

FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO THE VALLEY: THE FLOWS AND FRICTIONS OF
COMMUTING IN A RESORT GEOGRAPHY

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Sarah Amasa Madsen and Shawn Orloff, whose commutes, experiences, and passion inspired and shaped this research. Though they are not here to see the results, may they live on through their friends, family, and this research. And to all who participated in the research. Some agreed to interviews or otherwise shared their perspectives and thoughts. Others allowed me to conduct interviews at their businesses or organization offices. To those who let me ride along I am especially grateful, and this study is so much better because of their honesty, thoughtfulness, and openness. I hope that this project and my future research and work honors you.

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VITA, AMERICAN INDIAN HERITAGE

I acknowledge the Indigenous nations on whose traditional territories this research was conducted. The place now known as Big Sky, Montana in the valley and headwaters of the West Fork of the Gallatin River is part of the traditional land and unceded territory of the Shoshone Bannock, Cheyenne, Salish, Blackfoot, and Apsáalooke (Crow) people (Native Land Digital 2018). The United States Government claimed this area through Cession 398 via two treaties: the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851 and a separate treaty with the Blackfeet in 1855 (Kappler, 1975; Native Land Digital, 2018).

The Morrill Act, signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, provided seed money for public universities by granting them land that had been seized from Indigenous people (Lee and Ahtone, 2020). Montana State University was funded through the profits from the sale and rental of 140,385 acres. This land was part of the traditional territories of the Flathead, Blackfoot, Upper Pend d'Oreilles, Kootenay, Chippewa, Ontonagon Band, Nez Perce, Piegan, Gros Ventre, Crow, River Crow, and Blood Nations (Lee, Ahtone, and Pearce, 2020).

Despite the injustices against them, many tribes are powerful entities in the governance and culture of Montana today, including MSU's current Council of Elders. This research is guided by the blessings laid forth by Dr. Henrietta Mann at the opening of the Montana State University American Indian Hall in 2021. Below is an excerpt from her prayer.

So, note that I wish for you all good things in life. All things good: happiness, joy, good health. And a sacred walk on this beautiful land.

For all those here and those not here, I make seven special requests.

Bless each with a good mind with powerful thoughts of love and respect for life, and to be responsible to our ancestors and to our children.

Bless each with good sight to see the divine within each other and in the world. Bless each with good hearing to learn to listen with the heart. And to listen lovingly to others.

Bless each with good speech, with kind words to speak gently and to sing the beautiful songs of life.

Bless each with an open and compassionate heart. With the gentle strength of love and to experience the daily moments of happiness.

Bless each with good health and courage for the long journey ahead on the road that leads into the sunlight.

Bless each with good movement, but as they walk across the four ridges of life and dance their prayers gently on earth.

Bless everyone attending this grand event. Always fulfill their every dream and hope. Let them welcome today and tomorrow with joy and confidence.

To our home planet Earth and to all its peoples give peace.

Dr. Henrietta Mann Cheyenne

October 16th, 2021—American Indian Hall Grand Opening Montana State University

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the commuting experiences of laborers who travel upwards of 60 miles to work in the resort town of Big Sky, Montana, USA. Using semi-structured interviews with commuters and an ethnographic approach, this case study describes the phenomenon of rapid luxury amenity growth with a focus on how workers experience the commuting burdens of endemic housing shortages. The analysis draws on concepts from resource geography, urban planning, and transportation studies to elucidate the relationship between the spatial footprint of the resort economy, commuting and the subjective well-being of workers. To categorize a wide range of subjective descriptions of the commute, the study offers the framework of flows and frictions. A focus on commuting provides a new way to understand how costs externalized by the resort economy are adapted to, and absorbed by, workers. As wealth inequality continues to create demand for high end tourism and real estate, these results are an important contribution to understanding the associated social and spatial costs that accrue to resort laborers.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Justification

This is a thesis about the ways the super-rich ¹are changing the social and physical landscape, as told through the commuting experiences of laborers in a resort geography. By examining the experiences of the workers who make the lifestyles of the super-rich possible, in a resort locale utilized by the wealthy, this research reveals how wealth consolidation shapes the resort geography. This research examines wealth consolidation not by scrutinizing wealth itself, but by examining the daily lives of laborers and geography shaped by it.

The activities of the ultra are an emerging area of concern for geographers and have been of sensational and political interest to the public for quite some time. Over the last 20 years, national and global increases in income inequality have prompted a growing canon of research to address the implications of income inequality, including how wealth concentration alters landscapes and communities (Saez and Zucman, 2020, World Inequality Database 2022, Zucman, 2019). In their 2004 paper, geographers Beaverstock, Hubbard, and Short described what they call the “fast world” of the super-rich. In this “fast world” the super-rich “move easily from nation to nation” in private planes or first-class travel amongst “multiple residences”, “luxury five-star hotels,” and the “most exclusive clubs and restaurants.” (Beaverstock et. al.

¹ The definition of ‘super-rich’ is not conclusive. Some literature defines super-rich individuals by their wealth: either as the top 1% of the population measured by net wealth or those with investible assets of US\$1 million or more (Koh, 2020). Other definitions center more around “the characteristics and ability to generate wealth” (Koh, 2020 par. 4). Of note much of Big Sky’s luxury amenities require much more than US\$1 million in assets, but since I cannot put a value on specific wealth divisions, I use the term super-rich.

2004 p. 404-405). In the stateless hypermobility of the ‘fast world’, the wealthy move easily from place to place unimpeded by physical discomfort or political boundaries. They rely on exclusive luxury nodes of residences, hotels and amenities that anchor this hypermobility.

An isolated mountain resort geography in the Northern Rockies, Big Sky, Montana has emerged as one such place. In Big Sky, real estate and industrial tourism sectors cater to the super-rich with luxury real estate and exclusive amenities (Vincentelli, 2022). This research examines the social and physical landscape of the resort geography driven by the high-end luxury model through the experiences of laborers who commute across it.

Increased awareness of the growing national and international wealth gap has inspired research on the implications of the ‘fast world’ for those who exist outside it. Of particular interest are rural and tourist locales where the wealthy congregate to play and vacation. While seaside or alpine resorts might appear to be places of effortless leisure, these nodes of the fast world rely on considerable labor. The laborers who serve the ultra-wealthy in resort and tourist locales face extreme economic disadvantage, especially compared to the visitors they serve. Western American ski destinations are a unique case of such interactions between economic and social inequality. High-end ski resorts offer a dramatic exemplar of places where the consumption patterns of the ultra-wealthy juxtapose, but also depend on, the narrow choices available to low-wage service workers. Wealth inequality’s impact on physical and social systems may be more obvious in a ski resort than in urban geographies where changes driven by the wealthy are disguised by the business of the city. For this reason, ski resorts provide essential insights into the coupled social and spatial dynamics of wealth concentration (Farrell, 2020). In

particular, the livelihoods of laborers are key data points on the changes to the social and physical landscape driven by the development of a ‘fast world’ luxury node.

