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# CRITICAL gambling studies



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## Book Review

**Shalene Wuttunee Jobin. *Upholding Indigenous Economic Relationships: nehiyawak narratives*. UBC Press, 2023. 272 pp. ISBN:9780774865203.**

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In 2021, the Tsuut'ina and Stoney Nakoda First Nations took the Alberta government to court for establishing an online gaming site while requiring all land-based casinos to remain closed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tsuu T'ina Gaming Limited Partnership v Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Commission, 2023). Although this case was lost after an appeal in 2023 (Fairhurst, 2023), it raises important questions about sovereignty and the role of gambling as a tool of economic development and cultural empowerment for Indigenous nations in Canada.

This book review continues a conversation within the *Critical Gambling Studies* (CGS) journal about the political, cultural and economic impact of Indigenous gambling, including in a recent [special issue](#) on critical Indigenous gambling studies. The review introduces an important new book by Shalene Wuttunee Jobin, a Cree scholar who challenges us to consider the epistemological and ethical problems of compartmentalising Indigenous agency into siloed domains of culture, politics and economy. Instead, she reshapes the field of political economy to engage Indigenous critiques of extractivism through the lens of Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence. Seeking to put this important book into dialogue with work in the special issue of this journal, and elsewhere, I will outline some of the interventions of her book and explain how they extend existing academic conversations about Indigenous gambling in North America. (Nicoll, 2016). I focus on three themes in particular: 1. the importance of defining and illustrating the economic relationships that sustain a good living; 2. the lived experience of colonial dissonance; and 3. the connection between resource extraction and gendered political cultures. I conclude with reflections on how the book might assist scholars and others to approach the politics of gambling in ways that uphold Indigenous economic relationships.

Jobin's book enters an expanding field of research literature broadly characterised as 'critical Indigenous studies' over the past two decades (see Hokowhito, et al., 2020, UBC, 2023). Critical Indigenous studies (CIS) breaks with anthropological and area-studies

frameworks and methods for understanding Indigenous peoples. In particular, it refuses the objectifying research gaze as inextricable from colonial regimes of governance and centres Indigenous ways of knowing, acting and being. However, CIS also mobilises and renovates critical frameworks developed by non-Indigenous theorists, foregrounding political projects of Indigenous refusal and resurgence as ways of knowing and creating other worlds within and beyond the academy. Work within CIS can be more or less disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary but there is a common commitment to undoing extractive ways of being that settler-colonizing states have imposed through racializing regimes of property ownership and exploitation. This entails a fundamental shift away from Eurocentric distinctions used to govern human and nonhuman beings, as well as moving beyond liberal frameworks of recognition that has been used to ameliorate social and economic injustices both past and present (see Coulthard, 2017). CIS also unsettles the linear ways of knowing and understanding history and time more broadly on which concepts such as 'civilization', 'modernity' and 'development' depend.

Within the broader field of CIS, Jobin's contribution is specifically in the area of political economy. She explains Critical Indigenous Political Economy (CIPE) as "... an approach through which to examine not only the ways in which Indigenous peoples have been affected by ... settler colonial processes, but also Indigenous peoples' challenges to ... forces that try to reconstitute them or attempt to make them disappear legally, socially, or politically" (2023, 38-39). One of the book's accomplishments is Jobin's *relocation* of how the economic sphere should be thought in relation to political and cultural spheres of governance, most broadly conceived. Generating further research "... that uphold[s] the complexities and beauty embedded in Indigenous knowledges ... broadens the discussion on the economy to include nature's economy and the sustenance economy based on relations to human and nonhuman beings" (2023, 39).



The form and the content of Jobin's book work together to demonstrate that it is impossible to rethink Indigenous political economy in place without understanding the beauty and complexities of *nehiyawiwîn* (Creeness). This, in turn, requires readers not only to reconsider our preconceptions about governance, politics, culture and economy in light of Jobin's demonstration of their intersections through *nehiyawak* art and oral narratives: it also requires us to take time with the Cree language through which these intersections are conceptualised and lived. Jobin provides an explanation of Cree syllabics and a glossary to assist readers in a journey that, if taken, will reorient our understanding and experience of an economic system in which activities such as trade, diplomacy and gifting are embedded in Indigenous knowledges of place and peoples.

