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Development and Gentrification of the Hawaiian Islands

As a college student who migrated from Hawai'i to San Diego to attend school, I was in awe at the large population of Native-Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and former Hawai'i residents that now permanently resided in the mainland. It was my curiosity about their reasons for migrating here to the mainland that lead me to consider what may have caused their migration in the first place. This curiosity eventually brought my attention to a migration pattern of a very different, yet profoundly consequential one; that of the affluent mainlanders who migrated to and gentrified the Hawaiian Islands. I argue that this in-migration of newcomers is the catalyst for the out-migration and displacement of former Hawai'i residents, specifically Native-Hawaiians, and is the driving factor behind their rising population here in California. To illustrate this I will present two case studies done on the island of O'ahu that offer several perspectives on development and gentrification, while drawing connections from other case studies across the globe. I will also pay close attention to examining the desires of these newcomers for migrating to Hawai'i, the role that the media and tourism play in the production of these desires, as

well as the affects of their arrival on local residents and Native-Hawaiians. By understanding the desires of certain populations, and what causes these, one can attempt to address some of the inequalities that these attained desires produce.

Although Hawai'i is considered a melting pot of different cultures, these socio-economic inequalities are clearly seen and felt due to the geography of the island itself. On islands especially, the inequalities that are produced by gentrification are especially visible because of the close proximity people have with one another. Since the shift has been made from the gentrification of urban communities to rural ones, cosmopolitan lifestyles that were originally sought after are no longer valued over a serene life in the country or in a tropical oasis. Travel and tourism are the world's largest service industries in which islands have become some of the most sought after destinations and with Hawai'i being the 50th state it is even more easily accessible for those from the mainland seeking an "exotic" getaway. Popular media such as films like "Fantasy Island" or shows like *The Travel Channel* has accelerated tourism to these islands (Baldacchino, 2008, pg. 13), and as sociologist J.D. Hines would argue are the driving motivations behind *desires*.

While some local residents may enjoy the benefits that gentrification brings such as better public services, job creation, improved infrastructure, etc. (Atwood, 2006), the Native-Hawaiians and long-time Hawai'i residents continue to remain the most marginalized, as they are most vulnerable to the rising costs of living. Hawai'i is home to the highest percentage of millionaires in the nation, and according to the 2011 U.S.

census had the highest median housing costs for renters in the country at \$1,308, and currently falls within the top three most expensive states in the country (“Population Estimates”). Native-Hawaiian families in Hawai’i have both the lowest mean family income and per capita income of all major ethnic groups, and almost 15% of Native-Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders live in poverty when compared to the national average of 9.8%. They experience the second highest rate of unemployment at 12.5%, following closely behind American-Indians and Alaskan Natives (Kana’iaupuni, pg. 4). One can argue that gentrification is really neo-colonialism that exploits both the natural resources and people, while displacing the pre-existing communities and raising the cost of living.

Literature Review

I propose that one of the largest affects of the arrival of mainlanders can be seen and felt through gentrification. Ruth Glass first coined the term in 1964 when she noticed a trend of high-income residents replacing low-income groups in an urban London community. Although there is a vast majority of publications on urban gentrification, there has been a recent trend by scholars in introducing new definitions and case studies. The term has evolved to include a number of different definitions including rural gentrification, new-build gentrification, commercial gentrification, super gentrification, and even “greentrification” (Clark, 2009, pg. 502). While typically seen as an urban phenomenon as more and more people were moving towards cities to partake in a cosmopolitan lifestyle, as demonstrated in Lieba Faier’s book *Intimate Encounters*:

Filipina Women and the Remaking of Rural Japan, some scholars have suggested that the exact opposite has been occurring in recent times. Contemporary gentrification is now seen in both urban and rural areas, as individuals are moving towards country landscapes to seek refuge from the ‘hyper-connected’ world they live in (Clark, 2009, pg. 505).