Two features of resort geographies—the lack of affordable housing and constrained transportation infrastructure—particularly affect the livelihoods of laborers (Travis, 2007). While amenity communities and researchers have long identified affordable housing as a central issue, constrained transportation infrastructure and its relationship to housing remain underexplored in the critical literature. Yet most workers live far from the core of almost every resort geography, and travel to and from work and other amenities is a part of their daily rhythm. This study contributes to a broader body of work on the spatial dimensions of inequality in mountain geographies by examining laborers’ experiences of commuting across it. By studying the seemingly mundane and often forgotten commuting experiences, I contribute to existing assumptions about the externalized costs of the resort economy absorbed by commuting laborers.

To do this, I examine the experiences of laborers who commute to the resort geography of Big Sky, Montana. I begin by examining how the resort geography—both its economy and its physical footprint—are conceptualized within the literature. In one key feature of the resort geography, high real estate prices drive workers far from the resort core. Thus, this research operates on the premise that long commutes are a key feature of resort economies and rely on a workforce that lives far from the resort core.

Using qualitative semi-structured interviews with Big Sky laborers, this study documents a range of commuting experiences amongst Big Sky workers. Philosophically, this research takes a bottom-up approach. It starts with the day-to-day lives of resort laborers by asking: what are the subjective commuting experiences of Big Sky laborers and what costs might be associated

with those experiences? I then shape a larger inquiry into how these experiences relate to key features of the resort geography, asking: What is the relationship between worker commuting experiences and key economic and spatial features of the resort geography?

Why Commuting?

In 2020 I entered graduate school at Montana State University. At that time, I had worked eight winter seasons in Big Sky as a ski instructor, caterer, shuttle driver, and babysitter. While I was interested in researching Big Sky and its impacts, I did not think of commuting experiences as a potential data point on the resort economy. Despite the 500-plus trips between Bozeman and Big Sky in buses, friend's cars, and my 2001 Toyota Sienna minivan, and years of long-distance trips from my home in Montana to Idaho and Arizona to work as a river guide, I rarely thought about commuting at all. Commuting was a necessary inconvenience best quickly forgotten except for the occasional memorable sunset or golden eagle sighting.

A friend's tragedy brought the importance of driving into sharp relief. On September 2nd, 2020, my friend, Big Sky coworker and occasional carpool buddy, Sara Amasa Madsen, rolled her truck while driving to her parent's home in rural Idaho from her summer work as a hot shot wildland firefighter in Northern Montana. She was thrown from the vehicle and died. Sara had just finished a two-week hitch on a fire and decided to drive through the night to spend her 48 hours off with her family. In the early morning, ten miles from her parent's home, she lost control on a sharp 90-degree turn.

In the wake of Sara's tragic death, I began to think about the driving I had done. I have always treated these drives as "invisible time" or time that I forgot as soon as it ended to prevent it from interfering with the actual living of life. Sometimes forgetting was hard: when the stress

of traffic, negative social interactions, or late carpools put me in a foul mood. Sometimes it was easy—when I drove fast on dry on empty roads, I felt almost as if I teleported from home to the ski area and back again. I saw the drives as a necessary opportunity cost for my work and passions, invisible time to be painted over by the joy of skiing or the magnificence of the Grand Canyon. But, after my friend died during such an invisible time, I reconsidered my perceptions of driving time balancing the risks of driving with the moments of life that happened enroute. So, when Dr. Haggerty suggested directing my interest in social and spatial expressions of inequality in resort economies towards commuting, it made sense.

While examining laborer commuting in conversation with the resort economy often felt like an insurmountable task, I also never doubted that the ‘mundane’ experiences of commuting laborers reveal much about the resort geography. There is an illusion of effortlessness that underlies how many see resort geographies; they are places where visitors are protected from the realities of the world, where all is well. But in Big Sky there is much effort behind this illusion of effortlessness. Cleaners scrub the roughhewn wood floors of unoccupied mansions, and the project managers stock fridges with strawberries in the dead of winter. Thousands of construction workers make hundreds of thousands of trips on winding mountain roads to bring earth movers, gravel, concrete, steel beams, siding, and everything else it takes to build mansions and luxury hotels in these isolated places. Concierge and waiters magically appear when they are needed, as if they are a part of the landscape or the lodge. Ski patrollers arrive anywhere in the 5,850 acres of ski terrain in minutes to help injured or hurt skiers and set off more than 200 pounds of explosives after any storm of strong wind to subdue the danger of the mountains. Ski bums—here for one season or ten—who flip hamburgers and serve hot chocolate some living in

dorm housing with no kitchens, strange mattress stains and rumors of bed bugs. But perhaps the greatest illusion is that around 80 percent of those workers do not live in Big Sky. By choice or by trial, after a day of creating this illusion, they drive 40-60 miles on winding roads through mountain weather and the construction delays that are inherent to a developing tourist area before they are home (U.S. Census, 2022). What costs are associated with this illusion? It is impossible to know without examining the costs associated the commuting of resort laborers.

At its heart, this research seeks to illuminate the time spent commuting by resort workers. The first step is to account for travel time: How much time does it take? How is that time spent? What are the range of feelings that commuting provokes? What are the consequences of this travel—both positive and negative? In no way do I assume that commuting is a terrible experience—there is immense power in spatial mobility, and how commuters enact that power for personal and financial gain is an important part of this research. Instead, I set out to describe the experience of commuting: the views, the sunsets, the carpool conversations, the early mornings waiting in below zero weather, the accidents, the traffic and sometimes injury, and death. In this globalized political economy, ideas and capital travel freely, unhindered by physical impediments. But workers and goods are still tethered to the physical world. Travel will continue to be a part of many service and manual labor jobs. Documenting and acknowledging the rich and complex experiences of workers is the first step in illuminating this often-overlooked aspect of the resort economy. The second step in illuminating these experiences is to deploy them in a critical appraisal of larger political and economic systems—both in how workers' experiences are shaped by the resort geography and what those experiences can reveal about this geography.

Why Big Sky?

This research develops a case study of commuting experiences based in the resort geography of Big Sky, Montana. Big Sky is an ideal case study in which to document the commuting experiences of laborers due to two characteristics. First, Big Sky's housing stock and rental markets are largely unaffordable for workers. Second, the regional geography and land ownership patterns result in a long-distance commute. Such down valley shuffles and housing shortages are endemic in western ski towns and in Big Sky, they are particularly extreme.

First, land use and infrastructure decision-making in Big Sky occur through a diffuse and often uncoordinated network of private and public actors. These processes shape its transportation and housing geographies. Since Big Sky is unincorporated, it is technically under the jurisdiction of Madison and Gallatin counties, but many local boards of established 'special use districts' have intermediary power over services and tax funds. As a Resort Area District, Big Sky can administer and distribute a sales tax—a privilege available only to resort districts in Montana, which has no statewide sales taxing authority. The boundaries of this district are the commonly accepted borders of Big Sky. This resort tax is the only discretionary funding the community has (Big Sky Resort Area Tax District Board, 2022). Other special district boards include fire, transportation, parks, trails and recreation, zoning, and water and sewer.

