

Bet the Line, But Don't Cross It: The Invisible Boundaries and Territories in a Las Vegas Casino Bar

By Brett William Mauser, Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi

After walking through the red and orange carpeted casino floor, past the whirling lights of the slots, neon markers and video monitors of cackling witches and rolling dice, through the sounds of bells, whistles and fan fare, I found myself sitting in a wide black wooden bar seat at the casino bar of the Quad. It was possibly the cheapest casino on the Vegas Strip. I had been staying at a suite in the Rio Casino for the past few days and the Quad was quite a few steps down. Currently under renovation, the hotel showed signs of its age and experience, but the newly renovated bar showed signs of neither. A black top bar with video poker machines mounted deeply in front of each of the bar seats was the safe haven for many of those souls looking to either escape the insanity of the craps shooters screaming for joy or to find a slightly more silent oasis to share a few drinks and conversations with friends. While at least half of the people sitting and playing the slot machines were smoking cigars and cigarettes and drinking the free drinks that had become standard for all gamblers, there was only the slightest hint of smoke in the air. It wasn't covered up by perfume or air fresheners, it had just become such second nature for the casinos it was barely noticeable anymore. Even the most staunch anti-smoking advocate had given up the fight and settled into the smoke-filled bars and allowed themselves to be hypnotized by the lights of the town rather than become ostracized by those who understood it was Vegas, and that Vegas wasn't giving up its traditions, or the fortunes those traditions brought with it.

“What can I getcha, boss?” I looked up and saw a younger, slightly overweight bald man with a goatee on the other side of the bar pointing at me. I learned fast that you had to memorize the name of your bartender or waiter if you wanted to do Vegas ‘right.’ I glanced at his name tag as I spoke loudly over the walla of the crowd. His prowess with the liquor bottles and mixing glasses reminded me of none other than Tom Cruise’s Brian in *Cocktail*. “Just a regular coke, Brian!” Brian responded, “Can do!” In a matter of seconds and after a couple twirls of a highball glass, I was looking at a Pepsi with a straw dangling from it. I handed him a ten dollar bill and made the wave that showed I didn’t need any change. He looked me in the eye and gave me a sincere thank you before heading off to the next patron. As he headed right, down to the end of the bar toward a group of slightly rowdy girls, my eyes began to comb the rest of the bar to see who else might be taking a break from the fast paced excitement of the Vegas Strip.

Immediately to my left were two girls, obviously friends, sharing a couple chocolate martinis. I never clearly saw the face of the one closest to me as she kept her back to me the majority of the time she stayed at the bar. Her friend, however, was in plain sight. She had pale soft skin with a clear complexion. Her thick black glasses and long flowing black hair, low cut blouse and short skirt that was the starting point of a pair of long legs with painted on black hose and close-toed black shoes made her the most attractive girl at the bar. She had more than a few popular traits in common with the G.I. Joe villainess known as the Baroness. Often times in bars, the darker, soft lighting can paint people in a much more attractive light than a set of harsh fluorescents, but the lights of the bar overhead would occasionally illuminate the room and all those in it for a few seconds. The lights came on giving a well lit view of the Baroness. She was no less beautiful in the faux daylight than she was in the dark mood lighting.

My eyes looked past her, further to my left as laughter broke out. The laughter belonged to a group of six twenty-somethings downing shots and chasers. Brian spun around the liquor bottles and mixing glasses as he prepared a pink foamy concoction for the four men and two girls chanting and ready for more liquid courage. A couple sat to the left of them, of the same age, but seemingly a bit detached from them. As Brian poured out the highball sized shots, the male of the awkward couple popped his eyes open and asked Brian, "Are those shots?" Brian said nothing as he continued to pour eight shots from his two mixers. Within seconds the shots were gone. The uncomfortable man of the awkward couple watches the friends down the shots and continue to talk about the night's events while the uncomfortable blond just stared forward and seemed to be out of her element.

Continuing down the bar to the left, my eyes found two older men, both wearing glasses. The closest to me, who I'll call Burt, was wearing a plaid shirt and was smoking a cigarette and playing the video poker monitor in front of him. The older gentleman to his left was a taller lankier man who I'll call Ernie. Ernie seemingly had little regard for personal space as he constantly reached across Burt for ashtrays, napkins or whatever else of interest might have been on the other side of Burt. Burt seemed to do his best to ignore Ernie and never seemed to move his left hand, armed with a cigarette, from between the two of them. It seemed as if it was his only defense against the imposition and invasion.

My attention is drawn back to the Baroness as her friend stands from her chair and ventures out back into the casino. The Baroness stays behind and I notice for the first time a pack of cigarettes, Marlboro Lights, to the right of the Baroness. They could have belonged to either one, but since the box was never touched again for as long as I was there, I'll never know

which one was the smoker. For just a moment, the Baroness and I glance at each other. She quickly looks away, not wanting to leave any clue that we had ever made eye contact.

