabilities, provide an age-diverse environment, are safe and secure, and promote physical and mental stimulation (Peace 2013). Some of my participants had even experienced medical emergencies at the casino and were appreciative of the rapid ambulance response times and availability of trained personnel. Hank and Jeannie, regulars for the Monday promotions, were playing slots when Hank had a heart attack: "Thank God we were there, the floor people were so fast to come help. If we were at home who knows how it would've turned out," Jeannie recounted. The security staff at Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods (and indeed most other large casinos nationally) are trained to use defibrillators if a cardiac arrest is suspected, and both tribes maintain their own EMT services and ambulances in case of emergencies on site. In contrast to pervasive ideals about aging-in-place, for Jeannie, home was the *worst* place to be should a serious medical issue arise.

Although the couple's lifelong home was only blocks away from several of their children, the demands of work, grandchildren's after-school sports, and evening homework meant that their family had become less involved and visits were less frequent. The feeling of being 'cut-off' from outside activities intensified when Hank gave up driving. Jeannie, having never acquired a driver's license, was now

completely dependent on other kin to complete errands and keep appointments. During our interviews, they stressed to me the importance of their Monday casino trips for their well-being. "What else do we have to do?" she asked me. "It's something to look forward to each week. Without it, our lives would just be the supermarket, doctor's appointments, and the TV." She spoke sadly. "It's some excitement in the week, you know," added Hank. "Something to get out of the house and *do*."

Participation in the activities of public and private spaces, such as grocery stores, libraries, shopping malls and sporting events is emphasized as part of 'successful' or active aging and helps people feel 'themselves,' or a whole person. The ability to carry out these mundane activities independently becomes highly valued during advancing age and thus the settings for these actions are, too, valuable and support feelings of being a whole person in the individualized, Western sense. Mauss (1985) emphasizes the way that agency became inseparable from the person, and on his path to this conclusion he notes the importance of social roles in the constitution of the self. The role of an actively aging adult in the United States is one that necessitates both the ability to schedule and follow through on the day's plans and a setting in which they can unfold. In this way, the third-places of aging described by Phillip Stafford (2009) are key components of the lives of their customers, facilitating personhood through sociability, participation, and action. These casinos have become places to go and be active for area residents in old age.

Echoes of Work: Status and Skill Development

Most of the seniors I spoke to had dedicated their lives to a particular career, reflecting the patterns of work that, in many ways, defined this generation. Nick was an electrician who was employed by regional power plants since leaving the Navy in 1966. Tim had made a vocation out of delivery, starting out on a paper route and eventually working up to a driver for a major shipping and logistics company. Beth Anne, another regular for the Monday promotions, was a chemist for a local pharmaceutical manufacturing company and returned to the job for another 20 years after raising her six children. Then there was Sam, a retired financial manager for a prestigious research and technology firm. He left the company somewhat abruptly when new executives came in and began making decisions he felt were unethical.

> So when this new guy came in, to me, he was ridiculous. I mean he just was all out for himself. He could figure how many ways he was going to screw the company by taking more and more money. He didn't know anything. Wall Street liked him, so -- you know, so the board liked him. But he brought in his own people who didn't know anything, and they just really screwed up everything. So I wouldn't agree with some of the stuff he wanted to do. What I thought he was doing was, if not illegal, immoral. I knew I wasn't long for the company, but I didn't care. They gave me a good package. I got 28 months' full salary and benefits. And I was 55 at the time. So I was eligible for my pension, and I never got another job after that.

This meant that Sam was suddenly faced with an abundance of free time, with no grandparenting responsibilities or financial concerns, and he and his wife were in good health. For people like Sam, retirement can be an opportunity to develop new interests or throw oneself into an existing hobby with renewed fervor, and the pursuit of pleasure and passions is a recurring theme in ethnographic accounts of life after work in the West (Liechty, Yarnal, and Kerstetter 2012; Mikkelson 2017; Savishinsky 2000; Weiss 2005). The ability to develop a new skill at this stage of life is itself somewhat antithetical to cultural tropes about aging, and this belief is reflected in the English expression "Can't teach an old dog new tricks."