In addition, hundreds of homeowner associations provide additional services such as garbage, parking enforcement, and plowing. In addition to their subdivision HOA, most owners pay into the Big Sky Homeowners Association, the oldest and largest HOA, which plows and maintains roads throughout the meadow and whose architecture review board plays a central role in deciding what can and cannot be built in Big Sky (Ring, 1997). Other NGOs play a role in Big

Sky's governance. The Big Sky Chamber of Commerce organizes community forums, resort district strategic plans, and other organizational tasks a local government might otherwise do. The Big Sky Community Organization administers local parks, trails, and a community center. Both organizations receive resort tax funding. This complex network of governance is not as representative as a traditional municipality government and adds an additional layer of complexity to any housing or transportation interventions (Big Sky Chamber of Commerce, 2019).

Big Sky has an expensive real estate market coupled with a major shortage of workforce housing. As a result, 78% of the workforce to commute from surrounding communities (U.S. Census, 2018). Just how expensive is Big Sky housing? According to the Big Sky Housing Trust in June 2022, the average bedroom in Big Sky rented for 1200 dollars, the average non luxury condominium cost just under a million dollars, and the average single family home cost 2.4 million dollars (Big Sky Housing Trust, 2022). Big Sky has a 0% rental vacancy rate even though only one in three of Big Sky's 4,320 housing units in Big Sky are occupied as primary residences (Sullivan, Walker and Williford, 2018). Recent growth in the Airbnb and Vrbo short-term vacation rentals—1,031 listing in 2020 to 1,288 in 2021—has eliminated stock that was once rented long term to workers (Bigart et al., 2021; Butler, 2021; Sukut, 2021). Thus, Big Sky housing is both unaffordable and unavailable to those who work there.

Several factors contribute to this housing shortage. First, Big Sky's developers favor a luxury resort development model. In this model developers build large and/or luxury units rather than high density cheaper units. These units are developed primarily as second homes for the super-rich and do not add housing stock for the workforce. Much of Big Sky's developable land

is held in full or in part by CrossHarbor Capital Partners (CHCP)—operating through a subsidiary Lone Mountain Land Company in Big Sky. CHCP is a Boston-based private equity firm who acquired the three bankrupted private luxury clubs as distressed assets in the early 2010s (CrossHarbor Capital Partners, 2022 Cohan, 2008). Since then, CHCP has invested in development at these clubs, and Big Sky has solidified a reputation as an exclusive luxury destination for the wealthy (Vincentelli, 2022). With the luxury model employed by CHCP, fewer units are developed, and the units developed are more expensive. While the full scale of CHCP’s Big Sky real estate profits is unknown, in 2020, CHCP reported over 1.3 billion dollars in Big Sky real estate transaction volume, not including Yellowstone Club transactions. Given CHCP’s private equity priorities, their strategy suggests that the profit margins for luxury real estate sales outpace high-density low-end housing development (Kidd, 2021).

Developing dense, affordable housing might seem to be the natural solution to Big Sky’s shortage of housing stock, but Big Sky’s political and regulatory institutions do little to enable such action. Big Sky follows county land use plans and zoning ordinances. Because Big Sky is in both Madison and Gallatin County, developers gain approvals from the separate counties depending on which county they are in. In 1996, the Gallatin County portion of Big Sky opted to initiate its own “Part 1” zoning through the county. All areas except for the Town Center were zoned single family (Gallatin County, 1996). While this doesn’t eliminate the possibility of developing higher density cheaper housing, it adds administrative burden and uncertainty to pursuing multifamily developments which reduces profit margins. In the Eastern portion of Big Sky, which is in Madison County, rural county zoning only requires approval for subdivision, and does not require approval for different densities of housing (Madison County Planning,

2022). However, much of this land is either already developed as Big Sky Resort or is part of private luxury clubs where employee housing is unlikely to be built and would be far from services in the Meadow Village (Madison County Planning, 2022).

Even in the absence of single-family zoning, Big Sky's water and sewer system is not ready to handle the load that might come with large high-density developments. Big Sky has historically struggled to maintain environmentally acceptable water and sewer treatment. In the 1990s, development was banned for five years due to unmitigated sewage leaks into the Gallatin River (Ring, 1997). During that period, Big Sky established a water and sewer district, which took over management of the system from the Big Sky Homeowners Association (Knauber, 1996). Limited hookups are available to the existing system, and thus hookups for single family development are easier to come by or—if far enough from the Meadow Village and Gallatin River— can go on septic.²

Lastly, Montana state laws limit the tools Big Sky can use to subsidize workforce and high-density housing. In 2021 the Montana State Legislature banned inclusionary zoning that could have required developers to simultaneously build workforce housing or pay into government workforce housing development funds (Myscofski, 2021). In addition, Montana State Constitution Article VIII, Section 17 prohibits tax on the sale or transfer of real estate

² As of July 2022, some changes Big Sky's housing and infrastructure geography may have an impact on this characterization of Big Sky's housing shortage. 1. In 2022 the Water and Sewer District is expanding its operations to take on an additional 3,800 hookups which will include existing houses the Gallatin Canyon where the high density of septic systems has led to pollution of the Gallatin River, and new Some of these hookups will be reserved for workforce housing development (Big Sky Water and Sewer District, 2022). 2. CHCP is developing over 3,000 beds of workforce housing in both Big Sky and 35 miles North in Gallatin Gateway. How these units will be allocated and who will live in them is unknown (Kidd, 2021). These interventions may have an impact on the housing shortage albeit with significant lag time.

(Montana Annotated Code, 2021). Thus, standard tools to address housing issues in resort towns—i.e., real estate transfer taxes or inclusionary zoning requirements—are off the table in Montana.

These factors have compounded to create an extreme lack of workforce or affordable housing in Big Sky, forcing more workers to commute. Workers traveling to Big Sky commute especially long distances. Located in the headwaters to the West Fork of the Gallatin River, Big Sky sits north of Yellowstone National Park and is surrounded by the Lee Metcalf Wilderness and other National Forest. Land for Big Sky was consolidated via a series of land exchanges in the 1970s and 1990s, thus it is almost surrounded by public land (McMillion, 2008; Williams and Sandquist, 1976). These public lands and additional large private land conservation holdings mean that a bottleneck on both existing and potential commuting communities surrounds the resort. Thus, when workers commute, they generally commute between 35-50 miles one way. This means that the effects of commuting may be more extreme and thus easier to identify.

Roadmap

This thesis consists of five chapters. Following this introduction, I begin with a thorough literature review of resort geographies. Chapter Two details the conceptual framework and a detailed review of literature on both mountain resort geographies and commuting and transportation literature utilized in the development and framing of this project. Chapter Three is a manuscript that reports the methods, results, findings, and discussion of this study and is planned as a submission to the Journal of Rural Studies. Chapter Four describes my methodology in additional detail, and Chapter Five concludes the thesis by discussing the limitations and future directions of research on resort geographies and commuting. Several appendices include interview guides in English and Spanish and the IRB approval for the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines two sets of scholarship – resort geographies and commuting – which inform a conceptual framework to investigate the commuting experiences of laborers and their relationship to the resort industry in Big Sky, Montana. This review illustrates that the resort geography is a mobile and spatial phenomenon closely linked to the political economy through both exogenous and endogenous factors. This section begins by examining the historical, economic and spatial characteristics of the resort geography. These influences produce a central wealthy resort core and a mobile expanding sphere onto which costs are easily externalized. This review focuses on the particular process through which resort geographies externalize certain costs by relying on a commuting workforce. Housing shortages and financialized real estate force resort laborers to commute farther distances to find affordable housing. To better understand the social costs of commuting in resort geographies, the second part of this review engages the literature on commuting from transportation geographers and scholars in other contexts. This chapter closes with a summary of key insights and questions that have emerged from this literature review.