My attention is drawn away as I sense someone to my right. I turn just in time to see a Latino male step up to the bar to my right. He has short spiky hair and was freshly shaven, but what stands out most is the bright lime green sweater, and the odd addition of a bar towel around his neck. I wasn't sure what the towel was for until smoke began to make its way into his face. He held up the towel like a barrier between him and the smoker, made a few fans with his hand but as soon as Brian steps up to take his order, forgets completely about the smoke. He orders a Blue Moon and pulls a \$20 bill from his wallet as Brian pours a draft. Upon Brian's return he cards the young man and deposits the beer in front of him. He takes the man's \$20 and returns with change. The young man drops a couple bucks in the glass in front of him which served as a tip jar and places his Rewards card into the video poker machine in front of him. He plays only a couple quick hands of video poker until the girl to his right lights another cigarette. As the smoke continues to flow in his direction, he removes his card and moves on to less smokey pastures.

The Baroness continues to glance away from me when I glance up to comb the bar. After a few minutes she begins to text. We never make eye contact again. Brian has moved over to the locals to the far right as they are saying their farewells. Having maintained a majority of the bar for the time they were there, what they were using to house three would now allow five or more to sit. One of them reaches over the bar to hug Brian, and they all make plans to see each other again the following weekend. As they depart, I glance over and see that Burt and Ernie have left

the bar. I glance at my watch and see that it is now past 2am. The bar never closes, but people still apparently have their bed time. I decide to finish my drink and wrap up my evening.

My attention is drawn back to the Baroness as she leans over the bar and grabs a dozen or so cocktail napkins and starts spreading them out over the monitor in front of her and her friend's old seat. She calls to Brian and asks him to hold her purse behind the bar for a moment. I focus on my drink and try not to watch the Baroness walk away. The six twenty-somethings have disappeared, leaving behind a congregation of empty high ball glasses and beer mugs. The awkward couple remains. As a bar back starts clearing the empty glasses from the bar, the uncomfortable male says that he was with the twenty-somethings and points to one of the full shot glasses the bar back is about to get rid of. He offers it to the uncomfortable male and he shares it with his blond companion. As I wonder whether or not they were really with the twenty-somethings, the Baroness returns. She retrieves her purse from Brian and draws her attention back to the video poker game in front of her. She orders another chocolate martini.

A New Girl steps between the Baroness and I. She is a woman in her thirties, wearing blue jeans and a black shirt. She asks the Baroness about the seat with napkins covering the monitor. The Baroness informs the New Girl that the seat belongs to her friend. I tell the New Girl that I will be leaving when I finish my drink and that she can have my seat. Brian is counting up his tips and preparing to clock out when the New Girl orders a martini. It would be the last drink Brian serves for the night.

The New Girl asks me what the medal count is. I don't know for sure what she said until I look up at the monitor above the bar that was airing the Olympics. She repeats the question as I realize what she had asked the first time. I explain to her that I didn't know and that I was

actually zoning out on other things. She asks what I am writing and I tell her it is for a school project. She nods, uninterested, and doesn't say anything more until I finish my drink and depart at which time she thanks me and takes my seat.

In the elevator on the way up, I meet Burt and Kirk in the elevator. Kirk asks me if I won anything. "Sixty bucks," I tell him. But then I explain, "and then I lost it again. But I came out even, so in Vegas that's a win, I guess." He chuckles and gets off on the 6th floor. Burt remains as Kirk says his good nights to the elevator. Burt says nothing. The doors close and Burt closes his eyes and exhales silently. He was still on the elevator when I got off on the 9th floor and retired for the evening.

The experience was mostly an experiment in nonverbal observation. A few ideas for research and experimentation arose as I sat there observing the interactions of the patrons of this Vegas casino bar. Boundaries seemed to vary in method and scope, but not by intensity. For instance, the locals all seemed to exert dominance over the bar, taking up more space than most others, even though they were only three. The large group of twenty-somethings were many, but still clustered closely together only taking up three or four seats at the bar. The awkward couple preferred to slouch and take up very little room. The Latino was aware and patient of other's space, but once his space was violated by the smoker, he felt uncomfortable and left. Burt was constantly being violated by Kirk, and even tried to build a barrier between them with his arm and cigarette. Upon leaving the bar, the Baroness placed napkins across the monitor to mark her territory. Vegas locals were comfortable with claiming more space while visitors seemed hesitant to invade other's territory, but both locals and visitors took their territories seriously and were uncomfortable when invaded, and protective of it from intrusion.

In this casino bar there exists two cultures that live harmoniously in one, those of the Vegas tourists and those of the locals. While living in two different worlds, they still share the same territory. Even though the casinos are build and created for tourists and out of town visitors, there still seems to be an understanding that the city still belongs to the locals. Visitors still take up little space and don't get confrontational when their space is violated, though they do make non invasive attempts at protecting their boundaries, such as cigarettes or towels protecting oneself from cigarettes. Locals, however, will claim larger space and territory but won't invade the space of visitors. Territory is important to both cultures.

There was no general uncomfortable feelings until the New Girl asked what I was writing. I felt awkward admitting exactly what I was doing as it was the first time in the entire evening that I felt like I was invading these people's privacy. It suddenly became real and became something that could offend or make someone uncomfortable.

I made little contact with the subjects, other than the occasional eye contact with the Baroness and the necessary interaction with the bartender. The interaction with the New Girl was surprising, but was still the polite and courteous thing to do and didn't really affect the results or observations. While once out of my shell I am a very talkative person, it is still a bit difficult to get me to step out of the shell at first. I made little impact on my surroundings.