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In pursuit of experience: The postindustrial gentrification of the rural American West

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Abstract

Contemporary rural gentrification – the colonization of rural communities and small-towns by members of the ex-urban middle class – is a nationwide phenomenon that contradicts nearly two centuries of US urbanization. While previous research primarily describes such counter-urbanization as representing a profound divergence from previous patterns (i.e. urbanization, mass production/consumption, etc.), I contend that rural gentrification is best understood as the product of both continuity and change relative to the ideas/practices of Modernity and current postindustrialization. Based on ethnographic research conducted in a community in south-central Montana, I present evidence that the choice by middle-class newcomers to migrate to the rural US is simultaneously the product of: 1) the continued efficacy of the Modern ideals of authenticity and progress; and 2) their aspirations to distinguish themselves as members of an emerging class faction – the postindustrial middle class (PIMC) – through their emphasis upon the production and consumption of *experiences*.

Keywords

rural gentrification, postindustrialization, Modernity, ‘New’ West, experience, US middle class, authenticity/progress, rural US

While it continues to inhabit traditional fortresses of power it is also clear that an alternate, postindustrial kind of mind is beginning to emerge in the interstices of modern culture. (Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 1976: 34)

[M]iddle class culture... labors to produce itself out of the seemingly contradictory resources of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. (Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 2003: 4)

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From the large store-front window of the Coffee Depot in downtown Livingston, Montana, early morning customers watch as the newest snow of winter falls and drifts against the west-facing curbs and building walls. Across the street, hardy souls dash from their automobiles into the post office, leaving their pickup-trucks and SUVs idling in their absences, the tailpipes billowing with white exhaust in the intense February cold.

Seated in the coffee shop this morning, along with me, are four local men discussing, in caffeine-animated tones, the appeal of living in the rural Rocky Mountains. Dave is the first to speak: 'I moved here in 1993 because I wanted to be a part of a small-town, a community.' He calls himself a 'simple nail-pounder', by which he means a carpenter. He is the most formally educated of the group, holding an MA in fine arts from an elite eastern institution near where he grew up and where he got his undergraduate degree as well. He is also an artist, whose works of wooden and metal sculptures have shown in local galleries. He is in his mid-30s, lean, and slightly hawkish. He wears, on this winter day, as he does on most, a cap to cover his balding head; the rest of him is clothed in workingman's canvas and denim. Before he yields the floor, Dave adds:

I was tired of the anonymous life of the big city. My wife – my girlfriend, at the time – and I were uninspired by the sterility of the metropolis in which we were stuck. Our lives there seemed artificial. We wanted to be a part of something real; something that would afford us the opportunity to expand our horizons and engage with a more authentic style of life. We wanted to live amongst people who had similar tastes and desires.

Seated across the table from Dave is Aaron, tall and athletic; he wears a brand-name Gore-Tex ski-jacket and ski-pants. Aaron is an economist. He worked in Denver, Colorado, for several years out of college before quitting his job and moving to Montana in 1997. He now works as a consultant, traveling around the country for projects. Nearing 40, he is the only unmarried member of the discussion, and knowing his frenetic schedule it is easy understand why. In addition to his work travel – which amounts to, at least, 10 days per month and sometimes takes him away for weeks on end – Aaron is a rabid outdoorsman. Indeed, at the point in time I am describing (9 a.m. on a winter weekday morning), he has just returned from the Suce Creek trailhead (eight miles south of town), where he took a short (for him) 10-mile morning cross-country ski jaunt. His backcountry activities command the bulk of his time in Montana. 'I came,' he says with a smile, because 'I got tired of having to share the Colorado backcountry with 2 million of my friends.' In the winter, if he is not downhill skiing Bridger Bowl or Big Sky (the two local ski areas), he is cross-country skiing in Yellowstone National Park (hereafter Yellowstone) or back-country skiing in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness (hereafter the Wilderness); in summer, his preferred activities are mountain biking and hiking/camping.

By contrast, Ron, 45, rarely has the desire or opportunity to access the Wilderness, the northern boundary of which sits less than five miles from town. He loves the landscape of Montana, he says: the beauty of nature overwhelms him

sometimes, but he did not come here to practice his life *in* it. 'For me it was similar to his situation,' he says, pointing at Dave, 'My wife and I wanted to get out of LA and we stumbled on this place on a road-trip. We liked its relatively small size, and the possibilities we saw in it for a person to be involved in a community.' Ron wears a wool sweater, khaki pants, and a puffy down jacket (even in the warm shop) with the fur-lined hood covering his full head of curly-black hair; although he and his wife migrated in 1997, he has still not fully acclimatized. He maintains his previous career in the film industry, traveling for months on end to locations around the world. Despite his frequent absences, as we will see in more detail later, Ron is the most politically and socially active of those present.

The final member of the quartet is Patrick, who is, by contrast, the least engaged of the discussants in local sociopolitical affairs. He is also the only one of the men who lives outside of town. He, his wife, and their daughter are building a house on their streamside acreage in the southern part of the county called Paradise Valley. In his late 30s, his mid-section is thickening as his hair thins. His wife, Marsha, works for a national media outlet as their regional producer and her income largely supports the family. A former real estate developer in Los Angeles, Patrick takes occasional jobs in carpentry to supplement the family income. The majority of his time is spent raising his daughter and working on the house. Unlike those already mentioned, it was not outdoor recreational opportunities or the social advantages of town that drew Patrick and his family to Park County, but rather their desire to connect with something real and profound that they felt was part of the ranching landscape of the American West. Explaining why he rarely comes to town, except on inclement days like this, or visits Yellowstone or the Wilderness, Patrick says:

We needed a place where we knew we were surrounded by good folks, real people. Out where we live, when we moved there [in 1996], there were only the old-time ranchers up our valley. Those people are there because they love the place not because it offers them big bucks (like what draws folks to LA) or because it's suddenly cool (like the a#*holes who have moved in since [then]).

