Casino Roots: The Cultural Production of Twentieth-Century Seminole Economic Development

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“There is, indeed, a certain irony if not paradox in the fact that it was the Seminoles, so long respected for clinging to the ‘ways of their ancestors’ in the swampy vastness of the Everglades, who would be so pivotal in unleashing the juggernaut of Indian gaming in modern America.”
—ANTHROPOLOGIST ANTHONY J. PAREDES

“We’re not only B-I-N-G-O.”
—MITCHELL CYPRESS (OTTER), VETERAN’S DAY 2000

Jessica Cattelino’s chapter examines the links between economic development and cultural identity among the Florida Seminoles. Her work provides an excellent opportunity to rethink the problematic dichotomies that have framed American Indian experience as a choice between modernity and tradition or economic development and cultural survival. Seminole commercial enterprises promoted cultural expression and strengthened tribal identity. In shaping the terms of incorporation, they developed an alternative

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pathway of economic development, rendering the choice between modernity and tradition somewhat irrelevant.

At parties, over coffee, and in supermarket checkout lines, non-Indians of many political stripes who learn that my work addresses Florida Seminole casinos almost always ask a version of “So are Seminoles losing their culture?” or “Have they sold out?” Mainstream newspaper editorials, both for and against tribal gaming rights, worry that native people will become more materialistic, less “traditional.” Some tribes vote down tribal gaming referenda in part because they do not view gaming to be compatible with the cultural life they value. Others, including most of the Florida Seminoles with whom I conducted thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2000–2001 and 2002, do not see a conflict between gaming and their cultural distinctiveness as a people, for reasons that have much to do with their history of poverty and economic development.

In 1979 the Seminole Tribe of Florida opened Hollywood Bingo, the first high-stakes tribally run bingo hall in North America. This act began a slow but steady journey from crushing poverty to economic comfort on the tribe’s six urban and rural southern Florida reservations, and it led to a gaming revolution across Indian country, with 201 tribes operating high-stakes casinos by 2001. Gaming did not just happen to Seminoles. Instead, it represents one stage in a complex history of twentieth-century economic development initiatives, ranging from cattle to crafts, from airplane manufacturing to alligator wrestling.

Seminole cultural values and economic development have been inextricably intertwined throughout the last century. Indeed, culture and economy cannot be analyzed as separate categories in this context but are mutually constitutive. By accounting for this interplay, we can reject and reformulate the seeming paradox of how Seminoles, often considered by outsiders to be among the most “culturally conservative” Native American groups, became the first American Indian tribe to pursue and embrace a casino economy. This “paradox” assumes an inherent conflict between Native American “culture” and market integration, and it relies on a static and essential concept of “culture” (as something that can be “lost”). Instead, I follow Elizabeth Povinelli in “theoriz[ing] the relationship between the productivity of indigenous practice and the production of cultural identity,” showing how Seminoles have produced meaningful cultural categories and expressive modes through an array of economic regimes. During the casino gaming era, they have chosen a path
of market integration as a mechanism for producing and maintaining cultural and political autonomy.\textsuperscript{6}

To understand gaming, it is crucial to examine how prior Seminole economic practices enabled and were shaped by cultural production.\textsuperscript{7} It is in part through these economic practices that the very idea of Seminole “culture”—as a measurable, identifiable, and potentially commodified “thing”—emerged. With women’s craft production and men’s alligator wrestling and cattle programs in particular, gendered economic practices became privileged sites for Seminoles to produce, maintain, and discuss “tradition.” More recently, Seminoles have revised the relationship between cultural production and economy by using cigarette and gaming ventures to promote their political self-determination and cultural distinctiveness. In contrast to cattle, crafts, and alligator wrestling, which came to be part of what defined Seminoles as Seminole, most tribal members view casinos and cigarettes simply as income sources, as projects that facilitate but do not embody cultural production. Thus they exploit the fungibility of money—the ability to separate its source from its use—to disconnect casinos and cigarettes as economic projects from the forms of cultural production they have enabled. At the same time, many Seminoles view their legal and political battles over gaming rights to be part of an effort to maintain their tribal sovereignty, their political and economic self-reliance and cultural distinctiveness as a people.

**COWBOYS AND INDIANS**

A 1959 *Miami Herald* article entitled “Indians, Cowboys at Peace: Former Have Become Latter” suggests that “[a] legendary Indian chief looking down from the happy hunting grounds on the Florida Indians of today would probably turn pale with anger” because “as the cash register sings jingle, jangle in the background,” Seminoles have become cowboys. An accompanying cartoon (Figure 4.1) contrasts “real” Indian life (bareback riding) with cowboy ways and their technologies, depicting a befuddled Seminole man asking of another Seminole mounted on a saddled horse and dressed in cowboy attire, “What’re we coming to?” The answer: “A saddle!”\textsuperscript{8}

Seminole cattle programs, a key twentieth-century federal and later tribal economic development project, sparked the imagination of observers who considered cowboys to stand for all that was American and therefore, in a world of mutually exclusive racial identities, not Indian. In fact, Seminole cattle became a marker of heritage and tradition, a symbol and practice of “Indianness,” and an institution through which Seminoles elaborated emergent tribal class
and gender relations. Culture and economy are tightly entangled in Seminole cattle programs, but they come together productively and in mutual constitution rather than in a simple contrast between economic development and cultural authenticity.