Resort Geographies

In the US West, mountain resort geographies are known for their beautiful vistas and competitive and expensive real estate markets. These locales have received recent media attention since the COVID-19 pandemic brought a new wave of wealthy migrants to amenity

communities throughout the US West (e.g. Thompson, 2021; Clarke, 2021). The pace and scale of this new migration exposed the inequities and precarity within resort communities (Koshmrl, 2021; Saraiva, 2021). The juxtaposition of social precarity with elite lifestyles is fundamental to the mountain resort economy. This review aims to understand this relationship by examining the resort economy within theoretical, spatial, and historical contexts, and how commuting emerges as a social cost. The review begins by situating resort geography scholarship and reviewing the development of mountain resort towns within the Western United States. Next, I identify exogenous and endogenous factors that shape the resort economy. Lastly, I describe the key characteristics of the resort geography operationalized in this research: (1) the resort geography is a mobile and spatial phenomenon closely linked to the political economy and (2) housing shortages endemic to the mountain resort economic model result in a long-distance commute for resort laborers.

Resort Research

Researchers first examined resort towns by studying English seaside resorts (Gilbert, 1939). Early tourism scholarship was primarily concerned with demand-side questions of what drew tourists and how areas could effectively promote themselves (Saarinen et al., 2017; Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019). This positivist approach continued through the 1970s when researchers worked on modeling the growth and decline of tourist areas (Plog, 1974; Stansfield, 1978). In 1980, geographer Richard Butler published the tourism area life cycle model which became a prevalent theory in tourism studies. The life cycle model generalizes economic growth and failure stages within tourist areas which ends with overdevelopment and decline unless new amenities (e.g., gambling) are developed (Butler, 1980).

Planners in western mountain resort towns altered Butler's life cycle to include an elusive stage of "sustainable growth," operating on the assumption that these mountain areas possess resources so unique they will never stop driving economic activity (Travis, 2007). Geographer William Travis challenged these models by arguing that explosive regional growth, specifically in amenity areas of the American West, may be part of a significant economic turn. In Travis's assessment, the impact of resort economy on social structures and land use patterns stretches far beyond the official boundaries of resorts or tourism locales (Travis, 2007). Resort industry life cycles give communities an idea of what to expect in the future but ignore important regional and global contexts that can alter the outcomes of any predictive lifecycle. A regional approach is key to understanding how tourism and amenity growth impacts the environment and well-being of all members of communities within the region.

The Shaping of the American Mountain Resort Town

The American mountain resort town, which this research is most directly concerned with, is the archetype of the resort geography. These geographies are shaped by federal land use policy and economic forces. Ski resorts emerged during the long boom post-WWII with rising interest in skiing and travel and a middle class with disposable income (Coleman, 2004; Clifford, 2002; Travis, 2007). These developments took place on public and private lands originally seized from Indigenous people by the US government through hundreds of treaties and land cessions in the 1800s (Native Land Digital, 2018). Some of these lands were then transferred to private parties via railroad land grants and the Homestead Act of 1862, and its various successors (Egan, 2009). Other lands were withdrawn from homestead allotments and transferred to various federal land management agencies to manage. Today, ski resorts on both private and public land are on

territory that was taken through conquest from Indigenous peoples (Coleman, 2004; Native Land Digital, 2018). However, some ski areas—Sunrise Park in Arizona and Ski Apache in New Mexico, and Bear Paw Ski Bowl in Montana— are tribally-owned and operated (Berman, 2021).

Railroad land grants included alternating tracks of land across the West. This created a checkerboard pattern of public and private allotments which remains today in many mountainous areas (White, 2011; Jensen, 1995). Land exchanges between public land management agencies and private landholders are the primary mechanism by which both parties consolidate public and private land to alleviate management and access issues associated with checkerboarding (Paul, 2006; Ragsdale, 1999). Developers have consolidated private land for the development or expansion of mountain resort communities through land exchanges, and benefit from checkerboarded regimes where public and private mountain land is in close proximity (Clifford, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Ragsdale, 1999).

Many rural mountain communities built their economies around mining, agriculture, or oil and gas. As productivity gains and international competition led to declining jobs and stagnating employment in primary sectors, these communities needed new economic opportunities to maintain their population and standard of living (Woods, 2004). Tourism and its promise of economic growth became a path to avoid rural decline, and many communities threw their ingenuity and social capital into encouraging tourism-focused economic development (Coleman, 2004; Travis, 2007). From the 1960s to the 1980s, investors capitalized on the popularity of ski areas and corporate investments to transform the ski industry from a community recreation endeavor to a corporate industry complete with shopping, lodging, fine dining, and must-have new ski technologies and fashions (Coleman 2004; Clifford 2002). As a result, the ski

industry emerged as a high-overhead, low-margin sector that relied on the decadent spending of vacationers to supplement ticket prices (Coleman 2004).

By the 1990s, mountain resort communities found themselves overwhelmed by growth and unable to house local laborers because of skyrocketing real estate prices. As development and outside capital changed the character of communities while externalizing environmental and social costs (e.g. hazards cleanup, water pollution, workforce housing) to local government bodies and community members, these changes became the center of a contentious dialogue within resort geographies (Clark et al., 2006; Farrell, 2021; Ulrich-Schad, 2018;). Despite stagnating skier numbers, development in mountain resorts continued. Real estate, rather than industrial tourism, drove growth in the economies of resort mountain towns. Even as skier numbers stagnated, residential development in resort communities continued to boom (Clifford, 2002).

Influences That Shape the Resort Geography

Research on amenity migration, real estate gentrification, and capital accumulation within mountain resort locales provides insight into exogenous forces of the political economy which shape the rapid development and high prices of real estate within the resort geographies. In-migration and capital drive growth in resort economies from the outside, by creating demand for resort real estate and bidding up prices. Two characteristics of the mountain resort geographies are key to this research: expensive real estate markets and tendency to sprawl outwards across the landscape.

Amenity Migration Travis describes amenity migration as a phenomenon of the postindustrial economy in which, “businesses find increased freedom to choose their locations

for ‘quality of life’ (2007, p.5). Amenity migration occurs when mobile individuals move to locations with desirable natural amenities (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011). While this trend predates the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging technologies, and the growing acceptance of remote work during the pandemic brought a new wave of wealthy migrants to amenity communities throughout the West (Thompson, 2021). Amenity migrants may become full or part-time residents of these idyllic destinations. These migrants add to housing demand and are willing to pay higher prices, which in turn drives up rents (Clark et al., 2006).

