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Review of *Casino Women: Courage in Unexpected Places*. Susan Chandler and Jill B. Jones. Reviewed by Jennifer Zelnick

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will do much to advance understanding of mental health as an essential public health challenge.

David Mechanic, Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Susan Chandler & Jill B. Jones, *Casino Women: Courage in Unexpected Places* (2011). New York: Cornell University Press. \$29.95 (hardcover).

Chandler and Jones' *Casino Women: Courage in Unexpected Places* describes a chapter in labor history that has yet to be fully explored: how women in the lowest rungs of highly profitable service organizations, many of them immigrants, have overcome the odds, fought for their rights in the workplace, and often won. Chandler and Jones signal early on that their book is "hopeful," rather than bemoaning the sad state of union density (roughly 7% in the private sector according to 2011 Bureau of Labor Statistics figures) or the exploitation and injustices experienced by immigrants in the Western states in the lower rungs of the labor market. They focus on how organizing has transformed the lives of a largely female workforce both on and off the job. Organizing in "company towns" has shaped U.S. labor history and the consciousness of union members, their families and communities. Like mill workers in Lawrence and Lowell Massachusetts, meat-packers in Wisconsin and Illinois, steel workers in Pittsburgh, auto workers in Detroit, and clerical workers at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, casino workers in Nevada gain power in numbers through their pivotal role—as exploited workers, essential fuel for the engine of the local economy, and members of immigrant and/or minority populations trying to gain a foothold in the U.S.

Casino Women is the product of ten years of talking to women mainly in Nevada about their lives and experiences as casino workers in highly unionized Las Vegas and barely unionized Reno. Workers from other casinos in nearby Indian reservations and Lake Tahoe also contributed. The authors' methods included: interviews with workers and union activists (many with the Culinary Workers Union); focus groups with former

casino workers, social service and health professionals, and other community representatives; key informant interviews; and site visits to workplaces, union halls, and a wide variety of community spaces. The results of this thorough, longitudinal approach exceed "data triangulation" in qualitative research studies; Chandler and Jones create a deep context for understanding the women's lives they explore and the casino industry that dominates the state and local communities.

The story of *Casino Women* unfolds over 5 parts; the first describes the "back of the house, front of the house" divide through the voices of the largely immigrant women of the housekeeping, kitchen, and laundry departments in the "back of the house," and the young, mainly white, cocktail waitresses in the "front of the house." Part II tells the story of union women, including the compelling story of grassroots union organizing among African Americans propelled by the civil rights movement, and the shift when the "back of the house" jobs came to be dominated by new immigrants from Latin America. Part III describes the struggles of nonunion women to fight for rights in the workplace, and the personal transformations that blossomed, even when struggles failed to bear fruit. Part IV brings us to the casino floor through the story of dealers at the "dead center of the casino industry, where money is transferred from players' hands to the coffers of the gaming corporations;" despite their position at the "top of the non-managerial pyramid," dealers work under stressful surveillance and a cloud of tobacco smoke. Finally, Part V explores the position of women in management; ironically, a step up the career ladder often comes with a high price tag, including poor job security, reduced time for other life pursuits, and—most important for the story that Chandler and Jones are developing—loss of space for resistance and solidarity, as female managers must become compliant partners in the lean and mean corporate world.

Through stories such as the 6 year strike at Frontier Hotel and Casino, where immigrant workers drew on their experiences of hardship to stay the course and ultimately win, the history of organizing among African American women like Sarah Hughes, who began her career as a night maid at the Desert Inn casino and went on to become a central figure in

the labor and civil rights movements that built the Las Vegas Culinary Workers Union, and the story of Edna Harman, a pit boss and recovering alcoholic who discovers the Maryknoll sisters and a commitment to social justice in central America and then returns to help central American casino workers, Chandler and Jones build on 3 key themes: the personal transformations experienced by women who take on the power of the gaming industry, the enormous contributions of the union in improving the lives of casino workers (especially compared to non-union counter parts), and the “consequences of silence”—the price paid by those who remain compliant. Throughout the writing, the narrative replaces the glitzy image of Nevada casinos with the reality of those who work and live in its communities.

Health and safety have always been key union organizing issues, but service sector work has generally been seen as less hazardous than industrial work. *Casino Women* challenges these perspectives and provides concrete examples of health and safety hazards to workers: housekeepers’ back and knee injuries, cocktail waitresses’ foot injuries and sexual harassment experiences, and dealers’ exposure to second-hand smoke (which has been outlawed in most other public spaces). These serious health and safety hazards “embody” the exploitation of casino workers. By including these experiences, the authors make an important contribution to the study of health and safety for service workers.

Some readers might take issue with the hopeful perspective that the book takes. Casino workers describe the “disgusting” environment of the casinos and the devastating effects on the often “desperate” clientele that frequent them. Chandler and Jones focus on the empowerment of those who find their true work in the union and sense of community from their co-workers. While the role of casino worker activists extends to concrete improvements to the community (better standard of living, union sponsored education programs, access to health care), it is disturbing that casino workers toil in the service of an essentially destructive industry.

Chandler and Jones are both social work professors at the University of Reno Nevada (Jones emeritus), who bring a “person in environment” perspective to their analysis. In

particular, the use of social workers as key informants is novel and enlightening, and recognizes the unique perspective that social workers can bring to analyzing how public issues result in private troubles. Historians, public health researchers, and sociologists should take note of this under-utilized source of information and perspective. This book is well-written and straight forward with a natural use of quotes. The time spent on writing and data gathering shines through, and the voices of the participants ring clear and true. It is refreshing to encounter a book that takes on the themes of globalization and neoliberalism without resorting to jargon.

This book should be read by those interested in labor and women studies, community organizing, and occupational health and safety in the service sector. It would also make a great addition to the social work curriculum as a model of how the social work perspective can be embodied by a qualitative research methodology and as a text which shows how the adage "the personal is political" still resonates.

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Carol Lynn McKibben, *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town* (2012). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. \$24.95 (paperback).

A number of texts have examined and deconstructed the history of twentieth century race relations in America, from broad sweeping views of the politics of racial relations, like Gerstle's 2001 *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, to more regional or focused accounts of racial politics and community change (Bayor's 2000 *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta* and Bernstein's 2011 *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-century Los Angeles*). One largely unexamined piece of this history is the role of military towns in the transformation of race relations in American society. Here historian Carol McKibben makes her contribution to the literature, using a variety of sources and documents to lay out the history of race relations, politics, and progress in the town of Seaside, California, the former location of the Fort Ord military base. In this work, she seeks to tell the story of how a small military community in Northern California was