But Sam found that the mathematical and probability skills he had developed over his financial career were useful at the craps tables, where he spent one or two mornings a week shooting dice with other mostly retired older men: "My wife doesn't understand why I like to gamble. She says it's because I was a finance major and I know all about finance. And she says 'You know that the house is going to come out ahead of you.'" He smiles. "Yeah. But I just like playing the game." This sentiment reflects the importance of the activity of 'playing the game' over the actual monetary value of what is being wagered. The value of the craps tables, for Sam, is about the actions; by the time he takes his spot standing over the green felt of the field, he has participated in multiple actions that have increased the value of the overall experience. He has been greeted and recognized by casino staff as he is extended credit with which to make bets, supporting his identity as a valued (and valuable) player. He engages his mind and mentally prepares himself for the game, tabulating the stacks of the other players, observing the bets and dice, and using his skills to decide how and what to wager. He may lose or win, and this unpredictability adds excitement but also requires him to potentially adjust his strategy. The combination of all of these actions produces an *activity* that is dynamic, satisfying, and ultimately valuable to Sam, supporting Graeber's (2001) argument that value arises from the representation of actions to oneself and others. While money clearly has value to Sam, the activity of "playing the game" is a composite of many actions, and its value is only partially derived from the exchanging of money. The social recognition and accumulated status are thus not ancillary to the wins and losses, but they are important components of the entire activity of a casino visit.

During the course of a career, mastery of a skill set is often accompanied with its own set of rewards or incentives. Capitalism underscores personal agency as the mechanism through which improvement can generate payoffs, and workers are encouraged to put in the time and effort to earn bonuses, raises, or promotions. This system has been staggeringly effective at increasing corporate profits and it is therefore not surprising that casinos have found a way to replicate this in their own internal economies. All major casinos have player's club programs that use personalized magnetic cards to track customers' spending and time gambling. At Mohegan Sun, this comes in the form of the Momentum program, which is a tiered system for incentivizing gambling and maintaining customer loyalty. In an almost literal parallel of Graeber's theory of value, the very name *momentum* is a word indicating sustained action, and the names of the corresponding tiers are also verbs (Ignite, Leap, Ascend, and Soar). Customers earn points, called Momentum Dollars, in exchange for their time and money at machines or table games. The dollars can be used to purchase anything (aside from gaming) inside the casino, and there are even travel agencies and local car dealers that will accept the fictitious currency. Earning the next status level comes with its own set of rewards in the form of comped meals, tickets, or hotel stays, and in this way even money lost gambling can at least, as one participant put it, "go towards my Momentum."

Achieving certain status levels also opens up new VIP experiences, including a private dining area on the 33rd floor, where I joined Sam and his wife for brunch one Sunday morning. Sam was the only one in the group to have earned the highest status, but due to his generous retirement package and adherence to strict limits and strategies at the craps tables, his spending at the casino did not have a negative impact on their finances. The casino had become a recreational substitute for the things about work Sam enjoyed. He could use and perfect his statistical skills, receive acknowledgement for the time and energy he put in, and in exchange for the money lost at the tables he was compensated with concert tickets, high-end vacations, fine dining and the occasional spa day for his wife.

Of course, not all retirees are so financially secure as to play with thousands of dollars each week. It is inevitably true that player's club systems do lead to overspending for some, and potentially a serious addiction, as Schüll (2012) reveals in Las Vegas casinos. For my participants, the 'free' gifts and promotions

discussed earlier that are offered to lower-level players became a good reason to get out of the house, and provided something to do *besides* gamble at the casino. The points system designed to boost corporate profits is actually co-opted by these retirees as a way to sustain important elements of the person and engage in enjoyable activities that add value to their lives. By developing and practicing skills, receiving status through participation, and filling empty days on weekly calendars, older adults who visit casinos are able to live up to the expectations of active aging that might otherwise be out of reach or undesirable. The mega-casino experience differs significantly from person to person, but the diversity of activities available within this single institution contribute to its wide appeal and gives a deeper meaning to participants' comments that there are 'so many things to do.'