I begin with this scene because, aside from their gender uniformity, these men exemplify in important ways a significant segment of recent newcomers to Livingston, Park County, Montana, where I have performed ethnographic research on the causes and effects of contemporary rural gentrification since 2002 (Hines, 2004, 2007, forthcoming). They embody the demographic outlines of what became in the 1990s a profound reversal of almost 200 years of US internal migration history (Cromartie, 2003). The four men range in age from their mid-30s to mid-40s. They are all relative newcomers to the area, ranging in tenure from five to 10 years. They all moved as adults to this small town (population: 8000) in the south-center of the state, just north of Yellowstone. They all have college degrees and were raised in urban or suburban settings in other parts of the US. Not one of them came to Montana specifically to pursue career opportunities, although all of them now possess personally satisfying and economically viable occupations

(some of them far removed from their previous fields). Except for Aaron, they each have a spouse, with whom they moved to Montana, and children, which they produced since arriving.

The significant in-migration of ex-urbanites has been documented in non-metropolitan areas throughout the US, including: California (Duane, 1999; Walker and Fortmann, 2003), the Midwest (Hoey, 2005; Salamon, 2003), the mid-Atlantic region (Spain, 1993), New England (Brown-Saracino, 2004), and the Northwest (Rudzitis and Streatfield, 1993) as well as the Rocky Mountains (Cromartie and Wardwell, 1999; Ghose, 2004; Jobs, 2000; Wiltsie and Wyckoff, 2003). I employ the term 'rural gentrification' – which has been applied to related developments in Great Britain (e.g. Parsons, 1980; Phillips, 1993, 2005; alternately referred to as 'greentrification' by Smith and Phillips, 2001) and the US (Ghose, 2004; Travis, 2007) – to reinforce that this process – like its urban namesake (coined by Glass, 1964) – is best understood as a form of colonization of formerly predominantly working-class domains by ex-urban middle-class Americans. In this respect, this work seeks to build upon the class-based analysis of such projects in New York City (Smith, 1996), Vancouver (Ley, 1996), London (Butler, 2003; Hamnett, 2003; Hamnett and Whitelegg, 2007), and other cities of the Global North.

In addition to being part of this national migratory reversal, these four men – their actions and their words – are illustrative of the most common themes of practical and rhetorical narrative of recent newcomers to the rural Rocky Mountains that I recorded. Drawing on evidence from several rounds of ethnographic fieldwork (totaling 18 months), I offer an appreciation of the forces that have drawn people like these to places like this. These forces, I contend, are illustrative of ongoing shifts within the wider social structure and cultural patterns of the contemporary US. I present this study as an ethnographic appraisal of the implications of the transition from the predominance of an industrial regime of production/consumption to a postindustrial one that has by now long been the subject of sociological prognostication (e.g. Bell, 1973; Giddens, 1973; Touraine, 1971; see also. Cohen and Zysman, 1987; see Badham, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c, for overview). The specific evidence I tender is that of rural newcomers' dedicated attention to the practice of authentic 'experiences', as well as the marshalling and deployment – through their constructed narratives – of these experiences as markers that distinguish them as *postindustrial* middle-class (PIMC) Americans. Put concisely, I interpret ex-urban in-migration as the pursuit by members of the PIMC of dialectical Modern cultural ideals of authenticity and progress vis-à-vis the appropriation of valued experiences (and the construction of the narratives that describe them). Before presenting the theoretical and ethnographic context of this piece, I will briefly discuss the methods that I employed in this project.

Regrouping

I came to Park County, Montana, in January 2002 for my year's worth of fieldwork with a comparable degree of preparation as ethnographer Carrie Yodanis (2006)

describes of her arrival at her field-site, a small rural fishing/tourist village. She disembarked with a 'set of research questions, some hypotheses, [and] an interview guide . . . developed . . . from existing literature' (2006: 344). However, both she and I (each in our own way) 'learned that the assumptions [we] had made were wrong and that [the] interview guide . . . was not going to work in a small town where everyone knew each other and no one knew [us]' (2006: 344).

In similar fashion to Yodanis, in my attempt to regroup from my initial stall, I began to spend a good deal of time in a local coffee shop and it was there that I found the connections and insight that provided the entrée to the understandings presented in this piece. I spent nearly every morning during my first month of fieldwork in the Coffee Depot pursuing conversations with the locals that rushed in for caffeine fixes, taking notes on what I saw and heard from those in line and the few who lingered, and typing up my meager field-notes. It was on one of those mornings late in the month that I was party to the conversation that forms the introduction to this piece.

Beginning with a small number of contacts gleaned from my coffee shop interactions and pursuing a snowball sampling technique, I interviewed all of the members of the community that I could identify as newcomers who would agree to speak with me; people were incredibly generous in this regard and over the course of the year the number grew to over 200 participants. To date, I have interviewed almost 400 locals: nearly 300 newcomers and over 100 natives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for roughly one hour for each participant (or couple). To ensure that interviews were systematic and allowed for meaningful comparison, a (reworked) interview guide was used to broach central issues and to focus each interview on comparable topics. The broad themes touched on during interviews included: why participants left their prior urban existence; what (if anything) catalyzed their migration; why they chose a rural place; why they chose Montana; why they chose Park County, and how they would describe their lives in their new homes. Follow-up questions were used to obtain clarification and more detailed information on particular topics. While the interview guide ensured consistency across interviews, participants were encouraged to bring up topics that were not covered in the guide.

In addition to formal interviews, the observation and recording of people's day-to-day activities were central to the project. While a significant portion of the data for this piece proceeds from the quantity and quality of the discursive narrative pertaining to authenticity and experiences that I collected through interviews, an equally important set of data was gathered as part of the examination of the practice of everyday life. It was through the latter that the practical discourse of progress, which was generally glossed over within the newcomers' rhetorical discourse of authenticity, was made manifest. The point being that while the PIMC speak of (and pursue) the authenticity of Montana, Yellowstone, the American West, and the rural US, they also practice (or pursue) progress in their lives.

To observe and record the enactment of the ideals of authenticity and progress as well as the attention to the accretion of 'experiences' that I chronicle herein,

I undertook purposeful sampling of members of the in-migrant community. After dozens of interviews and several months of general observation, I identified newcomers that were exemplary of the specific categories of migrants that I identify later. Over the course of the remaining months of my initial fieldwork I engaged with these participants to a greater degree: attending their family events, visiting them in their homes, socializing with them in public, informally interviewing them on occasion, recreating with them, etc. It is from this familiarity that the specific ethnographic insight presented below largely springs.

