

Wagered Identity: Deviant Space & Performance in Poker

By Patrick Konesko

Abstract

For much of the last century, Americans have had a fascination with poker. Numerous folktales and, later, movies have worked to entrench romanticized conceptions of the game within popular culture. With the rise of televised play, the innovation of embedded cameras that allow home audiences to follow each hand, and the addition of expert commentators, popular enthusiasm has exploded. At the heart of this phenomenon is the “Cadillac” of poker—no limit Texas hold ’em. It is this game, with its exciting action, quick “swings,” and its emphasis on the practice of bluffing, that has been central to recaptured popular imagination. Along with this emphasis on deception (or, perhaps, because of it) the game play of no-limit Texas hold ’em is built on complex displays of gender, race, age, aggression, and timidity.

These performances, I argue, are part of a densely layered network of restored behavior and manipulated metacommunication. Relying on an exploration of Foucault’s theory of “heterotopia,” I posit a framework through which to explore the performances at work in poker and, ultimately, to analyze the way in which the cornerstone of poker, deception, is articulated through a process of continually deferred negotiation. Ultimately, I explore the possibility that the “deviant” practices encouraged by poker do not remain confined to the casino, but instead go through a process of transference, normalization, and reincorporation into the status quo.

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The Buy In:¹ *At the heart of a city built on distraction & hedonism, at the center of a casino complex built to awe and intimidate, there is an ostentatious room built to the same scale: the Caesar's Palace sportsbook. On one wall of this room, almost lost amidst the splendor, was the stately entrance of what was once the most impressive poker room in Las Vegas.*²

Numerous folktales and, later, movies have entrenched romanticized conceptions of poker within American popular culture. With the rise of televised play, the innovation of embedded cameras that allow home audiences to follow each hand, and the addition of expert commentators, popular enthusiasm for the game has exploded. Part of poker's popularity can be attributed to the way in which it interacts with fundamental aspects of American mythos and identity—it represents the egalitarian, the rags-to-riches narrative, the American spirit, and it is tied into deeply entrenched and romanticized notions of the frontier.³ The popularity of poker also stems from the excitement, the turns, and the skill required to decode the complex and highly performative nexus of identity construction and deception.

From Plato and Augustine, to Northbrooke & Gosson, to contemporary debates about violence and sexual content in video games, television, and film, Western criticism is replete with attacks on the

¹ "Amount of money required to sit in a game or enter a tournament; literally, the chips you buy to put into action" (McManus 477).

² In 2014, the Caesar's Palace poker room was moved elsewhere on the casino floor. The space previously occupied by the poker room now houses the OMNIA nightclub.

³ For more on the importance of poker in regards to these narratives, I recommend *Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker*, by James McManus.

manner, content, and potential danger of representation. The risk inherent in gambling has received similar scrutiny, particularly in terms of its potential for economic and moral bankruptcy. In this paper, I will apply an exploration of Foucault's theory of "heterotopia" to casino poker rooms in an effort to bring these two lines of criticism together and to define the representation of deviant identity that is central to professional poker. Ultimately, I will explore the possibility that the wide dissemination of the performance practices enabled by the "setting" of professional poker allows even amateur players to draw on, rehearse, revise, and ultimately normalize a range of "deviant" behaviors.

In this essay I will focus on one particular variety of poker: no-limit Texas hold 'em. There are several reasons for this choice. First, the attempt to explain and analyze multiple varieties of poker, all with unique strategies and performances, would take time away from the later points I am working to make. Second, it is the game most often associated with poker's rise in popularity and is the variety played during the Main Event at the World Series of Poker. Finally, in that it is "no limit," it is a game built on a foundation of violent swings and frequent bluffing. As such, it encourages a number of complex performances centered on identity construction, manipulation, intimidation, and deception. In Texas hold 'em the range of styles and methods of play and performance are as numerous and unique as the players themselves. As such, this essay can only hope to take the first steps in exploring them. In an effort to manage this topic, the focus of this paper will be on three prominent aspects of the game—location, deception, and identity performance/construction. It should also be noted that throughout the paper I extend the use of the word "professional" to incorporate poker rooms run by casinos and the players who frequent them.

