

The Persistent Frontier & the Rural Gentrification of the Rocky Mountain West

J. Dwight Hines

Introduction

“YOU know what I like about this place?” Russellⁱ says from across the coffee shop table. “It’s a *real* western place,” he continues without a prompt, “that is just what I wanted when I moved out here from Milwaukee in ‘93.” We are sitting at a downtown breakfast diner in Livingston, Montana. It is 8 a.m. on an early spring day and the sun has just crested the Absaroka Mountains southeast of town. Its pale light cascades down on the red bricks of Main Street’s stores and offices. “Aren’t those mountains awesome. Just look at those buildings, aren’t they great too,” he says pointing out the window. “The Wilson building was built in 1901. The Murray [Hotel] in 1905. The [railroad] depot is from 1902. This is a great old town.”

Russell’s attention returns to the plate of eggs and bacon before him but he continues to speak between mouthfuls, “But what I really like about this place is that you know most of the people on the street and they say ‘hello’ to you. You can see old cowboys on the street and in the bars all the time.” There is no one on the street right now, let alone any cowboys. It is cold (25 degrees F) and windy (a common condition in town). Russell is the only person I see who even remotely resembles a cowboy. He has got on a denim jacket and a brown, felt cowboy hat that is almost too small for him. His jeans are stone washed and relaxed fit, to accommodate his expanding middle age. He wears a narrow black belt with a turquoise buckle and cowboy boots. Russell is an accountant by trade.

Orientation

The perspective of Livingston, Montana presented here in the words of Russell (drawn from one of the over 200 interviews I conducted with newcomers to south-central Montana in 2002) neatly outlines several specific aspects of the region that have motivated tens of thousands of exurbanites like him to migrate there in the last two decades. The unifying theme of those aspects is the idea that the Rocky Mountain West is more *authentic* than other parts of the U.S. today. This theme of authenticity is commonly used to explain contemporary rural gentrificationⁱⁱ — the colonization of rural/small-town communities throughout the U.S. by middle class newcomers.ⁱⁱⁱ Rural gentrifiers themselves employ this theme, as we heard clearly expressed in Russell’s words when he described it as a “*real* Western place,” as do scholars (e.g. Danbom 1996; Howarth 1996; Jobs 1992; Rudzitis 1992, 1999; Rudzitis and Streatfield 1993; Williams and Jobs 1990).^{iv}

The theme of authenticity has a long historical basis not just in relation to the Rocky Mountain West but, as I will describe later, throughout American history. It is one of the principal ways in which analysts — from Crèvecoeur, to Thomas Jefferson, to Henry David Thoreau, to Walt Whitman, to “Teddy” Roosevelt, to Frederick Turner, to Edward Abbey — have sought to define the importance of the *frontier* to Americans. As we know, the frontier — as the *concrete* physical space beyond which European-Americans had yet to fully colonize — is long passed (Turner 1920). The (re)creation

i This, like all other personal names in this paper, is a pseudonym. I would like to offer my gratitude to all those residents of Park County, Montana who graciously gave of their time and insight as participants in this project.

ii The term “gentrification” highlights the affinities between this contemporary social process and the activities of the middle-class colonizers of working class *urban* neighborhoods throughout the Western world (see Beauregard 1986; Ley 1996; Smith 1996). Elsewhere I analyze the implications of the class-based issues evident in these proceedings (Hines, n.d.[a]).

iii The rural gentrification of the Rocky Mountain West is part of the larger phenomenon of migration of exurban Americans throughout the rural US since the early 1990s (see Decker 1998; Duane 1999; Frey 1995; Jobs 2000; Rasker 1995; Salamon 2003; Spain 1993 for published discussion of various iterations of this phenomenon).

iv The 1990s represent only the second decade (the 1970s was the first) in the last 170 years of US history in which more Americans moved from the urban to the rural than vice versa (Cromartie 2003). The

significance of this reversal is even more profound when it is noted that in the 1830s the US frontier was in what is now Illinois. Thus, throughout most of the European-American colonization of the continent — throughout the entire time we have been telling ourselves we love the rural and the frontier — the US was *urbanizing* nation.

v Contrary to linguistic conventions (in which it is synonymous with “contemporary” or “most developed”) I capitalize the words *Modern* (and *Modernity*) throughout this piece to highlight that I use them to refer to a specific era of and cultural configuration within Western/American cultural history.

vi I capitalize the word *Reason* in this piece to highlight that, far from being an absolute quality, it is the historically-specific cultural logic of the European intelligentsia, which coalesces through the process of the Enlightenment.

vii Park County exports the vast majority (up to 90%) of its youth after high school for educational and occupational opportunities (see Hines 2004 for complete discussion).

of *metaphoric* frontiers, however — which afford people the opportunities to pursue ideals of proper personhood — remain a persistent facet of U.S. history.

