

CRITICAL gambling studies



ISSN: 2563-190X. Available Open Access at <https://criticalgamblingstudies.com>

BOOK REVIEW

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University of Nevada Press, 2024. 356 pp.
ISBN:9781647791650

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APA Citation: Aitken, R. (2025). Review: Unger, Douglas. Dream City. Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2024. 356 pp. ISBN:9781647791650. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 6(1), 86–88. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs243>

Article History:

Received October 1, 2025

Accepted October 6, 2025

Published October 29, 2025

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Book Review

Unger, Douglas. *Dream City*. Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2024. 356 pp. ISBN:9781647791650

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Available Open Access from <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs243>

The relationship between gambling and finance or, for that matter, between critical gambling studies and critical finance studies, feels at once foundational to both yet strangely relegated to the background. The role of gambling in finance has become, itself, something of what Marieke de Goede has described as the 'excess', a remainder that is both separate from finance (policed in legal and cultural lines that separate finance and gaming) and yet, it remains a ghost that continues to haunt. Despite efforts to contain it, the 'excess' of finance continues to rupture into the present and undermine any easy claim that the financial world has overcome the myriad threats to its sacred commitments of rationality, efficiency and technocratic managerialism. The 'excess,' de Goede argues (2009, p. 296), "is not properly part of the markets, but that which has crossed a certain line of normality, morality or rationality... when normal... financial markets morph into wild zones of irrationality, exuberance or... toxicity." (de Goede, 2009, 296)

The tension between finance and its threatening proximity to excessive 'wild zones of irrationality' takes centre stage in Douglas Unger's *Dream City*. Unger is most well-known for his Pulitzer-finalist *Leaving the Land* (1984), a novel about the corporate incursion into everyday

American farming lives, and the uneven struggle to resist that incursion. Like *Leaving the Land*, *Dream City* narrates an intimate sense of place, the rhythm and senses of an experience that can't be divided from the location it occupies. The places staged in both novels are not merely or even primarily geographical coordinates as much as complex mediations of space and ideas, affinities built around landscape and discourse. These are places that "can be imagined," as Doreen Massey puts it (1994, p. 154), "as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings." The social relations conjured in *Dream City* are found in Las Vegas; a place both textured and empty, dynamic—in constant flux—and yet, also knowable, at least as seen through the life and career of C.D. Reinhart, a failed actor, now fledgling executive with Pyramid Resorts, a casino operator that floats, like the city itself, on various waves of growth and retraction. Reinhart's career, and Pyramid's various efforts at transformation, are echoes of a city itself in complicated departure from its own insular ecosystem (legacy casinos fixed in the Las Vegas landscape, the power and idiosyncracies of local patriarchs) to a world of gambling dominated by investors with a global reach and inhabited by the impersonal calculative logic of Wall Street. Reinhart navigates

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this world of 'shifting social relations and understandings' in an arc that charts his ascendancy up Pyramid's executive chain, a grappling with marriage and children, and a never quite resolved ethical debate about what exactly Las Vegas is and how it relates to the world around it.

In lieu of answers, Reinhart moves between the different kinds of dreams that narrate the story of Las Vegas. This includes a variant of the generic 'American dream', a reference to the early moments of Reinhart's Las Vegas, an economy of recession and growth. This economy, Reinhart's nostalgia tells us, is a frontier of opportunity available to all. "Losers," Unger writes (p. 79), "were welcome here... Anyone who had failed elsewhere and could just *get* here could find a job in construction, the hotel and service industries or the professions." This part of the novel is a kind of working-class prism—it opens with the death of a construction worker at the site of an expansive new casino build—and gambling as a kind of distillation of these possibilities. Gambling, notes Reinhart in a memory of this earlier Las Vegas (p. 120) is "a reach for improbable hope," a kind of "luxury of hope" and a "focus on the game, for as long as it lasts, for a good long while, or so they hope."

This nostalgic dream is eventually supplanted by a larger one animated by a kind of financialization of Las Vegas and the gambling world it hosts. The older world of local bosses, construction unions and the grounded hope for the elusive payout is replaced by networks of global investors, large pools of faceless capital and a transformation of the city into something more generic, at least to Reinhart's eyes. As he narrates it, this transformation is a collision between finance and gambling and a confrontation between old and new. And in this collision, Las Vegas changes in ways that seem to take on the immateriality of finance, the sense that finance—ephemeral and fleeting—occupies a world of its own spectral making. As Wall Street cements its grip on Las Vegas, as the strip

becomes more disciplined and responsive to quarterly market calls, Las Vegas becomes deposited in a kind of unreality. Drawing on long-established ways of figuring finance as fictitious or fantastical, Unger conjures another kind of dream for the city, a fantasy of detachment and simulation. For Reinhart, the new unreal Las Vegas reaches its apex in the immediate wake of 9/11 when it becomes New York, a replica of the city whose financial power it now channels:

Overnight, in front of the New York-New York Hotel Casino, on the sidewalk and along a low wall, people lit votive candles lined up in rows ten deep along the sidewalk near the replica NYFD fireboat at the foot of the structural foam statue of Lady Liberty. Arrangements of flowers began to appear in great mounds under hand-painted banners reading: *We Miss you!*, and *9/11 Heroes!*... Cards and notes for the dead and missing from the Twin Towers and the Pentagon multiplied into a messy but impressive display...folks driving in from L.A., San Francisco, Denver, Albuquerque, one from as far away as Fargo, North Dakota, to lay wreaths in honor of the first responders and others who had died... as if that ersatz Manhattan skyline of a casino was as close to the real New York City as they could travel to or imagine... the growing memorial in front of the New York-New York... confirmed how much Las Vegas had succeeded in projecting its illusion more successfully than anyone had ever dreamed: representation had become reality. (p. 151-152)

Las Vegas is a site of excess—Reinhart's key interlocutor, Greta Olsson, a lone female executive in the changing corporate world, is energized by indulgence, alcohol, sex, risky and aggressive maneuvering. But in Unger's rendering, it also becomes the excess—and the echo—of New York; both its pretended contrast

and its most obvious substitute. In doing so, he raises questions about finance and gambling, about the excess that marks their point of connection and distinction. Is New York the source of Las Vegas' excessive indulgence or only its reflection? Is the casino the emblem of Las Vegas or a marker of the financialized economy writ large? Or both?

The dreams that make up the city are, in ultimate form, left ambiguous. If, as Massey teaches us, place is not so much a bounded area, but a an "open and porous network" (Massey 1994, p. 121), then Las Vegas is a place reshaped as ideas, capital, bodies of all kinds, hope and risk cross its porous edges. Las Vegas, at least as told by Unger, also gives us an agenda for thinking finance through gambling, not just as the 'excess' of/for each other but as conditions of possibility and worlds in constant porous collision.

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