The Blinds:⁴ *The space above this hallowed entryway was dominated by a rich golden colored recess, lit by a soft yellow light. It had only two decorations: an image of Caesar, adorned with a laurel crown and the word “poker” in high relief, back lit in deep red. Beneath, walnut doors opened into a brightly lit hallway, which was painted in light gold and studded with paintings by LeRoy Neiman. The hallway turned sharply away from the door, as if to hide the mysteries within. Even from the hallway, one sound dominates all others—the continual riffing of thousands of poker chips.*

Before approaching the larger issues of deception and representation, it is necessary to explore the spaces that structure and authorize these behaviors: casino poker rooms. Michel Foucault, in his “Of Other Spaces,” writes of “curious” locales, “which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault & Miskowiec 24). In contemporary society, these locales are places for individuals to engage in behaviors that are in some way divergent from the norm. By separating these deviant activities to inverted/other spaces, the status quo of society is not only preserved, but actually strengthened by the communal acknowledgement of otherness and deviancy. In that these spaces, called heterotopias, are defined by deviancy safely cordoned off from society, the immediate application of the concept to casinos should be clear.

⁴ “In hold ‘em and Omaha (also known as flop games), the mandatory bets posted by the player one to the left of the dealer (the small blind) and two to the left (the big blind, usually twice the size of the small)” (McManus 476).

Even when legal, gambling is often framed as a deviant or immoral activity. This comparison is furthered by the fact that, in direct inversion of the world outside of its walls, casinos are a place of seemingly unrestrained revelry. Fortunes are won and lost at alarming rates. Cocktail waitresses move from table to table in clothing more revealing than is common in the outside world, alcohol is consumed at prodigious rates, the experience of time is altered by a literal absence of clocks, brightly colored lights flicker and clash, there is an almost overwhelming soundscape of noises, both human and mechanical, and a different vernacular with unique slang and expressions is spoken. Casinos have an intense atmosphere of excitement, a tension composed of shared anticipation, hope, and hedonism—a sort of Bacchanalian communion. Perhaps most importantly, casinos allow, even encourage a person to shed his or her everyday identity. In the anonymity offered by the chaos and the tolerance afforded by the indulgence of deviancy, a player can, with a relative degree of safety, embody and explore identities that are otherwise contained to his or her private fantasies.

In an extension of Foucault's theory, I would like to suggest that heterotopias can be stacked with one—or more—existing inside of others. Inside of the elaborate environment of the casino exists the poker room, a smaller heterotopia inside of the larger.⁵ This heterotopia is one in which the rules of both the outside world *and* the larger casino are reflected and inverted. As in the case of the macro-heterotopia, the poker room has its own set of rules, its own etiquette, its own experience of time, and its own unique performances. In that it seeks to invert the rules of both the casino and the outside world, the deception encouraged by these spaces is perhaps the most significant trait of this “stacked heterotopia.”

⁵ In certain cases, there might be other stacked heterotopias included in the poker room, such as a tournament room or high stakes room.

In the poker room, the perception of time functions differently than in the larger casino—which functions differently than the world outside its walls. Foucault, in describing heterotopias, notes that they “are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies” (Foucault & Miskowiec 26). By way of example, he offers temporary heterotopias, such as festivals and fairgrounds. These places are set up, deviant activity ensues, and then they disappear, leaving societal norms and structures safely intact (Foucault & Miskowiec 26). While casino poker rooms are not as temporary as a festival, they do serve to manipulate a participant’s experience of time. As in the case of the macro-heterotopia, they exist “above time.” Wall clocks are generally non-existent, the room is open 24 hours, and players will often experience flow— they lose themselves in the action to the extent that everything else, including time, disappears (“What is Performance” 97). Beneath, there is another level of time, which is regulated more strictly than either the macro-heterotopia or the outside world. In tournaments, the stakes are often regulated by the clock. The administrators of the room will mandate increases in wagers according to specialized schedules. The decision time allotted to each player can also be controlled, and participants have the right to “call the clock” on players taking too long to decide. This happens even in cash games as some casinos enforce a regularly scheduled seat fee in which “rent” is collected at given intervals. In both cases, blinds are collected before each hand begins.⁶ Whether in a tournament or in a cash game, time is used as a form of regulation—if the players are trying to advance in a tournament by avoiding play, for instance, these increases work to force them out of the

⁶ “The money posted by the two players directly to the left of the button [dealer] before the cards are dealt, and the designation of the players posting it. There are two blinds, and the amount posted by the small blind is generally half the size posted by the big blind.” See Hellmuth 271.

game. Similarly, in cash games, both seat fees and blinds necessitate certain gains be made each hour, lest inactivity decreases the buying/betting power of the player.