As I will show in this piece, however, access to a subjective sense of authenticity is only part of the value of the frontier to middle class Americans; and too great an emphasis of the ways in which rural gentrifiers describe their migration projects can result in an oversimplified picture of the process. A detailed *ethnographic* analysis — focused upon the way in which people practice their lives as rural newcomers — will allow us to appreciate the underlying cultural logic that informs the appeal of the Rocky Mountain West as a contemporary frontier to these recent immigrants.

This appeal is not solely predicated on the degree of authenticity that it portends but is equally based on the opportunity it also offers for them to pursue a sense of progress in their lives. The coexistence of these two seemingly paradoxical ideals is not just a hallmark of the concept of the frontier but runs through a mainstream of Western thought since the Enlightenment. Thus, rural gentrification, as I will show, is firmly bound to the pursuit of the cultural ideals of proper *Modern*-^v American personhood.

The connection between the central ideas of the Enlightenment and the importance of the concept of the frontier is far from an intuitive one. For that reason, in the following section I provide a brief historical overview of these dual ideals, their important position within the cultural substrata of our American middle class, and their central role in the persistent relevance of the frontier. This will help us appreciate the extent to which the existence of *metaphoric* frontiers — as the encapsulations (or socio-geographic interface) of the authentic and the progressive — are integral to the cultural character of the contemporary American middle class.

Modernity and the American Frontier

America as the first new nation-state inaugurated after the Enlightenment is incredibly beholding to ideals of Modernity; and within American society, it is the members of the middle class that most definitively bear of the imprint of Enlightenment ideals I now delineate.

Modernity, as the contemporary era of Western history, is the result of an intellectual movement — the Enlightenment — centered in Western Europe beginning the 16th Century (Bell 1976:3-30) and disseminating irregularly and, in some cases, incompletely from there to other parts of the world. Prior to the Enlightenment European thought was predominated by a sense of decline; Christian tradition and the difficulties of the Middle Ages combined to convince most that the world was heading precipitously toward Judgement Day (Patterson ???). The Enlightenment turned that thinking on its head (Nisbet 1994).

The main thrust of the Enlightenment was the belief in the potential for humanly engineered progress (Giddens 1990:2; see also Lyotard 1985) through the application of *Reason*^{vi} and its privileged epistemology (of science), to the understanding of our material universe. According to Jürgen Habermas the “project of modernity” formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted of their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic” (1983:9). “The Enlightenment philosophers,” he adds, “wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life — that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life” (ibid:9); thus, the project was conceived in quite utopian terms. In this respect to be raised in the Modern era and exposed to Modern thinking is to envision the future as improving, as progressive.

Reactions against Modernity, led by intellectuals and artists (and initially confined to these groups) who looked longingly back to a simpler time (as they denied the idea of uniform progress), began almost as soon as the Enlightenment commenced and continue to this day (as an alternate discourse or latent critique of Modernity). Modernity “is a double-edged phenomenon,” Anthony Giddens writes (1990:7), which from its very beginning spawned its own critique. A feeling that the liberation from pre-existing social patterns and modes of thought were not progressive, in fact, prompted this “counter-Enlightenment” (Habermas 1983:5), of which the works of early Modern thinkers (including Rousseau and Arnold) and the Romantic poets (especially Wordsworth) can be seen as examples. In a nutshell such critiques of Modernity hold that the past retains the key to the ideas and actions through which people can construct more socially and morally satisfactory lives; they represent the inauguration of the discourse of authenticity that exists, to this day, in uneasy tension with the value for and belief in progress within the cultural constellation of Modernity.

The Frontier in America

The idea of the frontier has exerted a profound and lasting influence on the course of human events in North America in the last five hundred years (Roosevelt 1889; Turner 1920 [1893]; Nash 1982 [1967]). The frontier — or the idea of the potential the frontier offered for the improvement of personal, familial, or communal economic fortune, religious freedom, social position, etc. — provided the impetus to literally millions of people to migrate to and transform the lands beyond it.