Ironically, there is a historical fallacy in opposing cattle to Indianness. Seminoles and their ancestors have been working cattle since they obtained cows from Spanish colonists, long before American cowboys ranged the West. Seminole cattle ranchers reminded me that their ancestors owned large herds in northern Florida prior to the nineteenth-century Seminole wars and that they fought against Americans who raided their herds and seized their pasturelands. In 1879 R. H. Pratt, an investigator sent by the Office of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., who later founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, estimated that in southern Florida one-third of Seminoles’ annual income—$2,000 of a total $6,000—came from the sale of hogs and cattle.9

In late 1936 the federal government shipped 500 head of Hereford drought-relief cattle from Apaches in Oklahoma to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)
Seminole Agency, ushering in a new era of Seminole economic development. Government officials hoped cattle would provide Seminoles with much-needed income, starting them on a march to economic self-sufficiency through modern, scientific agriculture. Officials worked with Seminoles to distribute cattle on the Brighton and Big Cypress Reservations, to build fences and develop pastures, to seek technical assistance from agriculture experts in the government’s Extension Service, to build the herd (which required cross-breeding with cattle that could endure the Florida heat), and to structure herd management. Over time the program has evolved, but it generally has consisted of both a tribal herd and individually owned herds, with individual owners paying fees to the tribal cattle cooperative in return for pasture improvement, marketing, breeding, and other services.

Cattle ownership under the new regime had far-reaching social, economic, and political consequences. The Indian agent distributed cattle herds only to residents of the new reservations, and today many Seminoles consider the cattle program to have been a government ploy to “herd” reluctant Seminoles onto reservations. Seminoles in the new program became reliant on government technical and financial aid, and cattle program administration formed the nucleus of the emerging federal apparatus that would dominate Seminole governance through the 1970s.

Over the course of the twentieth century, cattle shaped Seminole social organization, facilitating the emergence of new economic and status distinctions. Federal agents distributed cattle exclusively to men, shifting the gender of property ownership, since women (and, more generally, matrilineal clans) had previously been the primary property owners. In order to own cattle, both individual Seminoles and the tribe as a whole took on unprecedented debt, entering debt relationships to the federal government that would not disappear until the advent of casinos. But cattle investment also had productive potential: cattle owners leveraged their herds as equity to obtain loans unavailable to other reservation Indians, who had no collateral because trust land is inalienable. Cattle as equity, in turn, enabled new capital-intensive pursuits—for example, housing and business ventures—that were previously unimaginable, and cattle owners gained both economic and political power. Cattle owners’ emerging status and increased contacts with outsiders led some scholars and BIA agents to characterize them as “the less conservative, more white-oriented members of the tribe” or as agents of acculturation.

Today Seminoles are among the largest cattle operators in the state of Florida, and they collectively own the twelfth-largest cow-and-calf operation
in the United States. The tribal herd, of which all tribal members are shareholders, totals approximately 7,000 head, whereas individuals’ herds average about 100 head. The cattle program rarely turns a profit, however, so why does it persist, and what can this tell us about the significance of cattle to Seminoles?

On Seminole reservations today, especially at rural Brighton and Big Cypress, cattle have become a marker of Seminole belonging and community identity, in a resignification of their prior role in government programs as instruments of modernization and assimilation. This is evident in their prominence at public celebrations, as well as in day-to-day practices that mark cattle as key to Seminole heritage. Some nonowners resent that the tribe pours resources into a cattle industry that benefits individuals but consistently loses money for the tribe as a whole (in part because political pressure prevents the tribal government from levying cattle program fees for individual owners at a sufficient rate to defray costs), yet cattle appeal even to most critics as an embodiment of Seminole culture and economy.

Multiple events and institutions celebrate Seminoles’ cattle heritage, with rodeo among the most visible. On a warm day in February 2000 I attended Brighton Field Days, a tribally sponsored weekend celebration that features patchwork clothing competitions, sporting contests, entertainment acts, a parade, and a rodeo. Attendance peaked at approximately 2,000 (including hundreds of non-Seminoles) for the evening’s professional rodeo, held in a gleaming arena and broadcast on the tribe’s closed-circuit television station. Events included bareback and saddle bronco riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, barrel racing (the only event for women), and bull riding. Several Seminoles, mostly men, compete on the professional rodeo circuit, and scores of children participate through the tribal youth recreation program; many rodeo participants are from families that have owned cattle for generations. In addition to rodeo, each spring hundreds of Big Cypress residents and non-Seminole locals gather for the Junior Cypress Cattle Drive. On horseback, participants drive cattle through the reservation to the rodeo grounds, where they gather for a barbecue and an all-Indian rodeo. Each year children participate in a tribal 4-H steer program and annual steer sale, which attracts publicity for the youth and the many civic leaders who buy their steers. Cattle also reinforce Seminoles’ “Indianness” through intertribal institutions like the Eastern Indian Rodeo Association and the Intertribal Agriculture Council (est. 1987).

Cowboy aesthetics, albeit in a modified form, have become a Seminole aesthetic. In a 1956 *National Geographic* article about “Florida’s ‘Wild’ Indians,
the Seminole,” a caption beneath a photograph of Seminole boys wearing Seminole patchwork shirts and cowboy boots reads: “Cowboy Boots Say American Boy; Shirts Bespeak the Seminole.”15 This typical midcentury logic contrasted the cowboy with the Indian, but cowboy aesthetics today are Seminole aesthetics, with many men wearing cowboy boots, jeans, and hats and tribal officials often donning cowboy hats for public occasions and posed photographs.16 With casino wealth, expensive ostrich boots and other Western-wear accessories have become a common form of conspicuous consumption. The cowboy motifs extend beyond clothing on the rural reservations, where cattle graze in the pastures, country music blares from extended cab pickups, and rodeo grounds dominate the built environment.