The postindustrial priority of experience

A great many specific hypotheses have been forwarded by analysts to explain urban-to-rural migration (e.g. Duane, 1999; Jobes, 2000; Rudzitis and Streatfield, 1993; Salamon, 2003). By far the most common explanations of the process cast it as emblematic of a shift toward the greater emphasis of postmaterialism/postproductivism (e.g. Abramson and Inglehart, 1995; Wiltsie and Wyckoff, 2003), lifestyle migration (e.g. Hoey, 2005), amenity migration (e.g. Moss, 2006), voluntary simplicity (e.g. Pierce, 2000), the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and/or a 'sustainable future' (e.g. Jacob, 1997) in the lives of contemporary Americans. All of these approaches coexist within a larger vein of thought, emphasizing the process's discontinuities with past American thought and practice.

Hoey's (2005) insightful essay is paradigmatic of this approach. Based on his recent ethnographic research among youngish, ex-urban newcomers to Traverse City, Michigan, Hoey explains urban-to-rural migration as 'life-style migration', wherein 'the choice made of *where* to live is consciously, intentionally also one about *how* to live' (Hoey, 2005: 615; emphasis in original). As he defines it, life-style migration 'concerns individuals and families who choose relocation as a way of redefining themselves in the reordering of work, family, and personal priorities' (Hoey, 2005: 593). This work and others like it highlight the distinction between in-migrants' lives in their previous and current places of residence.

My work seeks to complement this body of work by contextualizing the process of rural gentrification relative to both the discontinuities *and* the continuities within the lives of rural gentrifiers, as well as within US cultural history, generally. In particular, I suggest, rural gentrification draws upon and perpetuates preexisting trends within US society regarding the: 1) character of the middle class, in general; 2) qualities of Modern subjectivity; and 3) changes accruing from the programs of the PIMC. I delineate each of these three points below before contextualizing their relevance in terms of my ethnographic analysis.

A middle-class heritage

An appreciation of the contemporary character of US society and its internal dynamics must begin with its Modern-capitalist heritage. This is marked, as

Marx noted, by the fundamental antagonism between its two paradigmatic social 'classes': people with access to the means of production (the privileged/capitalist class) and those without such means (the laboring class). Proceeding from this insight, a great deal of analytic effort has been applied to understanding the changes that have nuanced the bifurcated social world of early Modern-capitalism (e.g. Bell, 1973; Bourdieu, 1984; Ehrenreich, 1989; Frykman and Lofgren, 1987; Mills, 1951; Ortner, 1998). The principal advance on this topic, for our purposes, came with Weber's (1978) analytical differentiation between a person's *class position* (derived from his/her economic power) and his/her *social status* (proceeding from issues of prestige or honor); as Weber described it, although the two are often intimately bound to one another they are also discernibly distinct. This insight opened the door, as it were, for the elaboration on the character of what Weber referred to as the 'intermediate strata' of Modern capitalist society, which in both common and scholarly parlance we call the 'middle class'.

The emergence of this historically novel *class position*, in Weberian terms, was fostered, in one regard, by the dissolution of the US's first and principal 19th-century middle class of independent farmers and by the increase in 'white-collar' salaried positions – in the bureaucratic, service, and professional sectors of the *urban* capitalist labor market – in the early 20th century (Mills, 1951).¹ These positions, in general, afforded their practitioners a degree of remove from material production (hard physical labor) and greater income. This elevated position did not translate into control of the means of production, however, and thus while the middle class remained aligned in Marx's schema with the laboring class, these members of capitalist society did possess (by Weber's time) greater access to increasingly mass-produced commodities, including automobiles and private homes, which drew them, in terms of their ability to consume, closer to the position of the privileged. By virtue of this ambiguity, the expanding 'middle class' inverted the principal criteria described by Marx; rather than defining their social status (and/or having it defined for them) strictly by their position in the system of production – that is, principally as sellers of labor or owners of capital – the members of this emerging class differentiated themselves by their ability to consume and the quality of their consumption of goods. Accompanying the growth of this *class position* was a modification in the means by which its members dispensed and graded *social status*; as has been documented (see Frykman and Lofgren, 1987; Lears, 1981, Susman, 1985). The result was that the principal criteria of proper personhood for the members of this social group subtly shifted from "you are what you do" to "you are what you have" (Liechty, 2003: 15).

Thus, the primary distinction of the 20th-century middle class is 'determined less directly by its relations to the "means of production" (selling labor or owning capital) than by its relations to the market, that is, by its ability to consume' (Liechty, 2003: 16–17). This point leads us to the appreciation that although the middle-class position rests on a profound amount of economic privilege, its power is 'always exercised and reproduced culturally' (Liechty, 2003: 14). The cultural

character of middle-class-ness, as was already noted, necessitates an internal dynamic through which it is constantly constructed and reconstructed in 'opposition to its class others, above and below' (Liechty, 2003: 15; emphasis in original); thus, it is 'always a work in progress' (Liechty, 2003: 4). This idea – that social 'class' is manifest as cultural patterns – is not novel in and of itself, having been explored by a variety of scholars (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Fletcher, 2008; Frykman and Lofgren, 1987; Lamont, 1991; Liechty, 2003; Nava, 1992; Phillips, 1998a, 1998b). However, the specifics of the latest iteration – the cultural criteria of distinction employed by the *newest* division within the US middle class: the postindustrial middle class – forms the basis of the contribution of this piece.

As alluded to earlier, the impetus to internal differentiation that characterizes the history of the middle class is, at least in part, the result of its precarious interim position in Western society (Ehrenreich, 1989; Frykman and Lofgren, 1987; Liechty, 2003). Existing in an ambiguous situation as they do between the two principal sections of capitalist society, members of the middle class are constantly called to promote and justify their self-worth and social position. This situation paradoxically demands that they simultaneously hew close to the dominant character of Modern subjectivity *and* creatively manifest cultural forms of distinction. Thus, the members of the middle class in the US today are both the most Modern among us and the most actively engaged in the creation and maintenance of internal cultural boundaries, of which the postindustrial emphasis on experience is but the latest and (currently) most spirited.