I argue that the difference between the gentrification of rural areas and that of urban areas is the role that tourism, summer homes, and environmental recreation play. As previously mentioned, people are now seeking a retreat from the hyper-connected world in which they live in, and often times become permanent residents or ‘permanent tourists’, a term used by Hines to describe the rural migration of the post-industrial middle class (Hines, 2010, pg. 510). People who initially sought these rural retreats and island getaways seasonally, eventually became year-round residents. Interestingly enough, Hines too uses the metaphor of “islands” to describe communities such as Aspen, Vail, Durango, and Sun Valley in which contemporary rural gentrification has changed the geographic and social condition of the pre-existing scene (Hines, 2010, pg. 511). In his research on rural Park County in southern Montana, he introduces how production and consumption factor into the desires of the ‘permanent tourists’, and how gentrification produces not just inter-class conflict, but also intra-class conflict. Although contemporary rural gentrification is seen by some as the replacement of the working class by a middle class one (Phillips, 1993, pg. 125), Hines points out how intra-class conflict is produced by differing desires of the use of the land. As one group of people would like

to see the land's resources used for production (a view consistent with the materialist and consumerist culture of the U.S.), the other group would like to see the land used for recreational purposes and as "untouched" as possible by the hand of industrialism.

William Cronon recognizes this prioritization of romanticism and environmental preservation in his paper, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature". He points out that wilderness post-civil war is now being used for recreational purposes by members of the elite, and includes luxurious hotel resorts in rural settings, guided big-game hunting trips, sprawling country estates, and summer homes (Cronon, 2005, pg. 78). Similar to Hines's observations, these tourists and post-industrial middle class members are no longer using the natural resources to be producers, but rather to be consumers. Open space has been commodified, and *experiences* are now seen as symbols of wealth. Those who are considered producers, such as the ranchers, miners, and loggers in Park County, are members of the industrial class whose lifestyles and livelihoods are now being challenged by more powerful, environmental-minded class members. As more cases of conflict between industrial and post-industrial residents arise, a noticeable shift towards the latter groups' desires also surface. For example, in the case between the older resident miners of Park County, and the newer residents whose peaceful lives were being disturbed by the noise of the mining machinery, more support was generated for the new residents' side as they approached the debate from an environmentalist point of view. Although Park County natives wanted to see the land be used to produce material through its main industries of agriculture, siculture, and mining, newcomers predominantly

believed that the land should be used to produce *experiences* (Hines, 2010, pg. 216).

They expressed that Park County was quieter, cleaner, and less populated, and was seemingly connected to the past with its rich natural and national history, a stance consistent with the romanticism ideals that Cronon described.

Case Study #1: Ko'olina Coconut Plantation

On the west side of the island of O'ahu, a new luxury community called the Coconut Plantation was developed on land formerly used for plantation fields, and now known as Ko'olina real estate. What originally was intended for local buyers failed to catch on among the community because of its high maintenance, or high *makamaka* appeal and high prices. A home with 3 bedrooms, 2.5 baths, and a square footage of 1,970 sq. feet was listed at \$1.1 million. Because of the initial lack of local interest, marketing was redirected towards a new group of potential buyers: mainlanders looking to buy a second or third home. The designers who developed the new community began to market the homes as temporary residences rather than permanent residences as an extensive outreach to retired military and families seeking a second home were initiated. Promotional ads were taken out of local newspapers and reinvested into ads on the mainland, deals were made with airlines for in-flight services to the islands, displays were constructed inside terminals, and even the interior design of the homes were changed to construct a vacation-like home such as changing nurseries to media rooms (Ivester, pg. 12). Fast forward to 2011, and the new Aulani Disney Resort has been

added to the Ko'olina real estate, which now includes six luxury communities, an 18-hole golf course, the Marriott Ihilani resort hotel, and a man-made marina. Working in collaboration with one another, both the resorts and the Coconut Plantation offer their guests and residents' package deals including tours of the luxury living communities, or free memberships to the golf course with the purchase of a new home. These resorts also bring in interested buyers from all parts of the globe, increasing the demographics of the Coconut Plantation from the outside.

Case Study #2: Ko'olau Loa

Once a large center for sugar cane production, and the main source of employment for residents in the Kahuku and La'ie part of the North Shore, the economy plummeted in 1971 when foreign competition and renewed investment into the tourism industry forced the Kahuku Sugar Mill to close. The affects were especially devastating to residents, and in order to account for the slowing economy and lost jobs, the Kahuku community followed the growing tourism trend and suggested the development of a resort hotel. This new development would provide jobs and opportunity closer to home for the long-time residents of the North Shore, whose strong familial ties and rural lifestyles prevented many of them from the hour-plus commute into town on a two-lane highway that was notorious for traffic and accidents. Opponents from the predominantly white and affluent neighboring community of Pupukea, who were concerned about preserving the natural aesthetics of the North Shore, aggressively met plans for this

development. The older residents of the declining Kahuku community wanted to develop a resort in order to create jobs, while the affluent newcomers wanted to “keep the country, country”. One local resident described it as a battle between “the rich white people who’ve gentrified the North Shore and the really rich white people who own the resort”(Ivester, pg. 15). Ivester proposes the question of whether or not the rich white people and the really rich white people can come to a compromise that will actually benefit the non-rich, non-white community that needed the jobs in the first place. To this day, this compromise has not been made as residents, developers, and even politicians continue to debate over the fate of Ko’olau Loa.