Researchers have found that amenity migrations create labor needs in the construction and hospitality sectors. Thus amenity migrations are often followed by a secondary migration of low-end service laborers (L. Nelson and P. Nelson, 2011; P. Nelson, L. Nelson, and Trautman., 2014; P. Nelson, Oberg, and L. Nelson, 2010). Latinx laborers often remain physically and socially separated from both white migrants and long-time residents within these destinations (P. Nelson, Lee, L. Nelson, 2009). A study of female Hispanic workers in a resort geography in Colorado found some workers to be socially vulnerable to environmental hazards common in mountain resort communities (Norton, 2018). Latinx Laborers are often recruited through informal networks, work flexible and irregular schedules, and have varying immigration statuses (P. Nelson, L. Nelson, and Trautman., 2014). Workers also come and go in individualized time scales and rhythms. Some workers work isolated month-long stints while others will come seasonally for many years or work and live in the resort community permanently (L. Nelson, Trautman, and P. Nelson). These characteristics combined with the difficulties of collecting demographic data in within rural and rapidly growing amenity areas can make it challenging to enumerate growth in Latinx migrant populations.

Latinx migrants experience the housing challenges of resort communities in different ways than their more affluent counterparts. No offset high cost of living and low wages, migrants are more likely to live in tight quarters either with family or community members or in housing provided by employers. As is discussed in the next section, trailer parks, mobile homes, and high-density low-end housing that are more likely to house Latinx communities are under constant threat of being developed into more profitable higher-end real estate.

Gentrification and Financialization As amenity migrants purchase vacation-investment homes in amenity regions, they drive up real estate exchange values. This creates a rent gap that is a noted feature of rural gentrification (Darling, 2005). Darling (2005) describes how rural gentrification can reshape communities through increasing rents that make real estate inaccessible to participants in the local wage-based economy. Darling documents the rural gentrification process around the Adirondack Park, a recreation area in New York State, where growing interest in second homes during the 1990s and early 2000s increased home values and pushed laborers out or forcing them to live together in cramped quarters (2005).

While the mechanisms of gentrification that Darling describes account some of the growth in real estate prices, they do not account the magnitude of increases seen within amenity communities. In a case study on Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Nelson and Hines (2018) show how multiple transactions involving financialized capital bid up the real estate prices, adding to the rent gap between these properties' exchange and use values. The authors showed how a ranch property developed by a hedge fund as a private luxury development increased exponentially in value through multiple transactions by investment firms or individuals affiliated with firms leading to a frenzy of real estate speculation that increased land values and widened the rent gap

(P. B. Nelson & Hines, 2018). Thus, housing resources, when leveraged by the financialized markets become not just expensive but completely inaccessible to participants in the wage labor-driven local economy.

Other Influences Exogenous influences of the political economy drive high demand and supply of residential real estate within mountain resort geographies. However, local characteristics increase the impact of outside capital and migrants on local lands and residents. Researchers have emphasized the importance of two endogenous factors that contribute to development challenges in these contexts: land use planning and nostalgic discourse about development and change (Farrell, 2021; Travis, 2007; Ulrich-Schad, 2018;).

In his 2007 book, *New Geographies of the American West*, Geographer William Travis discusses how many amenity communities have failed to enact regulations to address major quality of life and economic issues such as a lack of worker housing and high cost of living (Travis, 2007). In many cases, the odds are stacked against these communities. County and state laws, regulations, and taxes are designed for agricultural and natural resource economies rather than tourism or luxury real estate economies and impede local governments from funding interventions and addressing new urban-style problems. Travis (2007) also lays much of the blame on land use planning, which “too often allows development that violates the ‘goals’ and ‘principles’ of comprehensive or regional plans” (p. 187). According to Travis, planning practices and the laws and the precedent behind them give significant control to private landowners and, by default, disempower the values and needs of the community. As a result, places, where “land-use regulations are lax or nonexistent,” are particularly susceptible to the aspirations of private landowners and developers who have ultimate control over landscape

changes, and changes can happen quickly without a democratic process (p. 187). Planner Bent Flyvbjerg confirms Travis' concerns about the processes of planning in a non-resort town setting in his classic in-depth case study of planning in Aalborg, Austria. Years of research led Flyvbjerg to conclude that land-use planning processes were shockingly undemocratic and tightly controlled by those with economic and government power (Flyvbjerg, 1998).

Rural character and open spaces often draw migrants to resort and amenity communities, but growth threatens to destroy the characteristics inherent to their initial appeal. The resulting social tension often creates a local dialogue of 'old' versus 'new' (Ulrich-Schad, 2018). How this discourse plays out within local civil society can distract the community from shaping growth to its values, or it can cause the community to shape changes that privilege environmental protection but also drive-up real estate prices and exacerbate housing shortages (Travis, 2007; Ulrich-Schad, 2018). Civil discourse is often framed as a conflict between development and environmental protection, which can include nostalgia for open space and rural character, conservation, or grumpiness about recreation crowding (Farrell, 2021). Sociologist, Jessica Ulrich-Schad captures these tensions in her 2018 examination of a river amenity town in Colorado where she identified residents as fitting into two general troupes of "keepers" and "changers". (Ulrich-Schad, 2018). Keepers wish to preserve town as it was with its open vistas, rural idyll, and 'traditional' way of life. Changers want to shape the town's growth around their values by increases business amenities such as restaurants and grocery stores and additional development. However, these debates about change are usually limited to development versus nature and rarely focus on social issues or privileges (Ulrich-Schad, 2018).

In his 2020 book, *Billionaire Wilderness*, sociologist Justin Farrell articulates the impact of the focus on land conservation on equity in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Farrell argues that wealthy landowners in the Tetons tend to give disproportionately to conservation and arts organizations, while social organizations such as food banks, housing assistance programs, and Latinx support organizations have much smaller networks of donors and receive far fewer donations (Farrell, 2021). While on the surface, preference for conservation organizations such as land trusts might seem like selfless environmentalism evoked by the breathtaking landscapes of the Tetons, Farrell argues that these philanthropic interests are self-serving to ultra-wealthy landowners. Local land conservation reduces the land available for development, thus increasing property values for landowners and decreasing the opportunity to develop housing for laborers. This exacerbates the housing crisis and forces many laborers to commute farther and farther away. Thus, land conservation limits the supply of properties, which should drive up prices and contribute to the shortage of housing appropriate for laborers.

This section discussed how the mountain resort geographies are shaped by both exogenous and endogenous factors. The current political economy drives migration to mountain resort areas which drives up housing demand and prices. Influx of wealthy amenity migrants drives gentrification, but the investment and transactions of financial institutions drives residential housing prices up even further. Development of both dispersed luxury properties and sprawling industrial and residential areas are relatively easy within mountain resort geographies because of lax land use regulation and zoning. Local discourse which often is motivated by nostalgia for open space can distract communities from managing inevitable growth. All these exogenous and endogenous characteristics shape the resort geography. In this next section I will

discuss the physical characteristics of the resort footprint and establish why commuting is a key feature of the resort geography.

The Resort Core and Sphere

The geographic footprint of a resort extends far beyond its visible center in the mountain resort town or village. The town or resort village is the resort core, where the wealthiest reside, own property, or vacation in luxury accommodations such as megahotels. Beyond the core, is the resort sphere. In the resort sphere, laborer housing, storage facilities, and back-end businesses and development continually sprawl into surrounding rural areas or cheaper areas via a process Travis calls the “‘down-valley’ shuffle” where development begins at the mountainous or mountainside resort core, and then continual fills developable space in surrounding valleys and lowlands (Travis, 2007 p. 146). As development “shuffles” down valleys, areas gentrify, and real estate prices are bid up. Key to this understanding of resort geographies in areas with high amenity migration is that the sphere of influence is constantly expanding as areas gentrify and workers are displaced further from the core (Travis, 2007, p. 131). Unincorporated regions of the surrounding counties are also affected to the degree that land use planning regulation allows dispersed and passive development. These transformations in incorporated and unincorporated areas of the resort sphere, tend to outpace community and regional abilities to plan and regulate them, often undermining the values that attracted residents in the first place (Ulrich-Schad, 2018; Travis, 2007).