The frontier as a concept encapsulates one of the central paradoxes in American thought. In one vein of that thought the frontier was considered the point at which progress was made tangible. As noted before, those who described it in such terms — including Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman,

<p>works with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Historic Preservation Commission The Urban Design Committee The Detention Committee Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commission The Alliance Council for Economic Development The Livingston Depot Foundation The Film Liaison Office The Livingston Center for Art and Culture The Livingston-Park County Public Library Expansion Campaign 	<p>PRESERVING THE PAST WORKING FOR THE FUTURE</p> 	<p>believes in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating partnerships to promote economic development An inclusive government process Community involvement Accountability in government
	<p>Vote for</p>	<p>on Nov. 5th</p>

Roosevelt and Turner — saw the possibility for redemption, both personal and social, in the frontier. It was there that people who had been degraded by modernization could reclaim their potential and make a better life for themselves; in a sense it became the place where progress, the hallmark of Modernity, could readily occur.

Another vein of Modern-American thought envisioned the frontier as the furthest advance of civilization — the best style of life humans had yet developed, which occurred behind the frontier in the settled and urbanizing East. From this perspective the frontier was a site where previously *civilized* people could easily devolve into *savagery*. It was a place of danger and violence. Simultaneously, then the frontier represented progress and regress, evolution and devolution. As Lee Cuba (1987:5) puts it, the land beyond the frontier “acquired a number of representations over time: a source of fear and respect because of its primitive qualities, a harbinger of abundance and plenty because of its seemingly endless expanse, a haven of refuge that restored the soul.”

These two apparently antithetical ideas configure the frontier as a perfect encapsulation of the seemingly paradoxical ideals of authenticity and progress, which coexist in productive tension with one another in our American-Modernity (Hines 2004). The persistence of the frontier in the U.S., in one form or another, can be seen as an imperative for the persistence of Modernity, as we know it. The idea of hope that a frontier represents is something without which Modernity — as essentially a utopian vision — cannot exist. When the physical space assigned to progress as the “frontiering process” (Turner 1920:37) was occupied, Americans translated it into metaphoric expression to avoid compromising the potential for continued progress. The frontier as a social *fact* became the frontier as a cultural *myth* (Smith 1950; Slotkin 1973, 1985, 1992) in order to sustain the internal dialectic, that is the dynamic that provides the impetus to our hyperactive American-Modernity. Today the Rocky Mountain West persists in the vision of many

Americans as a contemporary frontier; a place where the experience of authenticity and progress is more readily possible than elsewhere in the U.S.

Now let us turn to the ethnographic evidence that substantiates this point. In what follows I will show the extent to which rural gentrifiers are motivated by the relative frontier character of the Rocky Mountain West — i.e. its potential to facilitate their pursuit of both authenticity and progress — to remake their lives in places like Park County, Montana. I begin with a brief description of this site of gentrification to give the reader a vision of the place and the people involved.

The Ethnographic Site

Park County, Montana — the community from which my ethnographic data is drawn — sits on the northern edge of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem — the nexus of wildlands surrounding and including Yellowstone National Park. The county sits immediately north of the Park, which boasts dramatic natural features (e.g. waterfalls, geysers, etc.), remarkable wildlife viewing, and extensive backcountry opportunities (hiking, fishing, cross-country skiing and the like). Along the eastern edge of Park County sits the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, the 5th-largest federally-mandate wilderness area in the U.S., offering incredible scenery, hiking, alpinism, fishing and backcountry skiing. On the western edge of the county run the Gallatin mountain range. Due to these characteristics the region has enormous appeal to outdoors activists both of the recreational and environmental types.

Between the Absarokas and the Gallatins runs the Paradise Valley, which boasts some of the most splendid pastoral landscape in the U.S.; as one rural newcomer put it, “it’s aptly-named, it looks like heaven on earth.” Along the length of the valley meanders the Yellowstone River; the longest undammed river in the lower-48 U.S. and an internationally-renown trout fishery. At the northern end of Paradise Valley, where the Yellowstone River turns east (for its long descent across Montana to its confluence with the Missouri River), sits the county seat