Cattle ownership still conveys status, despite the fact that casino dividends have all but erased the income gaps that once separated cattle owners from others. Richard Bowers (Panther), a Big Cypress resident, is the tribe’s natural resources coordinator, chairman of the Big Cypress cattle owners’ committee, assistant to the cattle manager, and president of the Intertribal Agriculture Council. He and his brother Paul are third-generation cattle owners. In an interview Richard characterized cattle as “the social fiber of the community.” He believes cattle benefit not only the owners but also their extended families, and they produce jobs for Seminoles and non-Seminoles alike.17 When I asked Richard and Paul about the role of cattle owners, Paul replied that if you are a cattle owner “you’re somebody in the community” (April 13, 2001).18

Under the cattle program, government officials allocated cattle only to men, and this soon led to a partial male gendering of Seminole tradition. With cattle, men’s economic power and social status grew relative to those of women, as property patterns shifted away from female ownership and matrilineal clan inheritance.19 After anthropologist Alexander Spoehr interviewed Naha Tiger (Snake), an elder at Brighton, Spoehr recorded the following in his 1939 fieldnotes: “A girl with a lot of hogs has an easier time getting a good husband than one with no property. . . . Naha thought that in old times the women proportionately owned more hogs than the men. And they owned the houses and the fields, though the land itself was not owned, so far as I can make out.”20 Today, as the tribe has taken over the cattle program from the federal government, the male gendering of cattle as Seminole heritage, although powerful, is not absolute. Once again, many women own cattle, and some ride in rodeos. Women often run the accounting and business aspects of cattle ownership, and they provide meals when their families’ cattle are being worked. Louise Gopher (Panther), a middle-aged Brighton resident, is the principal
owner and manager of a herd she and her siblings inherited from their father. Gopher once presented a paper on female cattle owners at an academic conference, in collaboration with a local anthropologist, Susan Stans. She estimates that about half of the cattle herds are owned at least in part by women. She considers cattle ownership to be her “expensive hobby”; you can’t get rich on cattle, she says, but it is “a tradition you carry on” (March 13, 2001).

By analyzing the often hidden role of women in Seminole cattle operations—as owners, managers, cooks, accountants—it is possible to recognize both the male gendering of cattle as a marker of Seminole tradition and the embeddedness of cattle in the extended matrilineal family. Gender is a microcosm for the interplay of cultural production and economic development in Seminole cattle enterprises; government cattle operations did change—some might say assimilated—the gender of Seminole property ownership and inheritance patterns. However, Seminoles have reframed this economic regime as a site for cultural production, and, paradoxically, women’s roles as owners and extended family members are reemerging. Cattle are not “simply” an economic venture: they both bind a distinctly Seminole community and reveal some of its internal distinctions.

CRAFTING CULTURE
Gift shops sprinkled throughout Seminole reservations feature bright patchwork skirts and jackets, sweetgrass baskets, palmetto dolls, and glittery beaded jewelry. Twentieth-century tourism and commercial craft production began as economic development initiatives but emerged as important forms of cultural production, enabling Seminoles to engage in meaningful labor during a time when they faced poverty and new pressures of market integration. Other scholars have documented the development and forms of Seminole crafts.21 Here my project is narrower: to show how Seminole crafts have been shaped by economic development initiatives and, simultaneously, have been a site for the production and consolidation of Seminole “culture” as embodied in material objects, labor, and monetary transactions. Women defined and sustained these practices, such that today Seminole tradition is increasingly located in gendered craft production, women’s paid labor, and its objects.

Cultural tourism as an economic development strategy has gained currency among indigenous peoples around the world.22 Seminoles began to self-consciously market their culture—and themselves as culture—during the 1920s, after the hunting-and-trapping economy bottomed out and the completion of the Tamiami Trail highway and the Florida tourism boom opened new markets.
Like other indigenous and minority groups, Seminoles have engaged in cultural tourism and commercial crafts as forms of cultural production, navigating the relationship between the local meanings and the broader sociopolitical implications of marketing culture. These intercultural practices generate and contest cultural meanings: they do not (only) commodify culture, they produce it.23

According to ethnohistorian Patsy West, by 1930 more than half of the Mikasuki-speaking Indians in southern Florida were involved in the tourist economy, many employed in white-owned tourist villages where they marketed themselves and their crafts to curious onlookers.24 Some government officials criticized the villages for exploiting Indian workers;25 West, however, argues that tourist villages offered Seminoles spaces in which to sustain “traditional” ways of life, and many Seminoles today remember tourist villages as an important part of their economic and cultural history.26 By the 1960s the BIA Seminole Agency and the tribe decided to pursue the tourist village model, and in March 1960 the tribally operated Seminole Okalee Indian Village and Arts and Crafts Center opened on the Hollywood Reservation. It featured craft sales and demonstrations in a chickee village setting.27 Despite the fact that the tribe has only intermittently profited from the Okalee Village, it has remained a funding priority. After periodic closures during budget crises, its doors remained open until the building was razed during a 2003 casino expansion; there are plans for a cultural display in the new casino complex (Figure 4.2). At the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum at Big Cypress, museum officials have constructed another tourist village, although it is focused more on craft education than on profit; the museum also has a gift shop located inside the main exhibit building.