Pierre Bourdieu's work is the most prominent example of the attempt to theorize the middle classes' efforts to draw cultural distinctions between themselves and other classes. In *Distinction* (1984), he described the upper-middle class as operating with limited 'economic capital' (relative to the upper classes) but with varying, but quite high, degrees of 'cultural capital' – that is, understanding of manners, taste, art, literature, etc. – that they deploy to distinguish themselves from other segments of the social body and seek to parlay into elevated social status vis-à-vis others. Despite what I consider to be the limitations of this perspective, in that it is possessed of an implicit formalist/rational-actor model of human behavior, Bourdieu's work nevertheless provides an appreciation of the dynamics of cultural competition in which the interim classes engage to establish and maintain their social positions.

While it is its abiding attention to internal contests for status and honor that effectively characterize the US middle class as a whole, the tools of these competitions are not solely the economic power (i.e. position in the system of production) of the groups' members but also their valued patterns of consumption. As Weber understood well, in a capitalist social environment, it is never *not* about money, but it also rarely (if ever) completely about it either. The practice of proper middle-class personhood is not just being *able* to purchase the right commodities, but knowing which commodities are the right ones *to* purchase; and, as I describe next, it is among this subset of US society that status/honor is no longer as importantly arbitrated by commodities.

Acting right

Although membership in the middle class is predicated on socioeconomic factors, like profession and income, its members still must 'act right' in order to be accepted as proper members of the class or class faction. Thus, as with all social characteristics, class must be understood as a performance or set of practices. It is my contention in this piece that increasingly *acting right* for the PIMC is judged by the proper consumption of experiences as well as the consumption of proper experiences, which helps differentiate its members from coexisting subsets of the middle class.²

To appreciate the full significance of the difference between industrial and post-industrial regimes of production/consumption, I again rely upon the insight of Marx's description of the character of earlier stages of Modern-capitalism. As MacCannell (1976) notes, it was Marx who initially deciphered the semiotics of social difference proper to an industrial regime of production/consumption. In his evaluation, Marx referred to what he considered the overzealous attention given to material possessions as arbiters of social position as the 'fetishism of commodities' (1906: 81). Marx initiated the analysis of ways in which members of Western society deployed goods as signs in a complex system that allowed them to communicate to one another where (and with whom) they stood in a highly stratified society, in which other systems of communication (i.e. kinship networks, local residence, etc.) had either partially or completely broken down. Marx recognized that the most important relationship in industrial society is 'not between man and man (as in peasant society) but between man and his productions' (MacCannell, 1976: 21). By the late 20th century, MacCannell proposed that the dominant system has again changed and that 'experiences' were beginning to supplant commodities as the principal signs (for at least some) in a Western middle-class system of social semiotics. MacCannell developed the idea of an increasing emphasis on experiences as cultural criteria of social differences in his seminal work, *The Tourist* (1976), in which he presents one of the first and most prescient descriptions of the emerging *postindustrial* section of the Western middle class.

It is important to point out that MacCannell's insight applies (like Marx's discussion of the role of the commodity) to both production *and* consumption. Thus, the shift described in this piece is not from a focus on production to a focus on consumption, but rather between a regime of production/consumption centered on commodities to one emphasizing experience. In other words, postindustrialization does not necessarily entail a greater emphasis on consumption over production, as some researchers have claimed (e.g. Wiltsie and Wyckoff, 2003; compare Hines, forthcoming). Instead, members of the PIMC are largely integrated into a regime that increasingly produces and consumes experiences, that is, knowledge, services, entertainment, etc., as markers of its distinction from other subsets of US society (particularly within the middle class).³

Since the experiences, upon which these people place so much emphasis, are (largely) intangible artifacts of life, recounting them in narrative form becomes the

principal means through which members of the PIMC communicate that they are successfully attending to this powerfully important criterion of self-worth and social status proper to their class faction. Unlike commodities – which have lives of their own (Appadurai, 1986) and can (and, in fact, to complete the aforementioned cycle that is commodity fetishism, must) be experienced by others as well as by the person who purchased, possesses, and/or created them – experiences are available to others (once they have been *experienced*) only through their narrative exhibition by the person/people who experienced them. Thus, as I elucidate here, the use of *narratives of experience* are integral to the composition of rural newcomers' identities; their actions represent an intensification of the emphasis on experience in identity construction, as well as on status creation and maintenance. To fully appreciate the subtleties that drive the contemporary process of ex-urban migration to the rural US and establish it as an effective exemplar of the social transition occurring in contemporary Western society between an *industrial* and a *postindustrial* regime of production/consumption, I will now further contextualize the process in relation to the cultural character of the contemporary era of Western history, or Modernity.⁴

Modern subjectivity (and the role of narrative)

Much attention has been given to the topic of the emergence of the Modern subject through the course of the European Enlightenment and beyond (e.g. Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1984, 1985; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Habermas, 1988; Harvey, 1990; Patterson, 1997; Taylor, 1989). One of the abiding and most dramatic characteristics of this transition is the 'attitude of Modernity', described by Foucault (1984: 39) as a self-conscious and novel way of thinking and feeling that demands of the individual the ability to know oneself as a mutable object and not as an unchanging social entity. The objectifying of the universe and the subjectifying of the individual – that is, the creation of the objective space from which the Modern subject can view the world, including him/herself, which is the foundation of a *scientific* perspective – involves the extraction of the people from a sense of continuous time (Foucault, 1984). As the result of this extraction, in Modernity, both identity (i.e. personhood as the product of self-worth and social status) and time become points of contention to a greater extent than they were in preceding eras (Berger et al., 1973).

At least in part, questions related to time that were provoked by this uncertainty were addressed by emphasizing the potential for progress via worldly human action. This inspired a seminal shift of the era in the dominant Western perspective on time from a theory of 'history as decline' to one of 'history as progress' (Patterson, 1997; see also Bury, 1924; Ginsberg, 1953; Green, 1950; Sampson, 1956; compare Nisbet, 1980).