Also relevant here is Foucault's consideration of access as an important feature of heterotopias. He notes that they "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault 26). Aside from the fact that they are generally separated in some way from the rest of the casino,⁷ casino poker rooms are also distinguished by the customs of the game. It is difficult to enter the space in any meaningful way without the required knowledge. In other words, though you can literally gain access to the space of the heterotopia with relative ease, and even, in many cases, wander through and watch the games, it requires special knowledge to be an initiate. One mistake that many new players make, for instance, is betting "out of turn." In addition to creating disorder and possibly confusing the dealer and the other players, this mistake can dramatically alter the course of the hand. By indicating an intention to bet or fold at the wrong time, it gives players who have yet to act more information on which to base their decisions. This often innocent mistake can cause confusion, cost money, and will generally earn the player reprimand from both the dealer and the other players. Repeated mistakes of this nature will generally result in the ejection of the player from the heterotopia.

At the center of this stacked heterotopia, in this place of inversion and deviancy, safely set aside from society, is the actual poker game. To play Texas hold 'em is to put everything at risk. A single misstep could mean losing all of your bankroll. To succeed requires both luck and skill, including many laudable traits ranging from intellect & strategic ability to

⁷ Sometimes the division is as simple as a rope encircling the area, sometimes, as in the above narrative, they are more fully closed off from the rest of the casino.

game theory and mathematics. It also requires traits generally frowned on in polite society, including manipulation, aggression, and deception. To execute these strategies, a player must be able to engage in a performative practice of identity revision which, as I will explore later in this paper, draws on a balance of social and artful performance to create a “deviant” identity that blurs the line between representation and reality.

Family Pot:⁸ *I had grown up with gambling. My father, a union representative, filled my eager brain with stories of high strategy and bluffing at the negotiating table. My grandfather, when he came to visit, would set up a table in the garage and tell my friends to run home and raid their piggy banks. Then he would teach us how to play poker. My earliest victories were against my friends. My first crushing defeats were against my grandfather. When televised poker exploded in popularity, I was in high school. The hours I spent watching seemed to me a far more practical (and certainly more exciting) education.*

The deviancy and danger of casinos, kept in isolation, might be understood as generally harmless. After all, heterotopias are set aside specifically to allow space for the safe exploration of such activity. It is important to note, however, that the characteristics, structures, and traditions of these stacked heterotopias are not necessarily confined to the casino itself. One major consideration, particularly in terms of my larger argument about the dissemination of this culture and these performances, is the relationship of home games, school sponsored events, online poker games, etc. to the established heterotopia of the casino poker room. In another extension of Foucault’s theory, I would like

⁸ “One with several players, sometimes everyone at the table, seeing the flop. Also called multiway action. Much more common in limit than in no-limit hold ‘em” (McManus 480).

to assert the possibility of a “heterotopia of transference.” Poker, particularly in the last decade and a half, has become a worldwide phenomenon.⁹ Television, movies, and the Internet have spread not only the rules of the game, but also the customs and performances that define it. I propose that because of these modes of dissemination, the heterotopia of the casino poker room can temporarily transfer to, for instance, a weekly home game.

Now more than ever before, home games are filled with “experts” who make sure all of the various customs are followed. When I was an undergraduate student, for instance, my friends and I held a game that imitated in every way possible the heterotopia of the casino poker room—it became an analogous heterotopia while the game was in session. Whereas my group of friends was generally loud and messy, the weekly game saw us huddled around a table, chips neatly stacked, volume kept to a minimum. As in a real casino, we used heavy weight chips, the blind schedule and house rules were posted, poker room etiquette¹⁰ was followed, and, in mimicry of televised poker, commentary was frequently given by “experts.” Even though these games were objectively “low stakes,” we played like it was the World Series of Poker—value bets, check raises, big bluffs, slow playing, etc.¹¹ When we were at the table we performed as the professionals perform; the rules of normal social life were inverted, time was shifted, deception was expected and, when it was all over, the transferred heterotopia evaporated—it became a basement once more.

⁹ The boom in popularity can be traced to the creation of hole cameras which, for the first time, made the game exciting for a TV audience. James McManus puts this critical moment as “the evening of March 30, 2003, with the Travel Channel’s first broadcast of the Five Diamond World Poker Classic at the Bellagio in Las Vegas” (320).