The fact that Seminoles today perpetuate tourist villages as economic and educational institutions suggests that this practice of cultural tourism and display, originated in part by outsiders, has taken hold as a form of cultural production. Indeed, many Seminoles told me that tourism itself is a Seminole tradition, and some consider casino gaming, as a form of tourist entertainment, a logical extension of this legacy.

What about the crafts themselves, as objects that convey cultural meaning?28 Seminole crafts emerged as a modern cultural category in the context of government- and missionary-sponsored economic development initiatives. The category of Seminole crafts quickly became a way of figuring and exploiting the value of culture itself.29 In 1940, school instructor William Boehmer and housekeeper Edith Boehmer established the Seminole Crafts Guild, a small-scale cooperative at Brighton, with the assistance of the Indian Arts and Crafts
Board in Washington, D.C. In 1960 the organization was sold to the Seminole Tribe of Florida for $25,000. Throughout, Mrs. Boehmer worked closely with Seminole women to “improve” the quality of their crafts, selecting design elements and instituting standards in materials and sewing methods. On the Tamiami Trail, Deaconess Harriet Bedell, an Episcopal missionary, led a similar project beginning in 1933, selling Indian crafts at her Glade Cross Mission. In his field notes, William Sturtevant recorded that the deaconess held artists to “high and somewhat peculiar standards,” with clear ideas about designs and methods, but that she also encouraged innovation, including beach bags and pillow covers. Government documents suggest that by a conservative estimate, over 25 percent of all Seminoles were engaged in craft production and sales by 1937. In 1967 the tribal government undertook a new mode of craft production as economic development, opening a factory in Big Cypress that employed men to produce wooden items for sale. Unprofitable and plagued by workplace organization difficulties, the factory closed within a year and a half.

The economic development potential for craft production is difficult to gauge, but a gender lens adds clarity. Most scholars and government officials

Figure 4.2. The “Culture Village” at the Okalee Village, Hollywood. Photo by author.
considered craft production to be supplementary income for Seminole families, relative to male breadwinners. The maximum gross income earned by a craft producer in 1964 was $1,000. In 1963, 99 of 175 total Seminole families earned $500 or less annually, and only 37 families earned more than $1,500, so craft income may have played a significant role in household economies. Most characterizations of craft production de-emphasize this economic impact, in part by overlooking the importance of craft income for women, especially for the many single mothers who could not rely on husbands’ incomes. Many Seminoles remember craft production as a crucial part of their household economies. Elaine Aguilar (Otter) said that when she was growing up, her single mother survived by making crafts, sitting at the sewing machine daily by 5:30 A.M.: “She made everything. Anything to make money to feed her kids” (January 3, 2001).

Since gaming has increased individual and family incomes, few Seminoles make a living from craft production, and there is a widespread perception that fewer young people are taking up craftwork. Elder Jimmie O’Toole Osceola (Panther), an accomplished patchwork maker (unusual for a man), believes young people’s incorporation into broader American culture directs them away from crafts: “They are too busy with other culture. Young people very busy with schooling and education, and the boys are very busy with sports nowadays, so they’re not doing any wood carving. They like things that is done in a few minutes. Craft takes long time to make ’em. Not one day” (May 22, 2001). Nonetheless, gaming has sparked new opportunities for individuals to produce crafts. Several women and men hold jobs demonstrating crafts for visitors to the new museum, and others work as craft instructors for expanding tribal cultural programs. Women own several of the largest reservation craft shops (Figure 4.3). A high-end collector’s market, with several Seminole buyers, has opened up for patchwork and baskets, allowing “master” artists to realize significant profits.

In the early 1970s one observer stated with confidence that “most of the wares for sale at the Arts and Crafts Center, clothing excepted, are made just for sale to tourists and do not represent part of an artistic heritage.” This is not the case today, if it ever was. Seminole crafts no longer play a major role as income generators, but their significance as markers of identity, tradition, and community has only increased over time; and today many Seminoles and outsiders alike value sweetgrass baskets, dolls, beadwork, and other “tourist items” as meaningful representations of Seminole heritage. Mary Frances Johns (Panther) told a 1999 interviewer that when a Seminole makes and demonstrates
crafts, “what you are doing is publicizing your people.”41 As forms of cultural expression and celebration, patchwork adorns the stoles on the tribe’s Afachkee school graduation robes, Seminole dolls hang as Christmas tree decorations in the tribal headquarters lobby, and contestants in the annual Miss Seminole contest demonstrate basketry, doll making, or other artistic forms in the talent competition. Most tribal festivals feature well-attended clothing contests and craft demonstrations.42 Crafts also represent the polity of the Seminole Tribe of Florida when Seminoles present crafts to visiting dignitaries from other tribes and foreign countries. In these acts crafts become markers of diplomacy, measures of honor and status, and representations of tribal sovereignty.

Craft producers continue to innovate, from Seminole patchwork sewn onto Miami Dolphins fabric to beaded pool cues to Florida State Seminoles team logos incorporated into sweetgrass baskets. In recent years artists have begun to produce objects that feature clan totems in a new mode of asserting identity and distinction within the tribe, not just between Seminoles and outsiders. Some Seminoles have become specialists in producing historical designs, and several men have begun to produce period clothing and accessories for their costumes in reenactments of nineteenth-century Seminole wars. This

Figure 4.3. The Anhinga Gallery, a Hollywood craft shop owned by Virginia Osceola (Bird). Photo by author.
periodization marks a transition of crafts to a new form of historical culture making. The question remains whether the gaming generation will take up craftwork not only as consumers but as producers, not out of economic necessity but for the sake of tradition and aesthetics.