Modern uncertainty is also manifest as questions regarding the veracity of people, products, and experiences. As has been noted, authenticity only becomes a serious issue in Modernity (Bendix, 1997; Davis, 1979; May, 1995; NIR; Taylor, 1991;

Trilling, 1972); with the loosening of the firm patterns of ascribed status of feudal society the sincerity of people's perspective and identity is subject to greater scrutiny.⁵ Increased social fluidity inspired more potential for misrepresentation/miscommunication of intent and status.

One mechanism that Modern subjects have commonly employed to transcend such uncertainties is the creation of narratives to establish and maintain coherence and authenticity in their lives. Handler and Saxton (1988) explore the importance of such narratives to Modern subjects through their ethnographic work with contemporary 'living history' enthusiasts. These people, who participate in historical reenactments (e.g. Civil War battles) or volunteer/work at museums (e.g. colonial Williamsburg), seek to authenticate their lives by linking their experiences to coherent and culturally approved narratives.

Handler and Saxton's point derives from the work of Martin Heidegger (e.g. 1962), the fundamental insight of which was to defy the essentialization of identity or cultural categories such as authenticity. Heidegger recognized that for Modern subjects, it is not merely contact with or attention to perceived element(s) of authenticity that conveys the state to them. From this perspective the self is not a prior condition but an ongoing process through which an individual seeks 'being-in-the-world', the status of which is contingent upon the achievement of coherence through the appropriation and practice of culturally sanctioned narrative structure(s). As Handler and Saxton describe, '*Living historians share with other moderns the notion that an authentic life is a storied or emplotted life . . . Modern narratives are particularly effective in constituting individuated identities*' (Handler and Saxton, 1988: 250; emphasis in original). The most effective of these narratives, from the Modern subject's perspective, according to Handler and Saxton, are those that bind individual experience to established traditions of thought/behavior while still allowing individuals latitude to personalize the project.

As described by Heidegger, the authenticity sought by Modern subjects actually takes two forms. The first is predicated on the idea held by living-history practitioners that 'everyday experience is "unreal" or inauthentic' (Handler and Saxton, 1988: 243) and authenticity defined as 'perfect simulation' (Handler and Saxton, 1988: 242) of previous patterns. This ideal is the one given the most conscious and overt rhetorical attention by Modern subjects; as a result, it constitutes a wide and diverse discursive trope. This is best thought of as an expression of the belief that an essentialized form of authenticity correlates to past forms of landscape and behavior. The Montana newcomers' attention to this type of authenticity is abundantly evident in their descriptions of the rural/small-town experience they have sought through their migration. However, what Handler and Saxon (following Heidegger) note is that the pursuit of this style of authenticity facilitates and obfuscates the actual means by which Modern subjects satisfy their desire to authenticate their lives. Thus, ultimately, while such people seek authenticity as 'perfect simulation', they overcome inauthenticity by creating what the authors call 'narrative coherence', or historical worlds that are '*emplotted* or constituted in

stories' (Handler and Saxton, 1988: 243; emphasis in original). This type is best understood as a processual (or enacted form) of authenticity.

The implications of postindustrialization

Returning to my ethnographic material for the rest of this piece, I present examples of the ways in which the rural newcomers with whom I worked practice life and construct narratives that highlight their *authentic* rural/small-town Montana experiences as validation of their migration. By seeking to authenticate their existence in this manner these ex-urbanites attempt to differentiate themselves from other middle- and working-class Americans through their enactment and deployment of specific *narratives of experience*. To this end, I reintroduce and further describe Aaron and Ron (the participants from the earlier coffee shop scene) and their families. The narrative themes that they respectively present cohere into discursive veins that revolve around culturally patterned notions of where authenticity is to be found; or, perhaps better said, in which forum(s) they believe they can (or would most like to) experience the authenticity they believe is inherent in such spaces.⁶

In the cases described here authenticity is located (or negotiated) via the rural gentrifiers' engagement with the experiences of: 1) nature through a recreational lifestyle; 2) nature through the agricultural landscape; 3) a sense of 'community'; and/or 4) social empowerment (i.e. political enfranchisement). It is important to emphasize that although distinct from one another, these thematic channels share an attention to the idea of the rural/small town domain as a valued place, where a more authentic (and, ultimately, progressive) experience of life can be obtained than was possible in newcomers' prior urban existence. It is also important to recognize that, although largely mutually exclusive, these 'frames of reference' are not always so; in that they can and do merge in the practice of any given individual. To demonstrate this point, I draw on two ethnographic descriptions that, nonetheless, exemplify three metanarrative categories. My description of Ron's practice as an in-migrant will demonstrate the extent to which his interest in rural Montana is a combination of the categories of: a) a sense of community (also exemplified, but not discussed here by Dave's migration); and b) social empowerment. I begin, however, with Aaron and his pursuit of authenticity/progress vis-à-vis the experience of the natural environment.

The natural environment

Aaron's practical and narrative focus on the experience of the natural environment is exemplary of the most common plot enacted by the in-migrating ex-urbanites with whom I worked. Aaron is part of a group of newcomers who came to Livingston, Montana, principally because of its unqualified access to 'public' land, including Yellowstone and the Wilderness. For them the primary appeal of the rural US is the natural environment. The members of this subset of in-migrants

are characterized by their commitment to regular, if not near-constant, outdoor activity, and are described as ‘hardcore’ in the local parlance. Aaron is rarely seen around Livingston when he is not coming from, heading to, or engaged in some sort of outdoors activity. He trail-runs, backpacks, bikes (both roads and mountain trails), whitewater-kayaks, and skis (both cross-country and downhill). On one level, Aaron and the other members of this subgroup of newcomers seek a nearly perpetual engagement with an ‘authentic’ backcountry experience; what is also evident from their behavior is that their successful construction of individual narratives is predicated on the extent to which they can see themselves improving at those activities – actualizing progress in their practice of them – not merely their connection with the outdoors.

The personal trajectory that led Aaron to south-central Montana provides insight to what he sought in his migration. Aaron was raised in the South and college-educated in the Midwest. In the mid-1980s, fresh out of university, he moved to Colorado. At the time it seemed like the perfect opportunity for him; a challenging, well-paid job in urban Denver on the doorstep of all the mountain resources a person could want. He quickly realized, however, that it was simply too crowded for his tastes.