One-Stop Shopping and Independence

Having an abundance of activities available is only one arm of the active aging model; having the physical, economic, and social means to participate in them is equally critical. The values of independence and self-sufficiency are defining values of the United States, and these values are evinced in recent policy and fiscal decisions by the government regarding pensions and healthcare. The ongoing reduction of social services for the elderly has led to an emphasis on market solutions that can facilitate self-care and urge personal responsibility rather than dependence on state assistance or support (Estes and Associates 2001). These products and services are oriented towards adapting the home to changing physical needs, enabling self-administration of routine medical care, and making household tasks and errands more manageable. In her study of home care in Chicago, Elana Buch (2013) reveals that it is through this facilitated sense of independence that personhood can be sustained for elderly residents. The aging population in the United States is preoccupied with losing their independence and becoming a burden on kin, especially adult children (Portacolone 2011). This concern was voiced by several of my participants, most notably by Beth Anne, the retired chemist, and Judy, a former hair-dresser who had just turned seventy. Both women were widows and had some serious medical issues. Beth Anne suffered a stroke several years earlier (while at a casino, interestingly) and still had some difficulty reading and remembering words. Judy was on dialysis thrice weekly and went to the casino on her free days. She and her late husband never had any children, and she was without family in the area excepting one cousin, whom she hated to bother but sometimes drove her to appointments if she was not well enough to do so herself. Beth Anne was a mother to six children and many grandchildren, who were, in contrast, often bothering her. She explained to me that one afternoon she had been late returning from some errands and missed one of her daughter's regular phone calls. When she arrived back home, she found her daughter standing in her entryway, terrified that something serious had happened. Beth Anne laughed about this story with minor irritation, saying with a sarcastic smile, "I've got a dinner this coming Monday night, and I've got to remember to tell her I won't be there when she calls this time." Unlike Beth Anne, Judy had to adapt to living alone, and found it a difficult transition.

> I still live in my own home. I'm still able to take care of the snow, the grass, and stuff like that. Other than that I'm fairly self-sufficient. I don't like to bother anybody. I've gotten pretty independent actually. It surprised me, because I've never really been alone. I've been married all my life. And now I've become somewhat of a loner. I was married for almost 37 years, and you had your own circle of friends with your mate, and things change when you're widowed. They really do. you become the third wheel, and I don't have a lot of the same friends that I used to have. I've made new friends. And you have to go on. But it's different in a way, because I never have been alone, and I didn't know how I was going to fare with it, and it was very scary in the beginning, because my husband took care of all

the financial things and everything, and I never wanted to be bothered with it.

The perceptions of independence for these two women were very distinct from each other, but for each, maintaining self-sufficiency and managing one's own schedule were crucial priorities and symbols of 'successful aging.' Both women took it upon themselves to plan outings and activities to keep the week full. Judy would visit the local senior center for bingo and a chair yoga class, and Beth Anne had weekly lunches with her sisters and participated in her homeowner's association. The casino was also a regular social activity and both women went at least weekly. Beth Anne came with a couple in her neighborhood for the Monday promotions: "Getting older is…" she trailed off with a sigh, "You have to fill your time some way. This is one thing I really look forward to once a week. We chat in the car coming up. We don't see each other from week to week. And we tell stories, it's just a good time." The importance of frequent activity is underscored, and the use of the expression 'fill your time' reveals Beth Anne's framing of time itself as 'empty' until given value by 'filling' it with important actions of one's independent choosing. Judy, however, had found another way to use the casinos to maintain her independence, by taking advantage of the Momentum status program and the dizzying and frankly unusual variety of shopping to be done in one place.

Mohegan Sun contains within it a wide assortment of retail shops. Aside from the expected range of luxury goods that are typical for this setting, you can also purchase gasoline, groceries, prepared foods, underwear, household appliances, cell phones, toiletries, and even power tools. Some of these items are available at standard mall-type stores, but the casino also has its own stores that sell a hodgepodge of commodities they think customers might need. The purpose of this is to encourage guests to shop with their earned Momentum dollars, keeping them in the casino longer and hopefully inciting more gambling, where the real profits are made. For Judy, this strategy was not so much a clever marketing move but a real convenience, as her dialysis trips were extremely time-consuming and made it difficult to complete all her necessary errands. Since she already came to the casino to gamble on several of her free days, she accumulated Momentum dollars and used these to put gas in her car, pick up some aspirin, and stock her freezer with shrimp and steaks, all at the same location. Even when money was tight at the end of the month and she refrained from gambling, she would come to the casino just to do her errands.