**EVERGLADES SMILES**

Cultural tourism promoted women’s crafts as markers of Seminole heritage and, by extension, located cultural transmission in women’s labor, yet tourism also gave birth to a wholly masculine form of Seminole cultural production— alligator wrestling. Beginning around 1920, Seminole men earned money at white- and Indian-owned tourist attractions by climbing into a pool of water with at least one alligator, catching it, and “wrestling” it (Figure 4.4). Soon alligator wrestling became “an activity synonymous with the Florida Seminoles.”

Some critics decried alligator wrestling as silly, fake, or exploitative; but wrestlers gained status within Seminole communities and became respected as expert practitioners and bearers of tradition. Some men leveraged their skills to travel across the country for fairs and expos. During the early 1950s, Moses Jumper (Panther) took William Sturtevant to the white-owned Jungle Queen tourist boat on the New River in Fort Lauderdale, where Jumper wrestled alligators. Sightseeing boats stopped twice daily at the dock, with its chickees and alligator pit. Women sold souvenirs, men wrestled ’gators for tips, and on that day three small girls earned coins by singing “Jesus Loves Me” in Mikasuki and reciting the pledge of allegiance in English.

To this day, individual wrestlers develop their own routines and styles, but common skills include sitting atop the alligator, opening and closing its powerful jaws (showing its “Everglades smile”), and rolling it over on its back to scratch its belly and make it “go to sleep.” During shows some wrestlers talk about how Seminoles coexist with alligators in the swamps, others describe alligator anatomy and behavior, and some try dangerous tricks like inserting their heads or hands into the beasts’ open mouths and pulling them out before the alligators’ jaws snap together. One wrestler told me that in the 1980s he could earn $200–$300 per show, performing three shows daily.

Today gaming has eliminated the financial incentive for men to risk their limbs in the ’gator pit, yet alligator wrestling remains a colorful component of Seminole cultural celebrations. Spectators enjoy shows at the Okalee Village and at events such as the annual Tribal Fair. Both the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum’s introductory film and a segment staff members developed for a local television series on Seminole culture feature alligator wrestling. When Naomi Wil-
Figure 4.4. Alligator wrestling at the Jungle Queen. Photo courtesy of the Seminole/Miccosukee Photographic Archive.
son (Snake) reigned as Miss Seminole and competed for an intertribal title in Oklahoma, she represented her Seminole heritage by wrestling an alligator for the talent competition (Elsie Bowers [Snake], June 27, 2001).

Alligator wrestling performs Seminole heritage, in a reminder of Seminoles’ connection to the Everglades and a demonstration of (masculine) bravery. Alligator wrestling also operates discursively as a metaphor for Seminole values of toughness and fortitude. For example, at a Tribal Council meeting Chairman James Billie (Bird), an accomplished wrestler, greeted a longtime employee returning from an illness by comparing her experience to wrestling alligators. Billie also joked about making outside politicians and businessmen hop into the alligator pit before he would support their causes. Some Seminole men embrace wrestling as connecting their masculinity to their cultural heritage. In 2000, Chairman Billie climbed into an alligator pit after a long hiatus from the craft, only to have his finger bitten off. The Seminole Tribune quoted him on his motives for jumping into the pit: “I thought I’d go back in there and reinstate my manhood.” While I was in Florida he often wagged his stump and joked about his “battle wounds” from life and politics. Other wrestlers show off physical scars and missing digits as badges of honor, not unlike the war wounds displayed by veterans.

Many Seminoles lament alligator wrestling’s decline, and some seek ways to preserve it. The director of the recreation department, Moses Jumper Jr. (Snake), has considered including wrestling in youth recreation programs so boys can learn their heritage. Since gaming, however, young men enjoy many career options, and hardly anyone seems to disapprove of boys’ choices to pursue safer and more lucrative paths. Indeed, many tribal members were amused and somewhat befuddled by a September 2000 national media frenzy over the Okalee Village’s need to openly advertise alligator-wrestling positions. A New York Times front-page article, “Filling the Job Is Like Wrestling Alligators,” got picked up by the NBC Today show and the international press. Why would such an obscure story garner front-page attention in a leading national newspaper? Perhaps because it marked the end of an era and presented a paradox of culture and money: How can alligator wrestling be Seminole anymore, and how can Seminoles be Seminoles when no one is lining up to jump into the pit, when they have the money to attend college instead? Alligator wrestling, as an economic form and a performative act, is inalienable from Seminole-ness, insofar as only Seminoles themselves, not hired non-Seminoles, can authenticate it as a cultural practice through their labor. Casinos, and the expanded economic and educational horizons they enable,
have disrupted a familiar equation of Native American tourist arts and cultural heritage with poverty. With alligator wrestling, that which began as an economic pursuit grew into a marker of cultural heritage, only to be displaced by new economic opportunities for young Seminole men. This trajectory illuminates the complex and productive relationship between indigenous economic development and cultural practice.