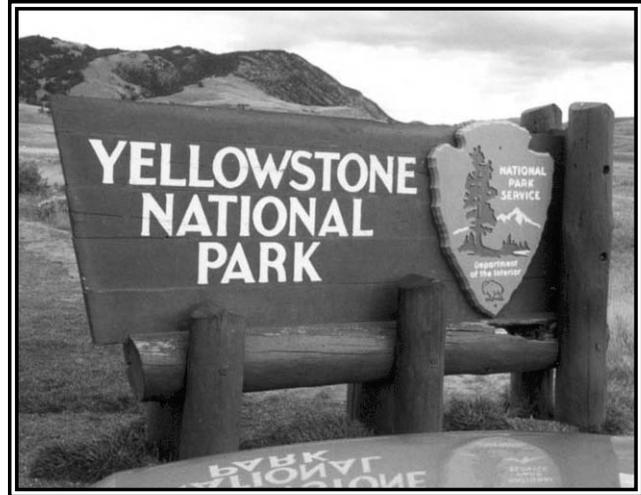
of Livingston (population: almost 8,000). Originally known as Clarke City and established by traders to the Crow Nation (initially all the land south and east of the Yellowstone River) at the point where William Clarke crossed the river with his contingent of the Corp of Discovery on their return from the Pacific in 1806. The current name came with the Northern Pacific Railroad, which platted the town as it forged its way up the Yellowstone River valley in 1883. The town developed as the site of a major railroad repair shop, which until the mid-1980s supported up to 1,000 employees, and as the primary disembarkation point for Yellowstone National Park visitors until the turn of the 20th Century.

Due almost exclusively to the immigration of exurbanites Park County grew officially by 7.8 percent in the 1990s, increasing to almost 16,000 residents (U.S. Census 2000). In addition, given the high degree of out-migration of native youth, which is characteristic of such small rural communities, the percentage of the population who are newcomers to the county in the last 15 years is actually closer to one-third.^{vii}

The Migrants

In general, contemporary urban-to-rural migration is an amalgam of several different processes. Inmigrants to Park County over the last two decades include members of: (a) the national wealthy-elite (i.e. CEOs, VPs, and owners of major transnational corporations); (b) the cultural elite (i.e. nationally-prominent writers, film actors, painters, and photographers); (c) the retirement set; and (d) the middle class. Regardless of which of these groups they come from, I found that newcomers invariably employ the discourse of authenticity to describe their migration, depicting the Rocky Mountain West, as we heard Russell say, more “*real*” place to live due to its connection to a frontier past.

In terms of practice, however, the middle class gentrifiers are clearly distinguishable from other newcomers. They are more likely to make their exclusive residence in Park County and to be locally active socially, economically (both as workers and consumers), and civically/politically. In addition to having invested themselves in the local context the people upon whom I focused my research and discuss in this piece have common demographic characteristics. They all are in their late-20s to early-40s and were raised middle class in a metropolitan context. Nearly all of them are college educated. Most are married and came to Montana with their spouse. Many had children who were born in Montana. At least one member of each couple and all the single people work for a living. Those who did so locally are generally employed as professionals or administrators or run their own business in the service sector. Those who work outside the community (an extreme minority) do so as entrepreneurial professionals. Almost to the person, they acknowledged that in their chosen



Yellowstone National Park and the greater Yellowstone ecosystem, including the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, provide the majority of rural gentrifiers with a site in which, through their practice they achieve connection with what they perceive as an essence of humanity and the possibility of personal improvement.

occupational field they could earn (or had made) more income in their previous urban circumstance.

Ethnographic Examples

Attention to a sense of authenticity by rural gentrifiers is primarily oral and/or textual in presentation, while the evidence of the pursuit of progress is more covert (and, therefore, difficult to discern as a casual observer). It is principally a *practical* discourse, meaning one that most evidently emerges through the detailed analysis of the people’s practice of life. It must be observed to be appreciated. For this reason I conclude this piece with extensive ethnographic examples, collected during my year’s fieldwork in Park County, Montana, which clearly show the dual concerns of authenticity and progress written into the projects of rural gentrifiers that mark them as part of our American-Modernity.

Russell’s testimony, at the beginning of this piece, and his choice of quasi-contemporary cowboy regalia, spoke to the appeal of Livingston and Park County. He mentioned several important ways in which a connection with the area’s frontier past was communicated through authenticity of the local social and physical landscape. His opinion, I found, was illustrative of the attitudes of the vast majority of inmigrants with whom I had opportunity to speak. You will recall that he alluded to, almost in the course of one breath, the appeal of the place as due to its natural beauty, its small-town atmosphere, and the agricultural character of the region. He noted the mountains that form a dramatic “natural” backdrop for the town. He referred to the greatness of the old industrial buildings of the railroad downtown and the regular greetings you get from people on the street; and he mentioned the existence of “real cowboys” in the community

The tropes and icons, mentioned by Russell, exemplify the most prominent domains that I found held across a vast majority of the individual cases of migration. These domains signal the potential for authenticity and progress to rural gentrifiers via their experience of: 1) the natural environment; 2) the social environment; and 3) the agricultural environment. These environments represent the patterning of newcomer thought and behavior around a specific constellation of features that they, individually and collectively, value. Each of them is an example of an historical cultural discourse that characterizes the rural Rocky Mountain West as a more frontier-like place than the rest of the U.S.