> I go into the shops every once in a while, and I've got a lot of points. So I've lately been shopping, and I hate to shop. I'm not a shopper at all. But I lost a lot of weight with my kidney disease. So last year I realized, I don't have any clothes that fit me. And I just can't afford to go out and buy a whole new wardrobe, but I went into the shops here and got one. Now I go in there all the time. I didn't have the Internet. My friends say, 'You should get an iPad. You should get a computer.' So I went into the store here, and I bought my iPad. I bought a couple of vacuums. I also like to get stuff for my cousin who does things for me, and my friends. I take them out to eat up here, and things like that. So the points… You know, I spend money gambling, but at least I'm getting something out of it. Because the points add up, and they don't go away if you don't spend them. So I have spent a lot in there on things that I normally probably would not have bought otherwise. And I get gas, I haven't bought gas at a gas station in almost five years now.

One could easily critique this tactic by arguing that if she did not spend the money gambling, perhaps she could afford to shop for the things she needed elsewhere. This critique could also be leveraged against any expensive (but socially approved) hobby of retirement, such as exotic travel or golf. But this is beside the point for Judy, and indeed for all my participants. They *are* going to gamble; it is an activity they enjoy, it provides them with mental stimulation, and gives them something to anticipate for the week ahead. The

mega-casino as a singular institution, even though not explicitly designed for retirees, aligns remarkably well with idealized social constructions of 'active' aging. In assessing the role of these facilities in the lives of the older adults who increasingly frequent them, we must also consider the external cultural pressures that emphasize constant activity, recognizable and reciprocated social status, and independence. The active-aging rhetoric pushed by professional organizations, state governments, and the Western medical system offers only a template for a 'good life' post-retirement; the steps to attain it are more nebulous and determined by factors both within and outside one's sphere of control. My goal here is neither to praise casinos as perfect solutions to the problems of retirement nor to condemn them as risky financial disasters waiting to happen. Instead, I hope I have succeeded in describing the mechanisms by which these unusual facilities acquire value in the lives of older adults and contribute to their sense of self by presenting multiple possibilities that otherwise may have remained inaccessible.

Conclusions

The active-aging paradigm requires that elements of personhood developed over the duration of the life course persist into late life, despite physical or financial changes and limitations. Those elements are defined through the participation in systems of particular cultural value and supported by reciprocal recognition (Mauss 1985). For retirees in the United States, being busy, staying social, and remaining self-sufficient are simultaneously cast as both indicators of good health and means to stave off feared 'declines.' Despite their position in a moral grey area for many people, casinos have, for better or worse, become facilitators of these activities of aging. The need to remain constantly busy with socially and personally significant activities has become the gold standard for American retirement. The activities to busy oneself with must also align with a long list of value-laden priorities, from physical exercise to mental engagement to the development of skills and nurturing of passions. Being unable to fulfill these purposes is associated, accurately or otherwise, with 'letting go' and succumbing to the slow decay of ill health and true old age. Reminiscent of De Certeau (2011), casino-going retirees have managed to use *tactics* to secure myriad needs and desires within a single institution, even one that is actively strategizing against them in many respects. The casinos are massively profitable enterprises, and some of those profits are of course made off of local retirees through successful marketing schemes. In exchange, however, these regular customers feel that they receive value beyond their financial expenditure — not literal monetary value but the value produced by activity, as Graeber has discerned. If value is created through action, then there is certainly plenty of action at the tables.

Notes

i. Participant names have been changed to protect privacy.

ii. I wish to thank the management, staff, and Tribal Gaming Council of Mohegan Sun Resort and Casino for their assistance in facilitating site access for this research project. I would also like to thank the reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions as well as the editors for their valuable input.

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