Recently, a new plan has been pitched called the “Ko’olau Loa Sustainable Communities Plan”, which has predictably met great opposition but has also gathered strong support. Some of the plan’s goal includes providing affordable housing for low-income residents, as well as providing more jobs by expanding the Turtle Bay Resort, Polynesian Cultural Center, and BYUH campus. Just like before, those who are opposed to the development are predominantly members from a higher class, and from the mainland, while those who are in support of the plan include many of the long-time residents of Kahuku and La’ie who would benefit from the added growth.

Discussion

I have presented two separate case studies that illustrated two different types of development and gentrification on the island of O’ahu. In the first one on the Coconut

Plantation, we see the role that developers play in building these luxury homes that are unaffordable for local residents, and how easy it is for temporary tourists to become what Hines would call 'permanent tourists'. While historically the Leeward side of the island was an undesirable place to live because of the underdeveloped nature, it is now home to several luxury communities, shopping malls, and multi-billion dollar resorts that boast growth and development. The average median household income for Ko'olina Resort residents is \$102,298 and is currently ranked at number twelve out of 148 cities in Hawai'i. 70% of residents in the gated community are white, while only 1% is Native (American Indian, Alaska Native, Native-Hawaiian, etc.)(Ko'olina).

While local residents from the Leeward coast have enjoyed some of the added benefits of this new development such as employment opportunities, improved roads, and private beach access, they are hoping that the economic growth will be shared with their community that has helped the developers throughout the planning process. Important to note is while many are grateful for the jobs that the resorts have provided for them, most if not all are still unable to afford the cost of living in the gated communities.

In the second case study on the Ko'olau Loa district, we saw the role that post-industrial middle and upper class members from the mainland directly played in the lives of the older community residents whose lives depended significantly on the growth of their economy. However, while it seems that many lives would be improved by a reinvestment in their tourist attractions and growth, anthropologist Michael Herzfeld and other scholars, including Glick and Faist in *Migration, Development, and*

Transnationalization: A Critical Stance, warn others of neo-liberalist ideals. Many times the true needs of the local residents are beneath the economic or environmentalist needs, which are often disguised as “development” and “improvement”. While the growth and development of Ko’olau Loa may seem beneficial as they would ultimately provide more jobs and affordable housing for some residents, who is really benefiting from this expansion? Is this once again a battle between the rich white homeowners and the richer white resort owners? What happens to those who are displaced by the expanding infrastructure?

In his paper, “Engagement, Gentrification, and the Neoliberal Hijacking of History”, he describes the dark side behind the ethics of conservation and the conflict between developers and residents. While homeowners are usually safe from being tossed aside by eviction (in this case many being the newer, white residents), for the large population of renters in the Ko’olau Loa area, that is simply not the case. Herzfeld also warns against state sponsored historic conservation, in which Hawai’i has seen its fair share given its rich cultural history. While efforts to preserve heritage sites are not quite relevant in the case studies I have presented, it is a phenomenon worth mentioning since it can be directly tied into my theme of *desires*. Heritage sites across the state attract tourists by the hundreds, making the area and Hawai’i itself even more *desirable* to live in. Often times these sites are located in a tranquil and breathtakingly beautiful area of the island that beckons visitors to want to stay. Furthermore, tourism runs the risk of turning heritage, both tangible and intangible, into a commodity, which is clearly evident

in both the Polynesian Cultural center in Ko'olau Loa, and the Hawaiian Cultural Center at the Ko'olina resort (Giaccaria, 2008). While being one of the most popular tourist attractions on the island, and one of the main avenues of employment for residents of Ko'olau Loa, cultural performances and everyday practices from around Polynesia are now a commodification for outsiders to experience. The same goes for those who'd like to experience authentic Hawaiian traditions such as hula or a lu'au. One of the most ancient forms of art of the Native-Hawaiians has now been reduced to a grass skirt and coconut bra thanks to the commodification of heritage.