This is not to say that resort geographies all follow the same pattern. Resorts unite in their tendency to sprawl but how they sprawl depends on their unique characteristics and often rugged physical topography. The footprint of resorts varies widely and can contain fascinating

paradoxes such as miles of idyllic open space but nowhere to live, decadent-but-empty houses, and ample retail developments dotted with realtors, high-end restaurants, furs, and rustic-yet-huge-and-expensive art but no repair shops or grocery stores. Still, these peculiarities occur in predictable spatial patterns. Natural amenities drive initial development, which can be hindered or reinforced by transport infrastructure. Still, constraints of rugged topography and undevelopable public and private land shape the long-term development patterns (Travis, 2007). The characteristics of commutes in resort geographies depend on these idiosyncrasies, which can create unique traits and challenges.

Regardless of the idiosyncrasies of the resort geography one thing is certain: expensive real estate prices and housing shortages push workers outwards, thus commuting is a central feature of most resort economies. This next section will explore the concept of social costs, and then I will investigate how commuting might function as a social cost externalized to workers within the resort economy.

Externalizing Social Costs to the Resort Sphere

With its irregular and dispersed expanding spatial structure, the resort's footprint provides an ideal diffuse space over which to disguise externalized costs of resort economies. These 'externalities' also known as social costs, are a "redistribution of income" which diverts capital towards firms by redistributing costs elsewhere, is a well-recognized characteristic of market economies (Kapp, 1964 p. 12; Neves, 2020). Economist K. William Kapp, who helped popularize this critique of the neoclassical economy described social costs as "harmful consequences and damages that other persons or communities sustain due to productive processes for which private entrepreneurs are not held accountable." (Kapp, 1964 p.13-14).

Because the sphere is mobile via continuous growth, these costs are harder to count or capture. Key to understanding the expansion of the resort sphere is the trend that as real estate prices increase, displaced workers must seek housing farther and farther from the resort core. In one example of cost shifting from the resort core to its sphere, planner Thomas Clark (2006) summarizes this effect as the “presence [of resort corporations] attracts growth and bids up the price of land...” and “rising housing costs claim inordinate shares of limited incomes. Renter incumbents face displacement as housing stocks gentrify. Newcomers are unable to afford local rents face long commutes to more affordable housing at greater distances” (p. 149). Clark uses fiscal and demographic analysis to describe how commuter communities in the sphere experience growth without increasing tax base. These communities must cut public services or tax residents at a higher rate to “subsidize resort communities and also resort-based employers whose local tax base contributes nothing to the public service requirements of resort workers residing in commuter communities” (p. 163). Thus, local governments within the sphere are burdened by the resort economy’s inflated real estate prices, or the resort core’s labor and service costs are externalized to poorer communities.

Clark’s framing of how resort geographies externalize infrastructure and governance costs to surrounding communities, leaving these poorer communities with a tax deficit begs the question: what about the experiences of the workers who commute between the core and the sphere? However, little is known about the lived experiences of these burdens on individuals across the unique spatial structure of the resort geography (Norton, 2018). This research investigates how resort economies shift costs to resort workers via their commutes by asking how laborers experience cost shifting through commuting.

Commuting as a Social Cost

Theoretical Considerations of Transportation

In this research, the commuting experiences of laborers are categorized to understand how costs are distributed in the resort economy. Why use experiences with transport as a mechanism to understand the resort economy? Transport geographers Shaw et. al. (2007, p. 3) explain that “a core interest of many geographers is explaining the location of phenomena over time and across space, and transport is one of the most powerful factors affecting and explaining the distribution of social and economic activity.” Yet it can be tempting for social scientists to simplify systems as static rather than mobile and fail to examine movement and transport as critical spatial characteristics of social systems. Transportation and Justice scholar Karl Martens (2016, p. 108) points out this dissonance in social justice research “transportation can go unobserved because transportation is the direct opposite of space: space necessitates travel, and travel, in a fundamental way, seeks to annihilate space.” Thus, this research seeks to examine commuting experiences as meaningful spatial expressions of the resort economy.

Commuting is an act of crossing both geographic and economic spaces. The language of accessibility in the transport justice field helps to understand commuting as a geographic activity. Martens (2016, p. 10) defines accessibility as “the potential of opportunities for interaction with locations dispersed over space” and the ability to “overcome spatial separation.” In commuting, work and home are nodes of potential interaction, and in resort geographies these nodes are often separated by significant physical and economic space. Thus, for the purpose of this study I define commuting as a broad range of techniques that laborers use to overcome the spatial separation between home and work.

Commuting Experiences

In resort geographies where housing is limited and distances between home and work are large, social costs can be significant. However, the experiences of resort commutes are not commonly investigated. To design an inquiry of what the costs of commuting might be to resort workers, I relied on existing literature that examines commuting experience and its risks, financial costs, and effects on subjective well-being (SWB). The SWB literature provides insight into potential uncaptured costs of commuting associated with stress and fatigue (Chatterjee et al., 2020). While a breadth of commuting literature shows that commuting has financial, safety, and wellbeing costs to commuters, no known literature examines commuting within a resort geography or looks at the relationship of social costs associated with commuting to the broader political economy of a resort geography. Thus, I use literature on commuting to frame my inquiry on commuting in a resort geography and its relationship to the resort economy.

Hazards and Financial Costs of Commuting Driving, for any reason, is inherently risky and becoming more so. In 2020 the United States ranked 34th in the world for traffic fatality rates—in the same year, 38,680 Americans died because of motor vehicle accidents (International Transport Forum, 2020). This is a fatality rate of 1.37 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, or 11.7 motor accidents per 100,000 travelers (International Transport Forum, 2020). Resort geographies where commuters live far from resort cores add significant miles traveled on hazardous and sometimes primitive roads, which increases laborers' exposure to risk.

In addition to hazard exposure, research has shown significant financial costs of long regular commutes. While driving costs vary broadly based on location and vehicle—in 2021, a 100-mile daily commute can cost as much as 15,000 dollars in vehicle expenses and gas annually

(AAA, 2021; Center for Neighborhood Technology, 2022). The Housing and Transportation Index, developed by the Center for Neighborhood Technology (2022) shows how affordability is a function of transportation and housing costs together rather than simply housing. The standard threshold for affordability is 30 percent of income for housing, 15 percent for transportation (Center for Neighborhood Technology, 2022). As of 2022, many areas of the United States with cheaper housing are made unaffordable because traveling to far away jobs and services is so expensive. Resort geographies are particularly unaffordable since housing costs are high and commuting distances are especially far.