The catalytic event in Aaron’s migration to Montana came while returning to Denver from a ski trip. After it took him four and a half hours to go a hundred miles, Aaron says, he took out a map, drew a triangle on it with points at Boise and Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, and Billings, Montana, and started doing research on the places in between, with the idea of moving there. He needed a major airport (which he found in neighboring Bozeman) to continue his business (as an economic consultant) and he wanted mountains to facilitate his outdoor activities. The proximity to Yellowstone National Park, he said, was a major factor in his migration to Park County.

The cultural ideals of a Modern subject are evident in Aaron’s description of his outdoors activities. His testimony simultaneously rings in two registers. At one moment he waxes eloquently on the aesthetic qualities of the outdoors:

There is a sublimity to it I can’t describe. To be at a lake near the top of the Absarokas at night, with the sky filled (I mean *filled*) with stars, and not another light visible. It makes you feel like you have gone back to a time before humans.

At the next moment he is describing his development as a backcountry skier:

When I moved to Denver I had only skied a couple of times in my life. But I knew it was something I wanted to do. I wanted to be able to do it well. I started going up to the ski resorts [in Colorado] every winter weekend. After living there for five years I felt I was finally becoming an expert. So next I tried backcountry skiing. And I loved it. I knew I would. I need the challenge to keep me interested; that is one of the great things about Montana. You have the commercial ski hills and then all this back-country to explore.

The compulsion to progress, although latent, is evident in his testimony; his desire to find and develop 'new and improved' experiences is further manifest in his actions. With the benefit of hindsight it is possible to discern a clear set of stages through which Aaron's skiing efforts have advanced in his first 10 years in Montana. By his own admission he was a decent skier when he arrived but after four years of skiing as many days as possible each season, he had improved dramatically; so much so that, in his fifth year in town, he was invited to join the ski-patrol – a coveted and respected (albeit difficult and low-paying) position of safety officer – at Bridger Bowl, the local ski-hill. After two seasons of ski-patrolling Aaron quit to pursue more 'backcountry' skiing, which is skiing done off-*piste* in the mountains of the national forests and parks. To be a 'backcountry' skier one must not only be incredibly adept at making runs down (ungroomed) mountain slopes but also in good enough physical condition to be able to ski *up* the mountain beforehand; what is more, a person must thoroughly understand the physics of snow to be able to avoid avalanches, as well as being capable at search and rescue should something go awry so far from civilization. At the time I met Aaron in 2002 backcountry skiing was the primary focus of his life. He and a couple of other local enthusiasts spent several days each winter week in the mountains of the Wilderness and/or Yellowstone.

After several seasons of backcountry skiing, Aaron moved on to what proved to be the final stage of his development; in 2003 he began traveling to British Columbia and Alaska each winter to take advantage of the heli-skiing there. Heli-skiing involves riding a helicopter to the top of remote mountain ranges in order to ski incredibly long, untouched powder-runs down entire peaks. This program, because of its remoteness, the steepness of the terrain, and the ever-present danger of avalanche, represents a paragon of amateur skiing.

The trajectory of improvement in Aaron's skiing described here was a central and defining facet of his experience of his new home for his first 10 years; it was a trajectory that took one final fascinating turn, which emphatically exposed the alternate discourse that also informs it. In 2006, after a year spent writing and teaching in Atlanta, I returned to Park County for the summer to continue my ethnographic research. On one of my first days back in town I ran into Aaron at the weekly Wednesday evening farmers market in downtown Livingston. He and I began by discussing local politics – an increasing interest of his, as I learned – and then, as a conversation-filler, I asked him how the previous ski season had been. He paused, smiled, and told me that he only made it out a few times all year; 'just on big powder days', he said. The surprise must have registered on my face because he quickly moved to ameliorate what I assume he saw as concern on my part; his response, however, was one I could not have anticipated. He said, 'Don't worry. Now I'm into mountain biking. I go out a couple of times a week. I'm getting pretty good. I think I'll enter some races later in the summer.'

At the time this made sense to me for reasons that I could not completely articulate (in part because I too am a middle-class American and raised to a similar style of 'common sense'). Upon reflection, however, I came to realize that this

statement held a key to understanding the ostensibly hidden element driving rural gentrification. Rather than dismiss his as slavish attention to the latest outdoor fad or the actions of an unfocused person, I feel we have to see Aaron's shift from skiing to mountain biking as occurring at a very portentous time, one that is expository of the underlying patterns of value and belief that define the gentrification of the 'New' West as a Modern middle-class project. Aaron's shift to mountain biking – as well as his 'career' as an amateur skier – are indicative of the abiding focus that rural gentrifiers have on the pursuit of progress as an invaluable facet of – or criterion of success in – their lives. What this case demonstrates is the extent to which it is not just an access point to the *authenticity* of the natural environment that Aaron sought through his skiing but also an avenue to pursue progress in his life. It is revelatory that he grew disenchanted with skiing and switched to an entirely new pursuit (i.e. mountain biking) at the precise point when he had essentially exhausted the potential to keep improving as a skier. By moving on to another project Aaron had renegotiated the potential for continued progress in his life through his engagement with the natural environment of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

The small-town sense

In contrast to the narrative(s) of experience developed and employed by Aaron (and other similarly oriented outdoor-enthusiast newcomers) is the example of Ron and Adriana Brick. Ron, who was also introduced in the preliminary scene, and his wife moved to the Rocky Mountains in 1991, after they had become disenchanted by their lives in metropolitan Los Angeles. Ron cites a particularly bad episode of road rage born of frustration with the traffic and endless construction as the catalyst for their departure from southern California. The summer after their freeway incident, the Bricks took a trip around the West looking for a place in which they 'could become part of the community'; Ron says, LA 'wasn't friendly anymore. We wanted to be more than just taxpayers. We wanted to be *citizens*. We wanted to make a difference.' The Bricks found their spot when in late July of that summer they passed through Park County. For them, its appeal was centered in the town of Livingston, which conformed, in several ways, to their idealized vision of the rural/small-town US. For Ron, this can be expressed in two ways: first, the town seemed to offer the potential to connect with a 'sense of community'; and, second, the physical space of the town signaled a connection with a bygone era of US history. In both ways – its social and built environment – Livingston signaled to Ron the potential for the construction of narratives of experience that would inspire an authentic existence.

