



Linked migration and labor market flexibility in the rural amenity destinations in the United States



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports results from a series of interviews with employers in two high amenity nonmetropolitan destinations: Rabun County, Georgia, and Routt County, Colorado. These communities were selected because both have experienced rapid in-migration of aging baby boomers and Latino immigrants, many of whom are undocumented, over the past two decades. The spending of baby boomers has stimulated expansion in various sectors including construction, property management, household services, and restaurants, and Latino immigrants have been pulled into these areas as a result of the expanding labor demand in these sectors. Interviews with business owners in these sectors reveal how the supply of immigrant workers enables greater labor market flexibility – both numeric and functional. Both documented and undocumented immigrants provide numeric flexibility in that employers can draw on them in periods of high labor demand, and they are functionally flexible in the ways they move between sectors. Such increased flexibility allows employers in amenity destinations to capitalize on rapidly emerging economic opportunities, yet at the same time the interview responses reveal a high degree of internal segmentation *within* the Latino labor force.

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1. Introduction

Rural landscapes often conjure up images of egalitarian communities where residents live slow-paced and more relaxed lifestyles in closer contact with nature (Bunce, 2003; Hummon, 1990; Murdoch and Day, 1998). These popular perceptions drawn on nostalgia for some bygone era, however, mask considerable dynamism and inequality that have come to characterize rural places. Today, transformations in the nature of rural economies coupled with advancements in information technologies are leading to dramatic economic restructuring in rural communities. Work within traditional resourced-based sectors such as agriculture, mining, and timber is linked to global commodity markets, so a farmer's economic fortunes are as tied to the unpredictable weather as they are to price fluctuations for crops grown half-way around the globe. Moreover, no longer are rural economies driven solely by these traditional resource-based sectors. Rather, rural places have economic structures that closely mirror their urban

counterparts with high concentrations of employment in the service industries (Vias and Nelson, 2006). Class divisions have been exacerbated by some of these economic shifts resulting in income polarization and heightened awareness of heterogeneity and diversity in rural regions previously viewed as more egalitarian (Murdoch and Marsden, 1994; Nelson, 2001). Furthermore, it is no longer satisfactory to describe rural locations as 'isolated' or 'remote.' Economic restructuring draws rural economies into the web of globalization through both transnational labor and commodity markets.

Layered on top of this economic restructuring is a set of demographic shifts driven largely by differential migration. Since the 1990s, many rural places, especially those with high levels of natural amenities, have experienced rapid in-migration as footloose individuals decide to leave urban areas in pursuit of a perceived higher quality of life rural places have to offer (Green et al., 2006; McGranahan, 1999). Often, these 'amenity migrants' are empty-nesters making the decision to move to the countryside in their late 50s and early 60s, a particularly important demographic given the current age profile of the post-war Baby Boom. Yet, the aging baby boom demographic is not the only group arriving in large numbers in rural areas. Since 1990, the Latino population has

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grown rapidly across the rural United States, as rural economic restructuring creates employment opportunities in niches often filled by immigrant labor (Johnson and Lichter, 2008; Kandel and Cromartie, 2004). Specifically, transformations in agriculture and food processing have pulled Latinos toward rural destinations as places like Dawson County, Nebraska and Garden City, Kansas have become centers of a reorganized meatpacking industry (Bodvarsson and Van Den Berg, 2003; Broadway and Stull, 2006; Zúñiga and Hernández-León, 2006). The Latino population growth over the past two decades has been attributed to a combination of continued immigration from abroad, internal migration originating from larger urban ports of entry, and natural increase with natural increase becoming increasingly important over time (Johnson and Lichter, 2008). Yet these demographic forces are not equally important in all rural regions. According to Census 2010, approximately 31% of nonmetropolitan Latinos were foreign born, yet in some of the amenity destinations described above, more than one-half to two thirds of Latinos were born abroad. In Eagle County, Colorado (home to Vail) for example, 58% of Latinos were foreign born; in Pitkin County (home to Aspen) 56% are foreign born; in Rabun County, Georgia (one case study location in this work) the value is 61%. Thus, it appears that amenity development is shifting both domestic migration flows as well as immigrant settlement patterns in substantive ways.