While sharing similarities with other cases of rural gentrification across the globe, I argue that what makes Hawai'i so unique is not only it's solitary geographical location, but also its existing population of indigenous people, history of colonialism, and relationship with the United States. Although I draw a large portion of my material from J.D. Hines's research, my biggest critique of his work is in his use of the word "native" to describe the older, long-standing residents of Park County. He argues that the 'permanent tourists' are enamored with the rich American history of the area, yet interestingly only includes a brief mention of the Native-Americans who occupied the land before white settlers came. He states, "Since the forced expulsion of the indigenous Crow population by European-American 'settlers' in the early 1880's the vast majority of Park County's residents (up to and through the late 1980s) have been participants in the traditional American-West extractive industries of mining, ranching, and logging" (Hines, 2010, pg. 510). Similar to Hawai'i, the true native inhabitants of Park County

were forced to leave the land by white settlers, with no regard to their livelihoods, or uses of land and resources.

This example reminded me of an episode titled “Going Native” from a popular yet controversial comedy series called *South Park*. When one of the characters learns of his “Native-Hawaiian” background, he travels to Hawai’i where he meets “his people” who teach him the ways of his ancestors. The irony of the episode, and essentially what the creators are trying to poke satirical fun at, is that these “natives” are what Hines would call the “permanent tourists”. In the episode, their desires are to adopt the island way of life, yet they live in gated communities among themselves, away from the true Native-Hawaiians and locals. My favorite line of the episode is when they have a tribal council meeting upon learning that a cruise ship full of mainlanders are coming to the dock. One “native” exclaims in protest, “I have lived on this island for ten years. Ten years, every July and part of August, and I can tell you all that what we are about to face from the *haoles* is nothing short of genocide!” (“Going Native”).

While obviously dramatized and exaggerated for comedic purposes, *South Park* episodes tend to have some political truth to them as they use satire to depict current events. The “Going Native” episode was in part inspired by events in 2011 when protestors on Moloka’i successfully stopped the American Safari Explorer cruise ship from docking on the island (Sloan, 2011). While in real life protestors of this cruise ship were true Native-Hawaiians, in the episode the protestors were “Native-Hawaiians”, or those that felt that they were true locals because they had lived on the island for an *x*

amount of time. Although it is a satirical, offensive, and very controversial cartoon series, I feel that it accurately reflects parts of the gentrification process in Hawai'i, including the tourist attractions, affluent lifestyles of newcomers, and apathetic attitudes of locals towards the newcomers' issues. My point being that just because many may wish to preserve the natural landscape and cultural history of a place, one must be leery of local idealists whose ideas may further suppress and marginalize certain populations, especially those that come from a lower class background, or a racial minority. As suggested in the *South Park* episode, the "natives" were further marginalizing the true locals and Native-Hawaiians by gentrifying the area, and not listening to their concerns or opinions. This ties in directly to the long-time residents of Ko'olau Loa whose voices are not being heard by the new residents who only wish to preserve the natural landscape for their own enjoyment.

Once again we see the differing desires of land usage that Hines so aptly described in his 'New West' article. Members of the PIMC feel that the best use of the land is for recreational purposes and that it must remain as rural as possible, while members of the working class would like to see the land used for production purposes and growth. Although the fate of the Ko'olau Loa communities is yet undecided, unfortunately for those still a part of the industrial working class, priority is often given to views in which preservation is favored. I presume that these "victories" for the residents concerned with the preservation of the natural landscape is in part due to recent trends in sustainability and conservation that were first seen in the post-development era

of the 1970's (Gardner and Lewis, 1996). As more awareness is made of the implications that resource consumption has on the environment, the more development and growth is seen as a negative, even if it directly benefits the most marginalized. In Hawai'i's case, the most marginalized being Native-Hawaiians and Pacific islanders.

Conclusion

After examining these two case studies from Hawai'i, I've found how gentrification has transformed both the landscape and the lives of local residents, particularly Native-Hawaiians. Although only 59% of the Native-Hawaiian population currently lives in Hawai'i, it's critical to look at the source of the displacement, which points to the in-migration of wealthy mainlanders and the subsequent gentrification.

While tourism and development are not entirely bad, and in fact is the main source of revenue for Hawai'i's economy, attention must be brought to the desires of Native-Hawaiians, old-time residents, and locals, while being critically aware of the desires of developers and newcomers alike. Like Faier suggested in her book, the desires of individuals are socially and historically produced, and in order to provide equity to Native-Hawaiians, we must address Hawai'i's history of exploitation, and long-term economic problems that are only exacerbated by gentrification.

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