¹⁰ For an introduction to poker etiquette, see pg. 90 of Kevin Blackwood’s *Casino Gambling for Dummies*.

¹¹ For a comprehensive list of terminology, see pgs. 269-291 of *Phil Hellmuth’s Texas Hold ’em*.

This “evaporation” suggests a key feature of these transferred heterotopias: they are inherently unstable. Unlike in the casino poker room, small disruptions have the ability to rupture the heterotopia. In a casino poker room, if a player does something in gross inversion of the customs or rules, it remains a poker room. By the nature of the architecture, the authority of the casino, the presence of the professional dealer and pit boss, the security cameras, the strength of tradition, and, in the case of televised play, the additional monitoring, staff, and audience, it weathers the crisis and maintains its unique deviancy. Though the actual play might be disrupted, the oftentimes harsh enforcement of the rules serves to strengthen the deviant “norm” of the heterotopia.

The heterotopia of transference, however, lacks the rigid customs and regulatory power of the original heterotopia. The transferred heterotopia is only held together by the willingness of each participant to adhere to the culture of the original. If a disruption occurs in the transferred space, the unstable heterotopia will likely be ruptured—i.e. the basement will become just a basement once more. Once the disruption is sorted out, the heterotopia can be re-transferred—but it will be a new manifestation, which requires a new compact on the part of the players. Finally, the stability of these transferred heterotopias is challenged by their inherent subjectivity—the inclusion of house rules, for instance. In short, these transferences are not facsimiles, but rather adaptations of the original heterotopia. Temporary as they may be, however, these adaptations seek to enable and encourage the same types of deviant identity performances fostered by the casino poker room.

These “heterotopias of transference” are not unique to my group of friends. Enthusiasts all around the world temporarily create these heterotopias based solely on the versions they watch on TV, read in a book, or have experienced in the casino. Even if every participant in the

transfer has not seen or taken part in the original heterotopia, it only takes one initiate who has knowledge of the original to guide the manifestation. Even at a charity event or a free university tournament where the prize is a cafeteria coupon, the boundaries go up, the atmosphere changes, and time slows—a heterotopia of transference is formed.

The Flop:¹² *If a player managed to navigate the city, traverse the casino, pass through the sports book, and still had the courage remaining to tread the length of that hallway, s/he would be greeted by a massive room painted in shades of cream, adorned with flat screen TVs, and filled with richly appointed tables. At each of these tables, men and women sat hunched over with varied, and calculated, levels of attention. Some wore hooded sweatshirts. Others wore sunglasses or listened to mp3 players. Some, the scariest, eschewed all such affectations. These carefully curated personas were betrayed, however, by each player's eyes.*

The heterotopia of the poker room, whether real or transferred, enables a wide range of representational and performative practices. More than that, however, these “other” spaces allow, even encourage, special types of deviant performances, of a blend between social and artistic forms of identity. The balance of this essay will begin the process of exploring *how* these performances function in poker and what the implications of these performances, and their transference to everyday players, might be.

At its most basic, the performance of professional poker can be understood as made up of what Richard Schechner terms “restored behavior.” These behaviors, which are “physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first time; that are prepared or rehearsed,” are

¹² “First three community cards, exposed simultaneously” (McManus 480).

explained by Schechner as bits of film strip—the individual cuts them apart and reassembles them as needed (“What is Performance” 29). For Schechner, these restored behaviors are the basic building blocks of everyday performances of identity, ritual, and entertainment. Though poker players certainly work to create a persona or character, the nature of the game demands that such a character draws, at least in part, on the player’s everyday identities and restored behaviors. Further, in that the effective application of poker technique requires performances to be authentically embodied, these restored behaviors are consciously drawn on in the performance of professional poker.

As Texas hold ’em has risen in popularity, it has highlighted a number of experts/celebrities. The status of the sport and the notoriety of this select group of performers has in turn spawned a number of “how-to” books for the budding player. In these guide-books, and in live clinics hosted by these personalities, the game is broken down into consumable bits of restorable behavior. In other words, these resources teach players the range of possible behaviors that might be applied in any given situation. So, theoretically, a well-read poker player can sit at a table and retrieve bits of strategy as the situation requires. Once memorized, these behaviors can be, as Schechner notes, “worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed” (“What is Performance” 35). In poker, a player must have rehearsed, and mastered, the basic “filmstrips” of poker strategy and identity performance before he or she can manipulate them during key moments of play.