The literatures on amenity migration and rural Latino population growth, unfortunately, treat these two phenomena as independent. Scholars examining amenity migration often focus on environmental struggles between wealthy newcomers and long term 'locals' (Smith and Krannich, 2000; Walker and Fortmann, 2003), and those examining the economic dimensions of amenity migration often focus on changes in the housing market, increased reliance on non-earnings income, or the changing nature of rural work (Ghose, 2004; Power and Barrett, 2001; Shumway and Otterstrom, 2001). While the amenity migration literature is robust, very little attention is paid to who is actually doing the work in many of these high amenity destinations. Similarly, scholarship on new destinations for Latino immigration to rural communities is often situated in the newly formed meatpacking towns of the Great Plains or Southeast, as these places provide very visible and acute cases of Latino immigrant population growth (Bodvarsson and Van Den Berg, 2003; Broadway and Stull, 2006; Cravey, 1997; Winders, 2005). There is, however, evidence to suggest that amenity migration and Latino migration are linked in certain rural destinations. Viewing these flows as complimentary provides a new case illustrating how demographic and economic forces operating across scales combine to reshape the rural countryside (Nelson and Nelson, 2011; Nelson et al., 2009, 2010). This paper extends the emerging literature on rural linked migration streams by examining labor market dynamics in areas simultaneously attracting large numbers of aging baby boomers and large numbers of Latino immigrants. Drawing on interview content and other evidence collected through two intensive community case studies in areas with linked migration flows, this paper, 1) highlights the essential role immigrant labor played in supporting growth in these two amenity boomtowns, 2) identifies the labor market dynamics that caused employers to turn to Latino immigrant workers, 3) illustrates how the Latino immigrant workforce enables greater labor market flexibility in rural places, and 4) describes how distinctions within the immigrant workforce along lines of legality, temporary work status, and social ties are instrumental in enabling these flexible labor practices to develop in rural areas.

This paper is divided into five sections. Following this introduction (1), the literature review (2) situates the analysis at the intersection of three bodies of work on amenity migration, rural gentrification, and linked migration. Next, we describe the

methodology (3) for selecting the two case study communities as well as the process by which we carried out our fieldwork and recruited interview respondents. The results (4) are largely based on interview responses from employers and community leaders in the two case study communities, and the conclusion (5) summarizes what the analysis reveals while charting a course for engaging questions that remain to be answered.

2. Amenity migration, rural gentrification, and rural linked migration

This paper is situated at the confluence of three bodies of literature, two of which are well established in rural areas while the third has only recently been extended from the city into the countryside. Natural amenities often associated with certain rural destinations have served as a major attraction for many footloose urban to rural migrants (amenity migration). As these urban émigrés arrive in rural areas, they often precipitate processes of change akin to gentrification in their new locales (rural gentrification), and gentrification, at least in the urban context, often relies heavily on the presence of a low-skill immigrant workforce creating linkages between high-wage and low-wage migration streams (linked migration).

2.1. Amenity migration

As early as the 1950s, scholars began to see relationships between certain features of the natural environment (moderate climates, coastal environments, mountain topography, etc.) and aggregate migration streams. Describing the economic and demographic shifts toward the southwestern United States, Ullman (1954) writes, "for the first time in the world's history pleasant living conditions – amenities – instead of more narrowly defined economic advantages are becoming the sparks that generate significant population increase, particularly in the United States" (Ullman, 1954, page 119). With the Rural Renaissance of the 1970s and the Rural Rebound of the 1990s, natural amenities once more were associated with migration into rural areas (Dillman, 1979; McGranahan, 1999). The USDA Economic Research Service has developed a composite measure that captures certain dimensions of an area's natural environment (mild winters and mild summers, number of sunny days per year, local topographic variation, access to water, etc.) and reports this natural amenity index for each county in the lower 48 United States. McGranahan (1999) shows this amenity index to be positively associated with nonmetropolitan population change between 1970 and 1996, and Fig. 1 shows this relationship to be consistent since 2000 as well. While most nonmetropolitan counties experienced population loss or only slight gains in the last decade, those areas with the highest levels of natural amenities enjoyed robust growth with net migration rates of nearly 5%. Clearly population is shifting toward areas with certain types of natural environments, and this pattern of population shifts is evident across the globe ranging from the United States and Canada to Sweden, France, the UK and Australia. Several edited volumes have examined amenity migration drawing on rich empirical work from around the world (see for example, Green et al., 2006; Moss, 2006).

The entire body of work examining amenity migration is too vast to comprehensively summarize here,¹ but several of its important impacts have been addressed in the existing literature. Given that amenity migration stimulates growth in areas

¹ For a very thorough review of the amenity migration literature, please see Gosnell and Abrams (2010).

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