VICES AND VIRTUES: CIGARETTES AND GAMING

Seminoles’ late-twentieth-century foray into cigarette sales and gaming disarticulated and reconfigured the relationship between economic practices and cultural production. The cases of cattle, crafts, and alligator wrestling illustrate that market integration can afford indigenous peoples opportunities to explore new and expanded forms of cultural production, but few Seminoles today claim that gaming and cigarettes—the tribe’s main income sources—comprise or express Seminole tradition. Instead, they view these economic practices instrumentally, as ways to escape poverty and make money for the tribe, and thus they increasingly detach economic practices from cultural production. Nonetheless, with cigarettes and gaming Seminoles have perpetuated the valuation of “tradition” through, not despite, a market economy by embracing modern economic and political institutions in the service of tribal sovereignty and a broader vision of cultural distinctiveness.

In 1976, after hearing about efforts by other Native American tribes to open tax-free cigarette shops, the Seminole Tribe of Florida opened its first smoke shops, jumping into legal and political negotiations with the State of Florida to exercise its right to sell cigarettes without state taxation or regulation. Discount cigarette sales were the first Seminole venture to yield regular, substantial revenues, leading the journey out of poverty. Located on busy intersections and even on a few quiet Hollywood streets, the small and rather drab smoke shops—mostly customized mobile homes with drive-up windows—attract a wide range of customers day and night (Figure 4.5).

In 2001 the tribe ran ten smoke shops and over two dozen bingo hall vending machines.48 Many more smoke shops are owned by individual Seminoles, who purchase cigarettes from the tribe’s wholesale operation. A tribal tobacco ordinance governs all transactions, and a tribal tobacco association sets and regulates prices.

Cigarettes set the stage for casinos. Seminoles cut their political and legal teeth on cigarettes when they defended smoke shop operations by hiring lobbyists, working with lawyers to avoid litigation, crafting public relations strategies,
and formulating theories of tribal sovereignty that would be tested in future casino controversies. Prefiguring gaming, smoke shops reworked the relationship between Seminole economic development and cultural production. Unlike crafts or alligator wrestling, cigarettes and their accompanying controversies prompted Seminoles to contend less with the dilemma of selling culture than with the specter of selling out. Despite the availability of images of tobacco as essentially Indian, few Seminoles consider cigarettes to be essentially Seminole, as is evidenced in part by the lack of distinctly Seminole iconography or names on smoke shops and by the near absence of Seminoles among smoke shop staff. But although Seminoles do not see an inherent conflict in pursuing economic ventures detached from Seminole identity, the public response has often been negative and grounded in assumptions about the “proper” activities of native peoples. For example, in the mid-1980s a Tampa city attorney told tribal leaders what she wished they would do with a reservation site instead of building a smoke shop: “You know what you could do is have a few carved canoes and statues and interview some old Indian ladies and get some recipes and put out a cookbook.”
In 1979, Seminoles opened Hollywood Bingo, the first high-stakes tribal gaming enterprise in North America. They subsequently litigated and won an important case, *Seminole Tribe v. Butterworth*, which affirmed their gaming rights to be grounded in tribal sovereignty.⁵⁰ Although it was only in the 1990s that new electronic games lifted the tribal economy to its present heights, casinos’ economic impact is staggering. According to the tribe’s general counsel, Jim Shore (Bird), prior to 1979 the Seminole Tribe of Florida administered an annual budget of less than $2 million, with approximately 90 percent of total funds coming from the federal government. Now the tribe’s annual budget exceeds $200 million, with over 95 percent of funds coming from casino revenues. Seminoles have chosen to devote substantial portions of casino revenues to social services and cultural programs, and the Tribal Council also distributes per capita dividend checks to each tribal member.⁵¹

Elected leaders and individuals are attempting to diversify the tribal economy to reduce reliance on gaming and to create jobs. Recent tribal ventures—all subsidized by gaming—including ecotourism, sugarcane fields, and citrus groves, yet failed ventures abound, including a rope factory, a turtle farm, an airplane manufacturer, and a vegetable farm. The tribe has pursued investments in the stock market, non-Seminole casinos, banks and insurance companies, and real estate interests.⁵²

Seminoles have also directed gaming profits toward tribal social services, channeling economic development to support self-governance. Because of gaming revenues and expertise, the tribe now controls programs previously administered by the federal government.⁵³ Today every Seminole child is guaranteed full educational opportunities, from tribal preschool and the K–12 Afachkee School at Big Cypress to adult education. Health clinics on three reservations offer a full array of free services, and all tribal members carry full health insurance. New housing, tribal offices, recreational facilities, and other construction projects dot the reservation landscapes.

Increased gaming revenues enable new and expanding cultural institutions, including language preservation programs, fairs and festivals, the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, a closed-circuit tribal TV station, and an expanded newspaper and a new website. Seminoles also engage in cultural production when they choose to direct gaming revenues to economic development and tribal governance, insofar as this is part of their effort to define what it means to be a people.

Despite these gains, Seminole casinos generate widespread fears among outside observers (and some, although relatively few, tribal members) that
Seminoles are sacrificing their cultural integrity to chase the almighty dollar. This anxiety, which to a lesser extent also attaches to smoke shops, extends far beyond earlier rumblings about assimilation or commodification that accompanied craft production, cattle operations, and other twentieth-century Seminole economic practices. Federal officials had previously promoted “non-threatening form[s] of economic enterprise” for Seminoles, but gaming is a different story, as casinos generate concerns that Indians will be exploited by organized crime operators, will lose their “Indianness,” and will encounter increased social problems such as drug and gambling addictions. Gaming anxieties comprise what Fred Myers calls “scandals of commodification,” revealing conflicting regimes of value vis-à-vis culture and money and mediating racial and political relations between communities.