Reductively, the basis of advanced poker strategy is being aware of these basic performed behaviors so as to be able to understand their interaction during play—how they are interpreted, reacted to, and how both sides adapt and reconfigure their performance. Beyond merely

recognizing restored behavior, however, a player must be able to interpret the sincerity of these performances and the meaning of the metacommunications exhibited by his or her opponent. In his "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," Gregory Bateson explores how metacommunication functions in human interaction, and the ways in which humans are capable of picking up on and interpreting the mood-signs of other human beings. As an example, metacommunication is what allows playful wrestling with a friend. Whereas the action is denoted as threatening, the framing of the situation and metacommunication between the two allows for the message, "this is play" to be understood. In describing this phenomenon, Bateson notes that as part of interpreting these messages, the individual must learn "to recognize that the other individual's and its own signals are only signals which can be trusted, distrusted, falsified, denied, amplified, corrected, and so forth" (Bateson 141). When performing in professional poker, these darker aspects of metacommunication rise to the fore.

While real world identity is multi-faceted and mutable, there is a general sense of sincerity. Just as my performances of identity can be understood as being truthfully "me," I can rely on the sincerity of the identity performances of those I encounter. In everyday life, in other words, it is possible to make the claim that metacommunication and identity is generally sincere. The message "this is play" can, in theory, be trusted to be true. In poker, however, the player works to manipulate his or her performance of identity and the transmission of metamessages so as to adversely influence the play of an opponent. This is not, of course, a one-sided manipulation. The expectation is that each player is performing bits of restored behavior in an effort to send an insincere metacommunication. As mentioned previously, the ability to perform an insincere metacommunication relies upon how the event is framed. A frame, for Bateson, is a psychological concept that defines or delimits a set

of meaningful actions (Bateson 147). In a game of Texas hold 'em, there are multiple frames nested one on top of another. These frames include the stacked heterotopia of the poker room and the performances authorized by them. These contextual frames, along with the basic purpose of gambling (to win), call into question metacommunications which, in the outside world, could be relied upon as sincere.

This consideration of metacommunication in poker is lacking in one critical area. What about those communications that cannot be controlled? These communications, which Bateson gives as “involuntary mood-signs” (Bateson 142), play a significant part at the poker table. These mood-signs can manifest in infinite variety—from micro-expressions, to shifts in posture, to checking and re-checking cards, playing with chips, fidgeting, etc. Even with rehearsal, these tells often remain outside of conscious control. This is why many players wear hooded clothing and sunglasses. The issue becomes still more complicated when interpretation and strategy are added. What do these signals mean? Which are involuntary and which are layered on intentionally by the other player?

The significance of these stacked heterotopias and nested frames is further complicated by the transference of these structures to the home poker game. As I will explore further in the next two sections, the manifestation of these spaces and the deviancy supported by them are met by frames concerning everyday identity and relationships with family and friends.

Poker Face: *Whether half-hidden behind sunglasses, gazing at the TVs, or counting the brightly colored stacks in front of them, each pair of eyes flickered—from one player to another, to the cards, to the dealer, and back again. Occasionally, a player would utter “all-in.” The eyes would stop*

flickering and the fiction of nonchalance would disappear. There would be a shared intake of breath, then stillness. Each player waited for two words: "I call."

The combination of the poker room heterotopia with the huge range of performances authorized by it creates a complex and ever shifting nexus of interpretation and uncertainty. Indeed, this uncertainty is part of what makes poker so exciting to play and/or watch. The efficacy of these performances, however, moves beyond that of mere entertainment. These spaces, the performances central to them, and the methods of identity construction fostered by them have made their way into our living rooms and everyday interactions.

Part of the reason for this incursion is the way in which poker performance draws on and blurs both social and artful performance. In his "Street Fairs: Social Spaces, Social Performance," Jeffrey Mason charts a continuum between these two terms. In doing so, he suggests that social performance is spontaneous, does not imply representation, and offers open access to spectator and performer alike; while artful performance is more highly structured, it generally relegates the spectator to a passive state, and implies representation (Mason 303-305).