The importance of these “environments” is that they provide analytical means to appreciate the variety of migrant experience and motivation. Or perhaps better said, they offer an understanding that there are, on one level, multiple ways to value the Rocky Mountain West for contemporary Americans that all derive from their perceived connection to the frontier past. In this way they are ultimately linked by the extent to which they all are valuable to rural gentrifiers because they afford access to the authenticity and progress. In what remains of this piece I offer ethnographic examples from each of these three, which shows how these domains are distinguished (one from the others) by the specific style of connection to the idea of the frontier that they offer. In the process, each of them demonstrates how the cultural ideals of Modernity inform the migration programs of middle class Americans in Park County, Montana .

The Natural Environment

Aaron Reimersma describes the reason he ended up in Livingston, Montana in 1995, after growing up in the South, attending college in the Midwest, and working postgraduate in Colorado for several years, this way,

I came here because I needed a chance to be myself. To find something I think was buried; something more me. I wasn't doing the things I find important [in Denver], essentially I felt like I was spinning my wheels, going nowhere.

Aaron's search authenticity and progress comes primarily via his outdoor recreational lifestyle. In this way he is exemplary of the most common style of frontier sought by the rural gentrifiers that I observed. He is part of a group of newcomers who came to Park County principally because of its unqualified access to the surrounding federal public lands. For them the primary appeal of the rural U.S. is the amenities of the natural environment. That environment, they say, places them in contact with something “more real,” “more pure,” and more frontier-like than is available in urban America.

At the same time, as we will see in the following description of Aaron's activities, the value of the Rocky Mountain West to him is more complex than just its

perceived authenticity. It is also based today on the extent to which it, just as the frontier has throughout U.S. history, offers access to a sense of opportunity to experience progress in their lives. While Aaron and his compatriots seek an authentic connection with a rural/“backcountry” experience, what is also evident from their behavior is that their satisfaction with their outdoor activity 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 members of the subset of immigrants for whom the natural environment confers a sense of frontier authenticity/progress can be characterized by their commitment to regular, if not near-constant, outdoor activity, and are considered “hardcore” by most locals; they are often referred to as “backcountry enthusiasts” in the local parlance. Aaron is rarely seen around Livingston that he is not coming from, heading to or engaged in some sort of outdoors activity. He trail-runs, he backpacks, he bikes (both roads and mountain trails), he boats, and he skis (both cross-country and downhill).

Even a brief conversation with Aaron reveals that he is conversant in the discourse of authenticity. He, like most of his fellow rural gentrifiers, rely upon it to articulate what it is about the Rocky Mountain West that appeals to him. He says,

What I love about this place is simple to explain. First of all, who wouldn't? Its got “more mountains in every direction than I've ever seen.” Do you know that line from [the movie] *A River Runs Through It*? That was filmed here you know? And its true. I look at these mountains and I see nature — pristine, perfect nature.

Ultimately what becomes apparent from a careful observation of the behavior of newcomers like Aaron is that as much as they say have come to connect with a reality they feel is only attainable in the Rocky Mountain West, criteria by which they primarily judge the success of their migration cannot not be expressed through the discourse of authenticity. Instead, when asked to elaborate on what specifically is the unique and valuable about the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, Aaron says,

the backcountry here is incredible, is it so unbounded; the opportunities are virtually unlimited. There are so many lines to climbs, peaks to top-out on, ski runs to make, streams and lakes to fish; there are lifetimes' worth out there.

The rural gentrifier's middle class compulsion to actualize progress remains a driving force behind both their migration and for their actions in their new domains. This is evident in the extent to which Aaron and

his cohort “work” at improving themselves at the outdoor activities they pursue. They are in constant motion, a constant search for more skills, greater attainment of experience as a means to transcend a sense of a lack of potential to progress in other sites and avenues of life. They are not recreating as a form of diversion or as a means to avoid the underlying “spirit” (Weber 1996) of capitalism. Instead they are operationalizing this very same asceticism in their practice of the cultural narrative of a “backcountry” enthusiast; they are using the same set of Modern drives to their own ends and in the process recapitulating preexisting patterns of thought and behavior in slightly new ways.