Gaming as a form of economic development fuels critiques because to many Americans indigenous “tradition” represents the opposite of casinos, which embody capitalism, nonproductive market exchange, and money itself. Conservative critics of tribal sovereignty as “special rights” argue that tribes’ embrace of casino capitalism indicates that they are no longer “really” Indians and thus do not deserve special legal status. Many critics of capitalism, on the other hand, decry the spread of casino-based materialism as corrupting indigenous ways. These critiques rely on an understanding of money as corroding culture, and they promote a suspect ideology of money as “a single, interchangeable, absolutely impersonal instrument—the very essence of our rationalized modern civilization.”

Recently, many anthropologists have rejected the assumption that money erodes cultural uniqueness, instead analyzing the history and cultural specificity of how people have come to understand and use money. During the twentieth century, Seminoles approached money and markets in diverse ways as they sought to escape poverty through shifting modes of economic and cultural production. Seminoles have neither rejected modernity nor accepted its claims wholesale. Instead, they have chosen to engage modernity on their own terms, to whatever extent this is possible, and they have created “alternative modernities” in their interweaving of market integration with efforts to maintain tribal sovereignty and cultural distinctiveness. Thus they have imposed limits on the universalist “project of modernity.”

Gaming is making Seminoles “rich,” both as a tribe and as individuals, and the mere fact of this wealth generates crises of cultural meaning and politics vis-à-vis non-Seminoles. By turning to market forces as economic engines to fuel cultural production, Seminoles have realigned the relationship between
economic development and “tradition.” Ironically, it is the fungible nature of money, the very abstraction that supposedly erodes social relations and cultural specificity, that enables these resignifications. The day has passed, if it ever dawned, when, as Ethel Cutler Freeman asserts, “[t]he Seminoles despise the man who lives rich.”59 Many, although not all, Seminoles now enjoy the trappings of wealth, from fancy cars and designer clothes to expensive vacations and private educations. For many Americans such a wealthy Indian is an oxymoron or even an offense. Katherine Spilde identifies the dual force of the “rich Indian” stereotype, which weakens claims to sovereignty because tribes seemingly “do not need sovereign rights now that they have a new economic resource” and which posits wealth “as the antithesis of ‘authentic’ Indian identity.”60 As Seminoles escape poverty, engage in novel consumption practices, and experience class mobility, they face new criticisms and they forge new values at the interface of culture and economy.

CONCLUSION
As Brian Hosmer has argued for other native groups, twentieth-century Seminoles repeatedly “chose economic modernization as the best possible way to preserve, not abandon, distinctive identities.”61 Not all choices worked out, yet some—cattle, craft production, alligator wrestling—yielded meaningful cultural practices and identities. The spectacular economic success of gaming casts a new light on this history, allowing us to view the relationship between economic ventures and cultural production in the context of present-day fears about cultural integrity, market integration, and wealth. Accounting for contingency and mutual constitution in the relationship between indigenous cultural production and economic development pushes us to address new forms of political, economic, and cultural integration (e.g., market integration) without resorting to a discourse of assimilation.

Casinos are not a “new buffalo” that has descended magically on American Indian tribes.62 Instead, casinos represent a new stage in the long and complex history of Native Americans’ economic, political, and cultural struggles. By attending to this history, we can move away from “impact” studies that determine what casinos have “done” to native peoples’ cultural and social life to instead show how tribal casinos are cultural and social practices worked out at the interface of economy and cultural production. Along with sweetgrass baskets, cattle, Everglades smiles, and other “traditions,” Seminole casinos move us away from analyses of culture to cultural production, from modernization to projects of modernity. Thus we escape the paradox of how such a
culturally conservative group as Florida Seminoles could launch a gaming revolution, and we can begin to understand why a religious/medicine leader and businessman replied to my question about changes in gaming’s wake: “Changes? I don’t see changes. Things basically have stayed the same, just taken new forms.”

NOTES


2. Clans are indicated in parentheses.

3. These include major reservations in urban Hollywood, in the swamps of Big Cypress, and on the prairies of Brighton (near Lake Okeechobee), as well as smaller ones at Immokalee, Tampa, and Fort Pierce. This account also includes information about the people who, after a 1950s political split, became the Miccosukee Tribe. In addition to these two federally recognized tribes there are several families of “Independent Seminoles” who refuse recognition by the U.S. government.


6. A disclaimer: I do not wish to imply, by emphasizing the indeterminate and productive relationship between economic forms and cultural practices, that market integration cannot harm indigenous communities. To the contrary, land dispossession, state welfare dependency, market integration, and other imposed economic transitions have often wreaked havoc on indigenous peoples around the world.

7. Originally drawn from Pierre Bourdieu and discussed in his The Field of Cultural Production (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), the concept of cultural production, in lieu of “culture,” accounts for the dynamic processes whereby cultural practices and beliefs gain meaning and value.


9. R. H. Pratt, “R. H. Pratt’s Report on the Seminole in 1879 (Presented and Annotated by William C. Sturtevant),” Florida Anthropologist 9, 1 (1956 [1888]): 1–24. More of the income likely came from hogs than from cattle, but the fact that Pratt included cattle in the estimate confirms that they were a source of income for some Seminoles prior to the government program, even if owners lacked capital to build up large herds before government assistance.