As suggested by Bateson, the dangers of representation can be at least partially neutralized through framing—if the event is self-consciously framed as play, as make-believe, as entertainment or art, the fears of those concerned with representation are, perhaps, assuaged. The heterotopia of the poker room, however, authorizes a myriad of deviant social behavior by drawing on both extremes of Mason's continuum. Rather than being self-consciously framed as performance, these spaces allow the "real" social personality of the poker player and his or her artful performance as a poker player to merge. The poker player is

simultaneously his or herself and a heightened version of that personal identity, carefully structured and focused on manipulation, aggression, and deception.

At a poker table, the combination of artful, closed off, representative performance also comes with an invitation, a challenge, to participate, to become both spectator and spectated, both player and played. By extension, when poker players watch the game on ESPN, buy the strategy books, and, ultimately, rehearse these restored behaviors, they also rehearse a blend of artful and social performances of identity, of drawing on and manipulating what would otherwise be everyday “real” identity—all with the intent of deceiving his or her opponent.

All In:¹³ *I had “trained” extensively with the strategy books, in my home games, and at the local casino. On the first couple of tries, however, I didn’t make it past the knowing smirk on Caesar’s bust. To a young poker player, this door was entry to a club, one of rules and risk, one in which you could lose all of your hard-earned bankroll in moments. In his triumphal garb, Caesar represented the divinity of Jupiter. In my khaki shorts and Margaritaville t-shirt, I was little more than a scared kid. Only on my third attempt did I actually sit, terrified, at a table.*

The stacked heterotopia of the casino poker room authorizes a myriad of deviant behaviors and performances. In particular, this “other” space encourages deception. The popularity of the Texas hold ‘em has helped celebrity players, already versed in blending their social and artistic identities, disseminate these strategies through classes and books. By replicating the customs and techniques of the game, players at home can manifest their own transferred heterotopia and, along with it, the

¹³ “Having all your chips in the pot” (McManus 475).

semblance of a safe space, held separate from society, in which to explore their deviant proclivities. Inside of that heterotopia, supposedly held safely at bay, players work to learn and replicate the deviant strategies of the great poker masters. And, like those celebrity players, this requires authenticity—the character of a given player cannot be held totally separate from his or her everyday identity. In short, each player will draw on and manipulate his or her authentic performances of identity in an effort to deceive. Unlike at a casino poker table or a professional tournament, however, these players are not deceiving a soon to be forgotten stranger across the table. Instead, they are deceiving family members, bosses, and friends.

Theoretically, in that the transferred heterotopia is a manifestation of the actual space, the structures and social functions might be assumed to carry over as well. The heterotopia is transferred and the deviancy ensues. After the game is complete, the heterotopia evaporates, conceivably taking with it the authorization and efficacy of the behaviors it had previously authorized.

As discussed above, however, these spaces can rupture. Rules and customs can be breached and, without the formal structures and enforcement offered by the casino, the protected “otherness” of the space can collapse. It is conceivable that such a collapse could be triggered by something less formal than betting out of turn or even cheating. Just as the players balance a performative identity that finds its authenticity in the everyday performance of self, the transferred heterotopia can only remain stable so long as the reality of the space and relationships is held at bay. In other words, the heterotopia could be breached by the dramatic reintroduction of the real: by the fact that you just deceived your best friend, your significant other, your boss. In addition to drawing on the authenticity of everyday identity, the player is likely to draw on everyday

relationships, interactions, memories, etc. If, in such a situation, a player is able to deceive an opponent not just based on observations from the game but also a lifetime together, it is possible that it is not only money at stake.

If such an interaction were to rupture the transferred heterotopia, does the imagined space simply disappear? Do the performances authorized by them evaporate at the same time? Or, in the absence of the protective heterotopia, does this deviancy bleed into the fabric of the status quo? Does the nominally artful performance of identity expected in poker find its way into everyday life? Rather than reinforcing the stability of the status quo through the othering of deviance, do these performances instead serve to normalize those behaviors? If this deviance is normalized, what greater implications might this have on our everyday interactions? On our relationships? On a society in which a significant percentage of the population is engaging in these practices?