Foregrounding *nehiyawak* narratives enables Jobin to develop new methods for understanding the relationality that, arguably, sustains all political economies. These methods include beading, stories, and dreams manifesting concepts from Cree language which structure the book's argument. They extend beyond auto-ethnographic approaches by demonstrating how relationships do not just produce a self but are embedded in the everyday processes which enable a book to enter the world. In this context, Jobin refers to time spent on writing retreats and with human relatives which created a space to be with nonhuman relatives in the land and - in particular - the Saskatchewan River, a powerful motif throughout the book. As she writes:

The river has an ancient history, and yet it is still carving spaces in the present: so too, are the Cree and other Indigenous peoples. Like my people, this river has witnessed many changes and yet constants remain. In this work I draw from the time-honoured words of the past that still flow into our collective presents and futures (2023, 3).

The centrality of the nonhuman world to Jobin's account resonates strongly with an essay by Darrel Manitowabi, gambling theorist and co-editor of a special issue of [this journal](#) dedicated to Critical Indigenous Gambling Studies. Manitowabi introduces the *windigo* as a theoretical framework for understanding Indigenous engagement with gambling, past and present, with an account of a dramatic thunderstorm that interrupted his speech at an Anishinaabek community gathering.

There are other resonances with Manitowabi's approach to gambling research. As the editorial of the special issue explains:

... standard academic frameworks are a predetermined linear trajectory: an introduction, literature review, methods, discussion and

conclusion. In situ, Indigenous knowledge system frameworks often begin with a story and leave discussion and reflection in the place of the listener who is left to draw conclusions. In research settings, this is also the case; Elders or Indigenous knowledge holders may respond to questions with story and, in so doing, research becomes a poetic conversation with lived experience and memory embodied in responses (Manitowabi and Nicoll 2021b, i).

Reconsidering research as a poetic conversation led by Elders or other Indigenous knowledge holders suggests new and productive pathways for interdisciplinary gambling research beyond Indigenous contexts. As Julie Rak's [blog](#) and [article](#) in this journal demonstrate, stories and memoirs are powerful ways through which diverse experiences and institutional forces shaping gambling can be investigated (Rak 2021; 2022).

While Jobin does not engage specifically with gambling and casinos in her book, the ideas and examples woven throughout offer some new ways to understand the ways that Indigenous peoples in Canada make livings in ways that may support or unsettle their *nehiyawak* values and agency. Most of the examples of Indigenous involvement in extractive industries explored by Jobin are taken from the oil and gas sectors. However, as Peter Adams and other critical theorists have demonstrated, gambling over recent decades has become increasingly similar to natural resource extraction (Adams, 2007). This is especially true of the digital forms of gambling that enabled gambling industries to be dominated by electronic gaming machines from the last 20th century. While it is impossible to do justice to the richness of Jobin's evidence and arguments in this short review, I will draw out three contributions that I see as especially useful for understanding Indigenous gambling and gambling, more broadly.

The first is the importance of defining and illustrating the economic relationships that sustain a good living, the second is the lived experience of colonial dissonance and the third is the connection between resource extraction and gendered political cultures.

Jobin demonstrates how changing economic conditions, which opened territories to settler-colonial regimes of trade and property, have affected the capacity of Indigenous people in Canada to live the good life that previous subsistence economies, which included intracontinental trade and gifting ceremonies, afforded. She shows how concepts such as the economy and the state can work ideologically to obscure the fundamental relationality of people, place and labor: 'the relationships we have to the land, people, and other beings create and co-create who we are as individuals and as peoples'

(2023, 25). To shift from a neoliberal model of Indigenous self-determination based on capitalist extractive principles, it is necessary to uphold Indigenous principles that sustain a robust and healthy sense of 'Cree livelihood'. Colonial dissonance describes a 'disconnect between norms of behaviour and lived practices', and can occur 'if one cannot live norms related to relationships between Cree people and the natural environment' (142). Jobin demonstrates how colonial dissonance becomes exacerbated by toxic gender norms that political cultures shaped by extractive industries encourage (96). She draws on a book by Metis Elder, Elmer Ghostkeeper (2007), which documents his community's shift from a subsistence economy to enter into a contract with an oil field company:

The result for [him] was dissatisfaction so intense that it motivated him to revitalize his repressed traditional world view... Ghostkeeper decided to live with the land once again... However, for him this did not mean a complete rejection of Western scientific knowledge or Western economic practices [but] a continual critical and reflective approach, thoroughly examining how decisions and actions will affect the roles and responsibilities that Indigenous peoples hold as central to their identities (Jobin 2023, 90-92)

I will conclude with some reflections on how these insights might assist in understanding and navigating the politics of Indigenous gambling through the lens of relationality.

I've argued elsewhere that 'enjoyment' is a key value in the government of gambling and the government of resources in settler-colonizing nation states (Nicoll 2016, 2019). Arguments in favour of deregulating gambling industries to subsidize taxation shortfalls have often emphasised the importance of non-interference with the enjoyment of recreational gamblers. In practice, this has led to 'responsible gambling' policies including self-exclusion and education campaigns about the risks of gambling excessively. A growing body of literature exists that demonstrates the failure of 'responsible gambling' to minimise gambling related harms for individuals and communities. This body of literature is paralleled by literature – especially by Indigenous feminist scholars – who (like Jobin) demonstrate the relationship between violence to the nonhuman world inflicted by national and transnational resource extraction projects and violence against the bodies of Indigenous women, girls and 2 spirit people. Jobin's book highlights the tension between the structural impacts of resource extraction economies and the capacity to fully enjoy a Cree livelihood.

As with gambling revenue sharing arrangements in Canada, land-use agreements and shareholding arrangements with First Nations have become an

important way for governments and fossil-fuel companies to continue economic relationships based on extraction from human and nonhuman beings. When the lens of enjoyment is applied, the power of extractive industries to shape the definition and experience of livelihoods becomes clear and it is no longer possible to understand Indigenous economic life and values in isolation from the larger climate in which they are diversely practiced, undermined and defended.

While Jobin's book explains and embodies what it means to uphold Indigenous economic relations from a Cree perspective, it also raises important questions about how non-Cree and non-Indigenous actors might contribute to or undermine this project. As the interdisciplinary field of Critical Gambling Studies begins to address these questions, it is valuable to return to Manitowabi's account of Indigenous casinos as expressions of the *windigo*:

In Algonquian oral history, the windigo is a mythic giant cannibal. The underlying meaning of the windigo is the consumption of Indigenous peoples leading to illness and death. One can become a windigo and consume others, and one must always be cautious of this possibility. I propose casinos and Indigenous-provincial gambling revenue agreements are modern-day windigook (plural form of windigo) (Manitowabi 2023, 113).

We see an example of this in the Tsuut'ina and Stoney Nakoda First Nations case against the Alberta government cited in the opening of this review. After benefitting from revenue generated by casinos up to the advent of COVID-19, the province created a new means of extracting revenues through its online gaming site, which left the gambling properties of these nations depleted.

The broader challenge that Jobin and Manitowabi pose to the state and commercial institutions that derive revenues from human and nonhuman beings on Indigenous territories is reconciling the value they offer to players, tax payers and corporate stakeholders with the enjoyment of Indigenous economic relationships. As we continue conversations about Indigenous and non-Indigenous orientations to gambling and gaming within *Critical Gambling Studies*, I hope that different ways of addressing this challenge will increasingly feature in the scholarship we publish.

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### **Author Details**

Since 2008 Dr Nicoll has published an academic monograph (*Gambling in Everyday Life*, Routledge, 2019) seven sole authored journal articles and book chapters and at least ten co-authored journal articles. The founding editor of the interdisciplinary international journal of *Critical Gambling Studies*, Dr Nicoll has supervised postdoctoral fellowships and graduate students on gambling projects and taught two courses at the UofA on the politics of gambling and the politics of Indigenous gambling and play. Dr Nicoll’s work on the politics of Indigenous gambling includes invited projects and a co-edited special journal issue with Darrel Manitowabi.