Commuting as a Subjective Well-Being Cost A breadth of quantitative survey and cross-sectional research on commuter SWB show that car and public transport commuting affect commuters' lives in various ways (Chatterjee et al. 2020). The body of SWB commuting research examines how commuting affects mental and physical health and an individual's social capital or involvement with family, work friends, and activities. Most studies examine stress or psychological distress during the commute as a measure of SWB. Research finds that stress increases as commutes get longer (Chatterjee, 2020). Women—particularly women with children—are more likely to feel stress around their commuting experiences (Wener et al., 2005; Feng and Boyle, 2014). In addition, disruptions to flow such as traffic, changing vehicles, and lack of control can increase commuting-related stress (Schaeffer, et al. 1988; Sposato et al., 2012), but choice and flexibility in commuting time and mode, and camaraderie can decrease stress if favorable options are presented (Lucas and Heady, 2002). This suggests that personal control and autonomy may play a role in how commuting affects SWB.

While there is clear evidence for increased stress and diminished well-being *during* commuting, studies show mixed results regarding commuters' experiences of SWB within other life domains. Thus, a broader SWB-commuting relationship is not as straightforward. Though some studies show strong relationships between commuting and stress in adjacent life domains such as work, family, and hobbies, community, and national level patterns of stress and overall SWB vary from study to study and place to place, making overall patterns hard to determine. These mixed results suggest uncontrolled variables contribute to the effects of commuting experience. Qualitative inquiry into commuting and SWB may shed light on nonlinear patterns of SWB and commuting.

Chatterjee et al (2020) provide a conceptual model of how commuting impacts individual well-being. A worker's experience during their commute can spill over into other life domains and then eventually affect a commuter's overall SWB, leading to depression or decreased life satisfaction. While Chatterjee et al. (2020) are clear that this model has not yet been substantiated through quantitative research findings, any spillover and broader effects on well-being related to commuting could indicate that the costs of commuting exceed the time spent commuting or the time lost with family, friends, and other activities. While mixed results complicate accepting this model as a theory, Chatterjee et. al's (2020) model is a valuable way to consider commuting social costs.

The commuting experience and its broader effects are not fixed. Chatterjee et al (2020) outline three external influences which shape the commuting experience and its relationship to SWB: (1) individual characteristics such as personality, attitude, and values; (2) the societal context in which a person commutes such as where someone works and lives; and (3) the

experience of the commute journey, such as mode, timing, flexibility, and camaraderie. Societal and commuting experience contexts are interacting determinants in how the commute affects each individual and are the primary object of inquiry of this study.

Understanding Commuting in Rural and ‘Honeypot’ Spaces

The commuting literature is useful in framing how commuting experiences may manifest for resort commuters. However, urban commutes may vary significantly from those experienced by rural commuters or those in amenity areas where car travel is more common, distances are often longer, and commuting involves fewer stoplights and more cow pastures. With the advent of car travel, transportation has become increasingly private, complex, and hard to examine—particularly in rural localities (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Gray et al. (2008, p. 108) describe how the car has “bestowed opportunity and choice on rural households” but has also drawn migrants away from the city (see also: Gray 2004). Mobility and access in rural places are often a direct function of access to a car (Gray, 2004) When a vehicle is not available, individuals often rely on social networks and exert social capital to get a ride (Gray, 2004). While public transportation options exist, public subsidies for rural transportation in the US are thin (Gray, 2004). Thus, rural transport networks are often disconnected, leaving informal ride-getting the only option for those stranded by car-lessness (Gray, 2004).

Mountain resort towns fit into Gray’s (2004) rural typology as a “the remote honeypot”. A honeypot is a remote tourist economic center that drives development and population growth in an otherwise rural region. Honeypots suffer from “isolation combined with rising traffic levels and congestion,” exhibiting rural roads and limited infrastructure (Gray, 2004, p. 179). These areas tend to have slightly better access to public transportation than other rural areas, but often

not enough to effectively reduce dependence on car ownership. In addition, with high levels of immigration and temporary employment, social networks that provide a transportation safety net in other rural areas may be thinner in honeypots (Gray, 2004). These transportation experiences, which are neither wholly ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ create complex and often private spaces in which social vulnerability experienced via transportation is poorly understood. The unique rural honeypot context suggests that commuting experiences may vary in amenity regions from nationwide or urban quantitative data.

In conclusion, the summarized literature paints an instructive picture of the commuter experience using broad brushstrokes, having been developed largely from urban contexts, quantitative surveys, and/or studies focused on the qualitative trade-offs of various commuter modalities. In rural areas, research suggests that commuting is likely more car-oriented with more reliance on personal relationships (Grey, 2004). In honeypot tourism areas, such as mountain resort geographies, residents rely on cars due to limited public transportation as in other rural areas. But these tourist locales are more congested and lack the social networks characteristic of rural areas—both traits that can add stress and complexity to commuting.

The commuting literature provides a starting point for examining how commuting affects laborers’ SWB via stress and opportunity costs. However, while there are clear links between commuting and stress during the commute, the literature fails to describe a causal relationship between commuting and overall SWB or SWB in life domains distinct from the commute. Thus, the nature of SWB as a potential social cost of commuting is not well understood. Qualitative research such as this can investigate the nuance of how the costs of commuting are absorbed by commuters within the underexplored context of a resort geography.

Conclusion

This literature review discusses scholarship on resort geographies and commuting and transport experiences. The literature summarized here offers a conceptual framework with five key themes. (1) The resort geography is a mobile and spatial phenomenon closely linked to the political economy via both exogenous and endogenous factors. (2) The resort economy has a defined resort core and a mobile expanding sphere onto which costs are easily externalized. (3) Through one process of externalizing costs, housing shortages and financialized real estate force resort laborers to commute farther into the core from farther in the resort sphere. (4) Resort core-sphere commutes have both categorized costs (e.g. financial and hazard exposure) and poorly uncategorized costs (e.g. SWB) (5) While commuting literature points to some patterns about how SWB is influenced by commuting, little is known about how these patterns manifest in a resort geography. Chapter Four operationalizes this conceptual framework via research that categorizes and contextualizes workers' experiences as they commute across the resort geography.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO THE VALLEY: THE FLOWS AND FRICTIONS OF
COMMUTING IN A RESORT GEOGRAPHYIntroduction

The high-end resort village of Big Sky, Montana (population 3,058) is in the Rocky Mountains just north of Yellowstone National Park (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). It attracts 250,000 visitors a year and is known for its world-class skiing and alpine beauty. However, the promotional images of snow-capped peaks, rustic mansions, and wooded hillsides obscure a key feature of this geography: its dependence on commuting. Of the estimated 3,000 workers who power the Big Sky economy, 78 percent do not live on site but drive 60-100+ miles to and from work (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

In resorts, two opposite sets of mobilities collide. Tourists—both recreational homeowners and occasional ski vacationers—travel long distances to the resort but upon arrival, become instant (if pretend) residents of the resort “village” space. Indeed, much of the resort’s allure to visitors lies in the centrality of village life. Premiums are paid for an all-inclusive, walkable vacation. In contrast, the workers who provide and facilitate the recreational and consumer services sold in resorts are mostly daily commuters. While wealthy tourists in Big Sky escape automobility, most workers depend on extensive time spent in cars, trucks, and buses. Their commutes are long: the high-end luxury resort economy model bids up land prices in the resort core, forcing workers to find housing in the resort’s periphery. Housing is a form of spatial

and social cost-shifting characteristic of the mountain resort economies of the American West (Travis, 2007); in turn, commuting is an externalized economic cost internalized by workers.