The Showdown:¹⁴ *Though terrified, I was determined. I was confident that I had mastered the skills. Or, rather, I thought I had. That first time in Caesar's was the shortest, and most embarrassing, game of poker I have ever played.*

To help in approaching these questions, I turn briefly to Harry J. Elam, Jr.'s concept of "reality check." In his article, "Reality █," Elam explores the "moment that traumatically ruptures the balance between the real and representational. It is a moment that, in the dissonance, generates demands that the relationship between the real and

¹⁴ "Turn over your pocket cards to compare the strength of your hand with the hands of other players still in the pot. At the *showdown*, after all bets are completed, the best five-card poker hand wins" (McManus 486).

representation be renegotiated” (173). Though Elam’s framing is intended to address major issues of race, culture, and reform, the process it suggests can be productively applied to the progression of individual hands, entire games, and tournaments, as well as to the questions implicit in the rehearsal and performance of such deviant identities.

In the above discussion of interpreting and reinterpreting the insincere and involuntary metamessages of the opponent, there is a sense of the perpetual. As delineated by the heterochronic function of time in the poker room, the game, and therefore all of the framing that goes with it, lasts until the game itself is stopped—even if one player gets up, he or she is replaced by another and the game continues. Between inception and closure, however, there is never a moment of completeness. The closest that the players come to this is the “reality check” of showing cards. Contrary to the expectation established by televised games, this does not happen every hand. In most cases, a player will fold before the final presentation of cards. In these situations, the player with the winning hand has no obligation to show his or her cards.

When cards are shown, however, there is a “reality check:” a point of pause in which the reality of the actual hand is interjected into the speculative back-and-forth of metacommunication. The sudden revelation of the actual cards demands, as Elam writes, “that the relationship between the real and representation be renegotiated” (173). In the case of Texas hold ’em, however, it is not a permanent renegotiation, but a new piece of information that affects the next set of metamessages between the players. If a player has been caught bluffing, for instance, subsequent hands will be affected—one player might now know the involuntary mood signs (tells) exposed by a reality check. Similarly, the player who was caught bluffing might use that same information in future hands, in an attempt to trap other players. With the exception of the final few tables at

televised poker tournaments (in which a player might go back and watch the “hole-card” cameras from a certain hand), this process continues beyond the game. Even if a player eventually discloses his or her cards from a certain hand, there is no assurance that he or she is telling the truth and no guarantee that the disclosure is not part of his or her greater strategy.

In the case of the transferred heterotopia, ruptured through infraction and/or the sudden reemergence of real world relationships, Elam’s “reality check” can offer a useful framework for exploring the real-world implications of poker’s emphasis on performative deceit. Central here is the fact that many of these home games are going to take place in the otherwise familiar and nurturing frame of the domestic residence. According to Elam, “context is critical for such reality checks, as the spectators’ unease comes from experiencing the grotesque, the unfamiliar in familiar circumstances” (174). In this sense, the transferred heterotopia might be ruptured as a result of the friction between the familiar context of the home and the reality of a friend/loved one using that space and those relationships to deceive and deprive.

In dealing with the larger issues of social justice in his article, Elam notes that the responses to reality checks are not always productive or positive. While reality checks can bring about change through consensus and peaceful demonstration, they can also spur violence and destruction, like in the case of the Rodney King videotape and subsequent riots (Elam 176-182). The question of the larger social implications of such reality checks and, indeed, our preoccupation with learning and applying this blending of social and artful performances of identity is far outside of the

scope of this paper.¹⁵ That said, I would like to suggest that such reality checks, particularly those that serve to rupture the space between transferred heterotopia and real-world relationships, can necessitate a renegotiation of those relationships and of personal identity. In the friction between the heterotopia and the context of the home, as well as between the artful and social performances of identity, the reality check creates a moment that requires reevaluation and a synthesis of these factors. In short, our attempts to mimic the deviant lessons taught to us by professionals can have very real consequences in our everyday identities and in our relationships.

Ultimately, I am not suggesting that we cease playing poker or even stop our attempts to replicate the performances taught to us by professionals. I am not even suggesting that these reality checks and their potential impact on personal identity and relationships are necessarily negative. After all, I still play every chance I get. I am only suggesting that, as a society, we should be aware that the “safely” marginalized deviant space of a casino heterotopia (or any heterotopia for that matter) is anything but. Instead, these spaces have a way of being porous and, ultimately, a part of everyday life. Perhaps, rather than spaces that allow for the safe exploration of our deviant proclivities, they instead serve to remind us of the centrality and presence of such deviancy in our everyday lives, interactions, and identities.

¹⁵ It does bear mentioning that there is some work done on this larger question. James McManus, in *Cowboys Full*, devotes a considerable portion of his book to reading larger trends in American culture, politics, diplomacy, etc. in terms of poker terminology and strategy.

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