

Review of Cahuilla Nation Activism and the Tribal Casino Movement

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***Cahuilla Nation Activism and the Tribal Casino Movement.* Theodor P. Gordon. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2018. 202 pages, \$32.95 paperback, \$94.95, ISBN 943859931.**

In this highly accessible book, anthropologist Theodor Gordon tackles settler society's deep deficit of knowledge about the tribal casino industry's legal and historical underpinnings. At the core of his analysis are the Cahuilla nations and homelands situated in present day Southern California, the "epicenter of the tribal gaming movement" (p. 19). The fourth title in University of Nevada's "The Gambling Series," this study contributes new texture to the embryonic field of tribal gaming studies and is an especially welcome addition to the meager corpus of California-based tribal gaming ethnographies. Yet this hardly describes the breadth of its scholarly relevance. As the author demonstrates, exercises in tribal nation sovereignty are historically situated and legally anchored within multiple contiguous, overlapping, and competing spheres of power. Thus, of necessity, the book transcends its Cahuilla moorings to shed clarity on the sociopolitical interactions and economic interdependence of multiple polities and "places"—including distinct, federally-acknowledged Native nations numbering in the hundreds, Native California, Indian Country, the U.S. settler colonial state, the State of California, and Southern California under Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. colonial rule. Gordon deftly unveils and explicates these matryoshka-like provinces of power in relation to the possibilities and limits they have posed over the long arc of Cahuilla nation activism.

Equal parts historical and contemporary ethnography of settler-colonial and Cahuilla interaction, the volume is informed by a mixed methods strategy incorporating participant observation; archival research; a Joshua Tree National Park ethnographic internship and research consultancy; semi-structured interviews with casino employees, patrons, and neighbors; and anonymous surveys administered in University of California, Riverside undergraduate classrooms. Turning to cognitive anthropology and psychology to frame his research agenda, the author interrogates the historical dissonance that underwrites a host of contradictory beliefs collectively held by settler society, as in their "shared desires to rationalize colonialism and resist or ignore any evidence that could challenge the belief that the United States is a just democracy that would never attempt to exterminate its own people" (p. 21). Those of us who teach in this field are all too familiar with the convoluted nature of this dissonance and the wealth of stereotypes that buttress its tenacious reproduction from one generation to the next. An example frequently encountered in the classroom is the incongruous and doubly-false assertion that Native Americans are "extinct," yet somehow also enjoying tax-free lives.

Organized in two parts, the first and lengthier portion is preceded by an exceptionally lucid introduction to sociopolitical concepts. Integrating the twin themes of settler colonialism and tribal nation sovereignty, Gordon brings his analysis into explicit dialogue with Native American Studies. Chapters 1-4 demonstrate that Cahuilla nations have always exercised political sovereignty in their engagements with one another, Spanish and Mexican colonizers, and the U.S. settler state. Sketching the historical contours of Cahuilla life from before the Spanish Conquest to the 1970s, Gordon foregrounds Cahuilla diplomatic interaction, economic adaptation, and cultural continuity against the everchanging backdrop of intruders, colonial subjugation and more recent federal Indian policies designed, but ultimately failing, to quash Native nationhood. Examples of settler colonial cognitive and historical dissonance are

illuminated throughout these chapters. Readers are reminded that Cahuilla creation stories tying contemporary people to ancestral place underwrite their nationhood, culturally and politically, and that contemporary involvement in the casino industry is more than simply an extension of traditional gambling. It is a recent instance of a much older Cahuilla tradition of selectively exploiting non-Native economic interests to ensure self-determination grounded in interdependence.

The last portion of the book delves into the evolution of the tribal gaming industry as an expression of sovereignty and domain of perpetual settler confusion, even in the “epicenter” of tribal gaming. In Chapter 5, the Supreme Court’s 1987 precedent-setting decision in *California vs. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians* takes center stage. This story has been told before, but it is narrated here with unparalleled clarity. Gordon’s didactic style and the measured pace with which he reviews the legal vagaries and jurisdictional challenges that ferried the case all the way to the Supreme Court are especially laudable, as is his distillation of the Court’s ruling: in domains (e.g. gambling) where states hold regulatory oversight, federally acknowledged Native nations may exercise the same regulatory powers within their reservation territory.

Gordon’s approach presumes that readers know little, if anything, about the terms and scope of tribal sovereignty. Chapter 6 presents data demonstrating the veracity of this assumption. Findings from interviews and surveys in the heart of Cahuilla country prove that even settler-descendants who live near and work in tribal casinos fail to comprehend the politico-legal foundations for tribal gaming. Indeed, some knowledge is often worse than none, as when casino-workers conflate gaming tribes with for-profit corporations. A thread running quietly throughout the text, that Cahuilla have always taken it upon themselves to educate settlers as a strategy to preserve sociopolitical and economic self-determination, is amplified here. A discussion of long overdue correctives to the State of California’s inaccurate and romanticized curriculum regarding Native peoples under colonization underscores how intentional and critical Cahuilla nations’ efforts to educate colonizers and settler society have been to their own survival. Contemporary iterations of this tradition are examined in a wide range of contexts, including powwows, political advertisements (especially during California Proposition campaigns), and casino architecture/interpretive displays. Notably, not all tribal governments choose to exploit this latter venue.

Cahuilla Nation Activism and the Tribal Casino Movement covers more interdisciplinary territory than its title can possibly convey. It will undoubtedly find a wide scholarly audience. But Gordon’s facility for translating murky concepts into easily legible terms (e.g. his modeling and explication of internal vs. external, and cultural vs. political sovereignty), and substantive reviews of Cahuilla colonial encounters, California Native genocide, and major milestones in federal Indian policy—including the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act—also make it eminently suitable for upper division and graduate seminar use. Its commitment to cognitive anthropology creates fertile space for supplementary readings in a more materialist theoretical vein, and for valuable pairing with articles that address issue of inequality that deserve additional scrutiny: racism and white supremacy, capitalism, unacknowledged tribes, and tribal disenrollment. The hopeful tone that pervades this text reflects the author’s conviction that truthful histories and accurate cultural representations can substantially alter settler attitudes and policy toward Indigenous peoples and nations. This flies in the face of much historical

experience. Still, one cannot help but root for this alternative world, where enlightened humanitarian impulses prevail over settler colonial violence and greed. If this book finds its way into even one generation of California and U.S. classrooms, that will certainly be a worthy step in the right direction.

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