The cultural ideals of authenticity and progress 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 [Mountains] 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;

and at the next 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 backcountry to explore.

The compulsion to progress, evident in his testimony, is further manifest in his actions. His constant and nearly indefatigable pursuit of outdoor activities, speaks to this point. Asked about his skiing career he will clearly trace for the listener his evolution from novice, to expert, to ski-patrolman, to backcountry skier; gives the sense that, in so doing, he is achieving the goals of his migration; and enacting a cultural narrative.

The final evidence on this point comes from my most recent return visit to Livingston, several years after the initial fieldwork, when I ran into Aaron on the street. We spoke briefly of the issues facing the town: rising housing prices, rampant rural development, etc. and then I asked how his ski season had been.

“I made it out once or twice,” he said with a smile; then recognizing my surprise for what it was, he contin-

ued, “I just got to the point where it wasn’t what I needed.” From that point, he struggled to communicate his increasing disillusionment with the activity that had, until recently, been a major thrust of his life. “I get bored,” he said, wrinkling his face. “It wasn’t going anywhere. If I wanted I could go to Alaska, and get on those big backcountry hills there, but . . .”

The last line trailing off indicates, as I interpret it, a continued anxiety on Aaron’s part deriving from a sense of incomplete progress. He points to the avenue through which he could continue to actualize authenticity and progress in his life according to that model, the direction in which he would again find skiing a challenge, but it is not part of his life in Montana now.

The most definitive statement Aaron made on this point, however, was the last before we parted. “Yeah,” he said, as if to atone for his divorce from skiing by adding another subplot to his cultural narrative of an authentic outdoorsman, “I’ve really got into mountain biking. It’s going well. I’m getting pretty good at it. I might enter some races this year.” The pursuit of authenticity and progress go on.

The Social Environment

In sharp contrast to the style of frontier authenticity/progress sought by Aaron, and similarly oriented newcomers, is the example of Ron and Adriana Brick. Ron and his wife began looking for places to move in the Rocky Mountains in 1991. 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 desire to leave 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 U.S. For Ron, can be expressed in two ways: first, it 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 U.S. history. In both senses — through its social and built environments — Livingston signaled Ron that a sense of the frontier past still existed there and offered a connection to an authentic/progressive existence.

After searching for three years, in 1994 the Bricks bought a modest home in the heart of Livingston’s oldest residential neighborhood; close to the center of town so they could walk to local commerce, the post office and public meetings downtown and thereby increase their personal interaction with members of the



For some rural gentrifiers, it is the built/social environment — centered on Livingston's historic downtown — that communicates that they can meet their middle class goals.

community. In the five years since they made Livingston their full time residence in 1997 Ron has entrenched himself in the scenes of the 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 fundraising cabinet for the new library construction project, and, as of 2003, the city commission. He and his wife also run a nonprofit art and culture center downtown, which seeks to “interface artists w/ the local community.”

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 immigration. 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 dual ideals 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.

That campaign slogan succinctly encapsulates the projects of rural gentrifiers like the Bricks. Personal programs like Ron's are successful not merely when he established connection with (and residence in) Livingston, a place that represents the authentic frontier past; but for him success comes when he is involved in what he deems positive change. What is more, Ron does not value unmitigated “development” but change that is done in subtle accord with preexisting local patterns. For Ron and Adriana the small-town social environment of Livingston offers avenues that connect them to a more authentic style of life; one that simultaneously affords them the opportunity to pursue personal progress, by investing themselves socially and politically in the local scene.

The Agricultural Environment

The Lincoln family — Patrick, Marsha and Lisa — moved from southern California to Park County in 1993. They bought their property from a local rancher who subdivided his land along Brush Creek into several 20-acre plots in the mid-1980s. Husband and wife, Patrick and Marsha, chose Montana for the genuine rural character that they felt it yet had and which, they believe, has



It is the agricultural environment of the Paradise Valley that signals to many rural gentrifiers that Park County, Montana offers them greater potential to reach their cultural ideals of authenticity and progress.



been lost in the rest of the U.S. In his “previous life,” as he calls it, Patrick was a Los Angeles real estate developer. Upon moving to Park County he began working as a carpenter, on his own home and for hire on other projects in the area. In California, Marsha was an executive in the entertainment industry. She has continued to work regularly from Montana as a regional producer for a major national television network.