13. Figures from Richard Bowers (Panther), chairman of the Big Cypress cattle owners’ committee (August 20, 2002).

14. Cattle also forge ties with non-Indian outsiders, especially local white cattle
ranchers. These cattle-based relationships ease the climate of racial tension in rural Florida.


16. Some women, especially at Brighton, have also adopted Western wear.

17. These include numerous non-Seminole Indians from around the country, many of whom travel seasonally as cattle hands, as well as Latinos and whites.

18. I have indicated the dates of quoted interviews in parentheses.

19. Before moving onto the Dania (now Hollywood) Reservation in 1928, Ada Tiger (Snake), for example, owned a herd of approximately 75 head, which, according to her daughter, was the largest Florida Seminole herd at the time (Betty Mae Jumper and Patsy West, A Seminole Legend: The Life of Betty Mae Tiger Jumper [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001], 36–37).


21. David M. Blackard, Patchwork and Palmettos: Seminole/Miccosukee Folk Art Since 1820 (Fort Lauderdale: Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, 1990); Dorothy Downs, Art of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995). Seminole patchwork, in particular, is not isomorphic with tourism; Seminoles wore patchwork clothing before they sold it on the tourist market. However, it was in the context of tourist camps and trade that Seminoles began to market patchwork, and it subsequently developed in tandem with other tourist arts. An informant of Sturtevant, William McKinley Osceola, believed Indians began selling patchwork at the Musa Isle tourist village when white tourists began to ask if they could buy Seminoles’ clothes (Sturtevant private collection).


27. According to a 1962 tribal document, the Okalee Village employed approximately fifteen tribal members, served as an outlet for Seminole craft producers, and offered crafts produced by other Indian tribes (Billy Osceola and Howard Tiger, *Progress Report of the Seminole Tribe of Florida* [Hollywood, FL: Seminole Tribe of Florida, 1962]).

28. First, a caveat about my use of the term *craft*: although I want to resist the pattern of designating objects produced by indigenous people as “crafts,” as opposed to Western “art,” I use the word *craft* nonetheless, mostly because Seminoles themselves generally refer to these objects as crafts and because this term more accurately reflects their circulation on the market.


30. The Arts and Crafts Board had been established in 1935 as part of Indian Commissioner John Collier’s Indian New Deal, which emphasized cultural preservation and economic self-sufficiency.


34. I am intrigued that the tribal government and the BIA developed this factory for men rather than women, who comprised the vast majority of craftworkers. I suspect that this reflected a general desire on the part of Seminole Agency staff to promote employment for men as breadwinners.


36. In a 1930 report to the commissioner of Indian affairs, Roy Nash observed that men generated most of the Seminole household income from trading skins, whereas “[t]he women make a few dollars from the sale of Seminole dolls and a little very indifferent beadwork” (Roy Nash, *Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida* [Washington, DC: 71st Congress, 3rd sess., 1931], 10).


39. One day I observed Linda Frank (Otter) weaving a basket she planned to sell for $600.


42. Clothing contests often draw more than 100 contestants and large audiences, and they offer substantial cash prizes in categories such as “Traditional,” “Modern/Traditional,” and “Modern Contemporary.”

43. West, *The Enduring Seminoles*, 42.

44. Sturtevant, “Fieldnotes,” box 5. Jumper’s wife, Betty Mae (Snake), was one of the few women to wrestle alligators, filling in when her husband was unable to work. It is exceedingly rare for women to wrestle alligators. The only two women I encountered who had done so were members of the Snake clan, which is associated in part
with legitimacy in handling reptiles. Alligator wrestlers seek approval from Snake clan elders before jumping into the pit.


47. Interestingly, a subsequent made-for-media event recast alligator wrestling as broadly Floridian, not only Seminole, when a (white) wrestler from the Okalee Village traveled to New York City’s Central Park to rescue an “alligator” (it turned out to be a small caiman) swimming around a lake. The Florida press took glee in New York City’s purported helplessness when faced with a loose reptile, and the public relations staff at the Okalee Village milked the story (Elena Cabral, “Gator Wrestler Flies to N.Y. to Tackle Central Park Critter,” Miami Herald, June 21, 2001; Lisa J. Huriash, “‘Gator Dundee’ Off to Gotham,” South Florida Sun-Sentinel, June 21, 2001, 6B).

48. The Tribal Council operated two shops, and the Board of Directors (the incorporated business wing of the tribe) operated eight shops and the vending machines.


50. Later, however, the tribe lost a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, Seminole Tribe v. Florida, in which it was denied the right to sue the State of Florida for refusing to negotiate a gaming compact.

51. Jim Shore, 2001. The 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act limits ways tribes can allocate gaming revenues, yet within these constraints Seminoles have prioritized tribal governance and cultural production.

52. Some of these investments, pursued under the James Billie (Bird) administration (1979–2001), are under investigation by multiple federal agencies and tribal auditors.

53. As I discuss in my dissertation, this movement toward self-determination enables the tribe to implement well-tailored and comprehensive social services, evidenced by shifting priorities in education, housing, and health care programs. Tribal control over self-government, as a realization of sovereignty, has become a point of pride for many Seminoles.


55. Fred Myers, Painting Culture: The Making of Aboriginal High Art (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2002. In this context and in contrast to many other tribes, it is notable that I know of no case in which Seminoles have pointed to Seminole games of chance (e.g., the kneebone game) to deploy a narrative of cultural continuity by claiming that gambling is traditional. Instead, to most Seminoles gaming is an instrument of economic development, not a cultural form.


63. Anonymous.