Ron represents a species of rural/small-town newcomer for whom the built environment of Livingston is a particular focus of attention. In general, the appeal is predicated on the extent to which the town exists as a physical manifestation and continuing example of an increasingly bygone era of US history: the age of industrial production. This circumstance is undoubtedly correlated to

MacCannell's recognition that, in the postindustrial era, the world of work (i.e. industrial production) is increasingly becoming the site of touristic pursuit of authentic experience. As MacCannell noted (1976), when a significant segment of society no longer interacts with a given environment as a site of the production of commodities, its potential value as a site of experience is accentuated. This process can be seen clearly in the value associated with the idea of 'wilderness', which throughout US history has increased in a direct inverse relationship to the processes of urbanization and industrialization (Nash, 1967). Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, sites that many Americans previously engaged with in a productive fashion (as sites of work, of industrial production, etc.) have been decommissioned but yet remain as fascinatingly potent portals to a more authentic past.

Livingston's industrial past as a railroad town is written into its contemporary landscape, with the large rail-yards and workshops that occupy the center of town, the turn-of-the-20th-century architecture that yet dominates the downtown area, and the neighborhoods of neat, humble residences that spread east and west from the downtown core. Although in general the town has retained a significant degree of the character of the passing era of industrial production, there is one building in particular that stands as an emblem of this aspect of the built environment and its appeal to postindustrial newcomers; that building is the Livingston railroad depot.

Livingston was laid out in 1882–3 where the mainline of the Northern Pacific Railroad crossed the Yellowstone River. The current depot was built by the railroad in 1902 to accommodate the large number of travelers bound for Yellowstone via the Park's northern gate at Gardiner, Montana (53 miles south of Livingston). Today the rail-yards and hulking brick repair shops of the Northern Pacific are nearly empty. In 1985, when the Burlington Northern (successor to the Northern Pacific) rail-line divested itself of its southern Montana assets, the railroad donated the depot to the city. Since then its interior has been refurbished to provide a venue in which to stage community events (such as town forums and Christmas galas) and its former offices and baggage storage are leased as retail and professional space to a variety of interests.

Livingston and the depot share an historical trajectory, in that both: 1) are creations of a formerly large and powerful corporation; 2) have now been stripped of their previous role in an industrial regime of production/consumption; and 3) remain symbolic of that era despite being reworked into a new *postindustrial* regime of production/consumption. Thus, although Livingston and the Livingston Depot of today are being used and experienced by people according to contemporary agendas, they nonetheless retain a resilient character that enables people to interpret their experience of the town and building as more 'authentic' and, thus, more directly connected to a valued past. The Bricks are among those middle-class ex-urbanites who have responded to the opportunity to construct a meaningful practice of life and narrative that incorporates the experience of an authentic built-environment.

In 1994, the Bricks purchased a modest house in the heart of Livingston's oldest residential neighborhood. They chose their home because of its proximity to the

center of town so they could walk to businesses, the post office, and public meetings downtown. They valued this opportunity because they felt that it would increase (and believe that it has enhanced) their personal interaction with other members of the community. The Bricks are part of a significant segment of American society – scholars (e.g. Jacobs, 1961; Lasch, 1977; Putnam, 2000; Riesman, 1950) and lay-people alike – for whom the inauthenticity of the contemporary US proceeds from the lack of opportunity it affords people to effectively constitute and maintain communal attachments in the face of the social forces of Modernity.

The experiences of Ron's first five years in Livingston speak to his success at this goal. Within that timeframe Ron has entrenched himself in the scenes of local politics and civic activism. He has served as president of the Park County Environmental Council (PCEC), a local environmental group. Currently he is a member of the Livingston Depot Foundation, the Historic Preservation Commission (charged with regulating the four historic districts in the city limits), the Urban Design Committee, the board of the Park County Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the fundraising cabinet for the new library construction project, and, as of 2003, the city commission. He and his wife also run a non-profit art and culture center downtown, which seeks to 'interface artists with the local community'.

Their success at collecting this style of experience, however, is most evident when Ron constructs a narrative of his engagement with the community. 'We came in here determined to be a part of this community. And we've done it. It is very gratifying to feel that you are integrated into a group and share with them reciprocal rights and responsibilities.' And as proof of that integration, Ron says:

I was elected to the PCEC board. We (Adriana and I) were invited to serve on the Big Brothers and Big Sisters board, I jumped at the chance to serve on the Historical Preservation Commission and the Depot Foundation. We've just been accepted as part of the community.

The largest rung on this progression was reached when, in 2003, Ron stood for and was elected to the city commission on a platform seeking to heal the rifts he saw developing in the community as the result of in-migration. His hope, Ron says, is to foster the growing attitude of 'community-minded spirit', in which people from 'all ends of the spectrum are able to put their differences behind them and share in a common dialogue about what is best for this town and county'. Prior to his election to the city commission he had never stood for public office before and admitted that living in the smaller community had emboldened him to stand up and make his voice heard on many levels.

Ron's campaign literature provides expression of the discourse that inspired his migration and attachment to the area. His campaign slogan – 'Preserving the Past; Working for the Future' – is emphatically illustrative of this perspective. The past that Ron speaks of preserving is not only the downtown infrastructure and 'character' of a turn-of-the-20th-century ranching and railroad town, which Livingston

is, but also the social fabric – the ‘sense of community’, as he calls it – that he and others feel still adheres to the place but are largely lacking elsewhere.

The terseness of the campaign statement belies how it rhetorically encapsulates the projects of many of the newcomers described in this piece. Ron was clearly speaking to other newcomers – the core of his political base – through this statement, which clearly and neatly articulates the importance of the pursuit of authenticity and progress in the lives of the PIMC. The efficacy of the future for Ron and his constituents – that is, the success of their narratives of experiences – is not solely arbitrated by the change (or progress) it/they offer but also by the extent to which it/they are constructed with reference to a valued ideal of past patterns of life in the rural US.