Patrick and Marsha’s migration to and practice of life in Park County is indicative of a particular style of rural

gentrification which is centered on the agricultural environment of Paradise Valley; their passive, inwardly focused approach is indicative of a specific aspect of the Rocky Mountain West as frontier that is harnessed by many newcomers in their attempt to authenticate their existence through the practice of progress in their new environs.

The Lincolns did not try to radically remake themselves or their property with their move. They have consciously avoided many of the increasingly standardized

practices that other rural gentrifiers adopt as markers of this new phase of their lives. They did not buy a brand-new Suburban Outback upon arrival. They have not appropriated the attire of the local ranchers. They did not build a gargantuan home on the ridge, nor plow and pave new roads across their property. They did not ring their acreage with a new chemically treated buck-and-rail fence. They did not dam or redirect the stream to create fishponds. They did not build new giant aluminum roping barns and paddocks for pedigreed saddle ponies. They did not start traveling to rodeos and/or cutting-horse competitions on a weekly basis. They did not import highland cattle or alpacas to raise for their exotic fibers.

Although clearly in search of *something* the Lincolns also knew they did not want to change their lives *too* dramatically to achieve it. They sought in the agricultural environment, what Patrick called “a more authentic existence;” what they felt they lacked in their previous urban lives. They tried to work well within the pre-existing patterns of land-use and social and economic activity. By paying attention to some of the more subtle aspects of rural (ranch) life, the Lincolns, in a sense, modeled their rural existence on the historical model of the homesteader experience.

Patrick chose to develop other marketable skills (i.e. carpentry), to serve on his daughter’s school board, and most recently to home-school her in preparation for high school. Although well educated (with an MA in finance from USC) he adopted a new, more working-class, occupation as a means to economic survival and personal satisfaction. Marsha also accepted a less-stress, less-well compensated job. They worked together to build their home, bit by bit over time, as money became available. By 2002, they had completed most of the outside work on their modest, two-story house, amongst the trees on the northern bank of Brush Creek. They had offered similarly modest improvements to the rest of their land — a new gate, a few dead trees removed, a reinforced bridge across the creek, etc. For the first several years after they migrated they did not even bother sinking a water-well; instead they survived by hauling water from the creek, which they boiled for household use.

From the way he speaks it is apparent that Patrick is proud of the life and landscape he and his family had built for themselves on their property and the relationship they established with local ranching “culture,” as he called it. He is not excited, however, over the rest of the rural residential development that has occurred in the Park County since they moved there. Actually, he was quite distraught by the houses appearing around his. Just across the creek from his home, on the flats between it and the mountain ridge to the south are 10 new log homes. The previous pastureland was carved into 40-acre plots with each having a new driveway cut from the county road.

What distinguishes Patrick Lincoln’s position from just another case of *gang-planking* syndrome — the term given by rural sociologist to denote the tendency of newcomers to try and pull up the “gangplank” after they have moved into a community and thereby prevent further in-migration that might compromise their experience — is that he is not merely disgruntled with the thought or practice rural residential development but with the type of change brought by people he believes are out of touch with the local agricultural environment. He believes he represents a subset of newcomers who got in [in the early 1990s] at the beginning of the latest rush and who are quite embittered by the changes that have occurred since. They see themselves as the “last group who came in quietly [and] wanted to integrate” with local society.

From his perspective land in the Park County has become so expensive in the last several years that only “super-rich assholes,” as he says, from places like Martha’s Vineyard, Malibu, and Westchester County [CT], can afford to buy there. The new people want better roads and other more “urban” services, like water treatment and snow removal, brought to the country. They do not mind paying higher taxes because they can afford them, Patrick says. The Rileys and the Bakers (the two formerly-ranch families upon whose land the Lincolns and others now have their homes) could not afford the taxes before, which is what prompted them to sell pieces their land in the first place.

The Lincolns’ consternation with the changes in their rural neighborhood are not to be construed merely as economic, that is, the fear of higher taxes, however. The newer newcomers, Patrick notes, also want to change the aesthetic of the place. They build in the open spaces for the views — to see and be seen — rather than in the creek beds where the ranchers built to get shelter from the summer heat and winter wind and to be closer to natural sources of water. What also irks him is that they build such large homes — twice, three-times the size of a ranch homes — out of logs, where the ranchers used regular lumber. In so doing, he points out, they operate according to an aesthetic ideal that is not consistent with local practice. Once locally-ensconced, Patrick adds, the new newcomers want to establish standards to which they want all residents held to preserve their, the later newcomers’, vision of the beauty of the valley.