In addition, Ron’s slogan is strikingly emblematic of the relationship that he and other newcomers have to the Livingston Depot. The community has, over the last decade, invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into the building, refurbishing the interior in the early 1990s and redoing the roof in the summer of 2004. This preservation clearly does not entail the atrophication of the built environment; it is not intended to freeze the building in some prior mode. When refurbished, the depot’s interior was not made to facilitate the effective translation of railroad passengers, as the building was originally designed; instead the space was recreated to maintain valued aspects of the previous mode – expressly the structure itself and its outside façade – but also to incorporate and facilitate new uses (i.e. public gatherings and collection displays). Thus, the depot is a physical manifestation of the dialectic between authenticity and progress that mirrors the primary agenda of the recent rural newcomers of Montana. What is more, Ron Brick’s campaign slogan must be understood as a discursive presentation of the same ideal, an expression of the renegotiation of physical and cultural forms that is occurring as the result of continued internal differentiation of the US middle class that is accompanying postindustrialization.

Continuity and change

Through this piece I have attempted to expand our appreciation of contemporary rural gentrification beyond previous discussions, which have explained it as an example of postmaterialism/postproductivism, life-style migration, amenity migration, voluntary simplicity, etc. To my mind, these perspectives draw too firm a divide between rural gentrification and other practices in which middle-class Americans engage and describe it as an essentially novel project. Instead, I have tried to show that rural gentrification represents both continuity *and* change within US socio-cultural patterns; specifically, I have sought to demonstrate how it is the product of the cultural forces of *both* Modernity *and* postindustrialization.

In so doing I have presented a vision of a group of Americans – white, ex-urban, middle class – who are engaged in the colonization of a working-class community in the Rocky Mountains. My discussion of them highlights that it is the perceived relative authenticity and potential for progress of the rural/small-town

US/American West/south-central Montana that inspires their migration and the specifics of their practice of life once there. In the process, I have also demonstrated that the members of this group speak of their migration and the practice of their lives as newcomers to this community in ways that clearly exhibit a concerted emphasis upon the accumulation and narration of *experiences* as cultural criteria of self-worth and social status, which marks them as part of an emergent subset of American society: the Post-Industrial Middle Class.

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Notes

1. Following Mills (1951), there have been a whole slough of 'new' (middle) classes introduced by analysts over the years: from the initial rumblings about a 'postindustrial' society of Touraine (1971) and Bell (1973), to the 'proximate structuration' of local (interim) class formations (Giddens, 1973; see also Harvey, 1985), to the advent of a 'service class' (Goldthorpe, 1982; Renner, 1978), to imposition of the 'professional-managerial class' as another third element in capitalist class structure (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1979), to the coalescing of an intellectual class (Gouldner, 1979), to a post-modernist class analysis (Betz, 1992), to the role of another new service class in oppositional politics and urban gentrification (Ley, 1996), to the tongue-in-check idea of 'Bobos' (or *bohemian-bourgeoisie*) (Brooks, 2000), to the consolidation of a 'creative class' (Fleishman, 2002; Florida, 2002).
2. 'Consumption', in this case, is more than just purchasing a commodity or service, the act of which is only one point in a whole trajectory – which includes both the anticipatory promotion and aestheticization of the goods and their social use after purchase – that is the cultural process of consumption.
3. While there exists some overlap between my discussion of the PIMC and that of the 'new cultural class' (NCC) (e.g. Lash and Urry, 1987; Ley, 1996), like Betz (1992), I do not see them as one-and-the-same. According to discussions the NCC is 'centrally concerned with undermining . . . the relationship between representation and reality' (May, 1995: NIR: 8); this perspective is part and parcel of the 'loss of faith' that Lyotard (1983) characterized as the 'post-modern condition'. While I acknowledge that this critical perspective predominates amongst a subset of Western society, I believe it is confined to a relatively small cultural elite, what we might call the post-Modern upper-middle class. The circumstance(s) to which I attend are that of a no less critical perspective but one that is, as yet, still of a *Modern* subset of the upper-middle class (Hines, 2004; Hines, forthcoming). The PIMC's critical reflection is focused not on the 'nature of reality itself' (May, 1995: NIR: 8), as it is for the NCC, but on the previously viable avenues to authenticity and progress (e.g. urban existence, mass production, etc.). It is this critique, coupled with their concomitant greater emphasis on experiences as markers of social distinction, that ultimately distinguishes this group from other contemporaneous (middle) class factions.

4. I believe that Betz (1992) correctly identifies the PIMC as a subset of the preexisting upper-middle class that emerges due to: 1) the advance of a regime of post-Fordist flexible accumulation; 2) coupled with the expansion of the high-end service and knowledge-based sectors of the economy/society; and 3) the increasing character of its members as 'symbolic specialists' (Betz, 1992: 97), who are deeply invested in both the production and the consumption of experiences (which is similar to the argument made by Featherstone, 1989) as a means to differentiate themselves from other classes (i.e. upper and working) and class factions (i.e. the industrial (lower and upper) middle classes).
5. I take Handler's (1986: 2) point that authenticity is 'a cultural construct of the modern Western world' that is 'closely tied to Western notions of the individual'; and since the concept of authenticity has been evaluated from a multiplicity of angles (e.g. Bruner, 1994; Dovey, 1985; Gable and Handler, 1996; Harkin, 1995; MacCannell, 1976; May, 1995; NIR; Orvell, 1989; Outka, 2005; Pearce and Moscardo, 1986; Taylor, 1991; Waitt, 2000) I will not discuss it here, except to suggest that the concept must always be evaluated *ethnographically*, by which I mean that this should only be done in close consultation with the people one seeks to understand (see Cohen, 1988, Steiner and Reisinger, 2006, and Wang, 1999, for more complete and nuanced accounts of the character of existential authenticity than can be offered here).
6. Emphasis on experience simultaneously deemphasizes the commodity (i.e. material possessions) as paramount sign in their system of social semiotics; which is not to ignore that 'experiences' have been part of the criteria of self-worth and social position throughout Modernity and that commodities yet remain integral facets of contemporary criteria. Nor is it to overlook the extent to which part of the value of commodities is, in fact, the *experience* of them. What is more, commodities are integrated into the construction of *narratives of experience* as foils or props that serve as validation – i.e. 'we knew where to go and what to do' – and/or verification – i.e. 'we were there and did it, see what we got!' – of the successful production/consumption of proper experiences.

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