With their imported aesthetic ideals and desire for services, Patrick recognizes that his neighbors and other later newcomers to the valley are attempting to remake the rural after an urban pattern. They want to make this place like where they came from, Patrick says. “If they want this place to be like the city why did they come here?” he asks with evident frustration. In essence he is expressing his sense that he came as a homesteader and he wants his frontier to stay a frontier.

It is the latest arrivals that are driving the native ranchers and other inhabitants from the rural lands to

make it their own private playground and to preserve it from further residential development, Patrick believes. It is ironic, he says, that the super-rich “kill the [local] culture but they save the land.” In this sense, he differentiates his migration from that of the more-wealthy, later arrivals. Although he and his wife could not and did not adopt exactly the lifestyle of the prior rural inhabitants — i.e. the ranchers — they have sought to coexist with them and to conspire in as little change as possible. They sought to avoid integrating anything that could be construed as not conforming to dominant local thought and practice; in this way they were trying to link with elements of local authenticity through the adoption of the cultural narrative we could characterize as that of a “homesteader.”

It is evident, however — from the time, money and effort they have spent on their place since migrating in — that the Lincolns believe that attention to improvement is an important criteria by which they judge the success of their personal migration project. It is important to understand their value for development not solely as a derivative of a sense of land as an economic investment; instead their attention to this issue is a manifestation of their belief in it as an essential criterion of proper personhood. This is a line of thinking that meshes well with the orientation toward land use of both 19th Century homesteaders’ and contemporary ranchers. Part of the criteria for “proving up” on a homestead in the 19th Century was met by the “improvements” that occupants made to the property. As part of the legacy of that ideal (born at least in part of Manifest Destiny) contemporary ranchers in Montana subscribe to a worldview that assigns value to the land (and the people thereof) in relation to its (and their) ability to produce commodities (i.e. crops, timber, animals, minerals, etc.).

The Lincolns have thought of and attended to their property as if they were the initial (European-American) residents, which they assumed were likely of quite modest means. In approximation of those patterns, the Lincolns sought greater (material) humility in their lives; even though they had the economic resources upon which to draw. Instead of buying new automobiles they drove their old cars for years, rather than hire a contractor they built their house themselves, they also avoided displays or practices that could be construed as ostentatious or out-of-line with the proper homesteader and/or contemporary rancher perspective. By attending adamantly to an aspect of rural life that they felt was disregarded by other rural gentrifiers, the Lincolns are clearly seeking to create and maintain “distinctions” between themselves and later newcomers.

At the same time, the Lincolns have also sought to practice their lives in terms of what they view as appropriate rural residents according to local standards. Life in this fashion draws its cultural character and history, as they read it, from the ideals and necessities of the

homesteading frontier. Thus, by appropriating this perspective toward rural life and their land the Lincolns are attaching their lives to an established and valued cultural narrative. The value of this process to the Lincolns as middle class Americans is evident in the extent to which it: 1) provides them access to a valued historical legacy of the Rocky Mountain West agricultural environment (authenticity); and 2) affords them the freedom to make it their own and thereby actualize a sense of progress in their lives (by practicing the modest improvements that they have to their property)

Conclusion

As the examples I have presented here show there remains a powerful connection between of the Rocky Mountain West and the concept of the frontier. This connection exerts a dramatic influence on the exurban middle class involved in the gentrification of the rural U.S. Also evident in the testimony and actions of the rural gentrifiers with whom I worked in south-central Montana is the complex character of the idea of the frontier. When disarticulated through fine-grained ethnographic analysis we can see that value of the frontier is informed by the cultural ideals of authenticity and progress. This, in turn, allows us to appreciate the links between contemporary rural gentrification and a mainstream of thought in the ongoing era of Western cultural history, i.e. Modernity. To be a Modern-American is to value and pursue (as evidence of personal success) those experiences that simultaneously afford avenues to pursue authenticity and progress; these opportunities are most commonly found by middle class Americans on persistent frontiers like the Rocky Mountain West.

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Dr. J. Dwight Hines is currently a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology of the University of California-Santa Barbara. His latest research addresses the effects of rural gentrification by associating ongoing changes in the landscape, architecture, and land-use practices of the Rocky Mountain West to shifts in the cultural character of the American middle class associated with postindustrialization.