This study aims to illuminate the commuting experiences of workers to paint a more complete picture of the resort economy and its dependencies. In so doing, this work responds to calls for mobility—the capacity to move across space—methods and analysis in the political economy of resorts (Hall, Hesse, and Jean-Paul 2006; Knowles, Shaw, and Docherty 2008). This study asks: 1) What are the commuting experiences of Big Sky laborers and what social costs are associated with those experiences? and 2) What is the relationship between those commuting experiences and key features of the resort geography?

This paper begins by examining the literatures on resort geographies and commuter experiences. Then the paper turns to case selection, data collection, and analysis, and an emerging framework of flow and friction for thinking about social costs associated with commuting. Next it reports findings on flows and frictions within commuting experiences and the relationship of these experiences to costs associated with commuting. The paper returns the characteristics of the resort footprint, this time discussing them in the context of commuter experience and costs to answer question two.

Literature Review

This review draws from literature in planning, geography, and sociology to define and describe mountain resort geographies and why commuting is a key feature. To explore the commuting experiences and costs within the mountain resort geography this review examines existing literature on commuting as a financial cost, hazard risk, and influence on commuter

subjective well-being (SWB). In particular, literature on the SWB of commuters informs the framework for investigating potential costs associated with mountain resort commutes.

The Resort Geography

Resort geographies have been subjects of inquiries into growth, labor, gentrification, governance, and environmental protection (eg. P. B. Nelson, Oberg, and L. Nelson, 2010; L. Nelson and Nelson, 2011; P. B. Nelson and Hines, 2018; L. Nelson, Trautman, and P. B. Nelson, 2015; Stuber and Paulsen, 2022; Clark et al., 2006; Farrell, 2021; Ulrich-Schad, 2018). Mountain resort economies are known to shift costs away from primary private sectors onto individuals, communities, and government entities (Travis, 2007; Clark et al., 2006). Resort economies boom when wealthy and upper-middle-class people have access to extra capital to invest in real estate (Darling, 2005; Coleman, 2004). The resort economy consists of three main sectors: industrial tourism, real estate, and construction (Clifford, 2002). Some resort developments, such as Big Sky, follow a high-end luxury model, where luxury services and real estate attract ultra-wealthy residents and visitors (Beaverstock, Hubbard, and Rennie Short, 2004; P. B. Nelson and Hines, 2018; Vincentelli, 2022). Mountain resort geographies have a particularly high demand for low-wage service labor (Clifford, 2002; Farrell, 2021; P. B. Nelson, L. Nelson, and Trautman, 2014; P. B. Nelson, Oberg, and L. Nelson, 2010). Workers are needed to run and fix ski lifts, check tickets, give massages, teach ski lessons, patrol ski areas, prepare food, and clean hotel rooms. Booming luxury construction and services provide additional labor demand. The luxury resort model is extremely labor-intensive.

The resort's geographical footprint consists of two parts: the core and the sphere. The resort core contains the village(s) where the wealthiest rent or own property. The resort sphere of

influence—where workers live and materials are stored—surrounds the core, expanding continually outward (Travis, 2007). The “presence [of resort corporations] attract[s] growth and bids up the price of land,” displacing existing renters and newcomers outward as housing prices rise and stock is eliminated by second homes and short-term rental schemes (Clark et al., 2006 p. 149). The core and sphere's size, shape, and character vary by locale, topographical constraints, private and public land availability, planning and regulation, and the size and style of capital investment. However, resort geographies, especially in the sphere, tend to sprawl. Rural, economic, and conservation-focused land use regulations may exacerbate rather than address rapid gentrification and transformative development within resort geography footprints (Travis, 2007; Ulrich-Schad, 2018).

The irregular and expanding footprint of a resort geography disguises the externalized social costs of resort economies. These shifted social costs are defined as the “harmful consequences and damages which other persons or communities sustain as a result of productive processes for which private entrepreneurs are not held accountable” (Kapp, 1964 p. 12-14). Planner Thomas Clark shows how resort geography costs are externalized or shifted from the core to the sphere. Commuter communities in the sphere experience growth in population without significant growth in tax base. These communities absorb infrastructure costs associated with population increases that are driven by the wealthy and tax rich resort core (Clark et al., 2006). However, while Clark shows how resorts externalize costs to sphere communities by shifting infrastructure burdens without shifting tax base, he does not describe costs borne by individuals who commute into the sphere. By examining the kinds of costs commuting workers experience this study builds on and expands Clark’s initial critique of resort externalities.

Commuting as a Social Cost

To design an inquiry of what the costs of commuting might be to resort workers, we relied on existing literature that examines commuting experience and its risks, financial costs, and effects on SWB. The hazards of driving and financial costs are well-researched and understood as costs absorbed by commuters (e.g. International Transport Forum, 2020; AAA, 2021). However, commuter SWB varies significantly in different commuter populations captured through various research (Chatterjee et al., 2020). These variances suggest commuter SWB depends on multiple variables and that costs absorbed by laborers through SWB experiences with commuting are not fully understood.

Commuting is well-understood to have financial costs, take up time and pose risks for commuters (AAA, 2021, Stewart, 2022). Quantitative survey and cross-sectional research have examined commuter SWB—or how an individual perceives their own wellness through emotions such as stress or happiness (Chatterjee et al. 2020). In general, these studies show that during the commute travelers experience negative SWB such as stress. Longer commutes generally increase stress, though women (and specifically women with children) are most likely to feel stress (Wener, Evans, and Boatley, 2005; Feng and Boyle, 2014). Disruptions to the commute like traffic, changing vehicles, and a lack of control also increase commuting-related stress (Schaeffer et al., 1988; Sposato, Röderer, and Cervinka, 2012). In contrast, choice, flexibility in commuting time and mode, and camaraderie can decrease stress (Lucas and Heady, 2002).

However, despite these negative effects of commuting on SWB during the commute, commuting does not always adversely affect SWB outside of the time spent commuting. Results

on commuting and its effect on SWB outside of commuting time exhibited mixed results across different areas and countries. In some places commuting had a negative effect on SWB before and after commuting, but in other places it did not (Chatterjee et al., 2020). For some commuters, the unallocated time of travel provides relaxation in an otherwise busy life (Lyons and Chatterjee, 2008; Jain and Lyons, 2008). As we discuss below, the relationship between commuting and other life domains is still developing (Chatterjee et al., 2020). Authors note that such variances suggest that other uncontrolled variables contribute to or detract from stress in commuting, leaving room for further inquiry (Feng and Boyle, 2014; Chatterjee et al., 2020).

This paper uses Chatterjee et al.'s (2020) conceptual model of commuting's impacts on individual SWB to frame our inquiry into the extent of how workers internalize commuting as a cost. The model shows how a laborer's SWB during their commute can "spill over" into other life domains and, eventually, affect an individual's overall SWB. Thus, the cost of commuting can extend affecting personal relationships and life satisfaction. Personal characteristics (e.g., values and personality), societal influences (e.g., housing and work), and characteristics of the commuting journey (e.g., mode, timing, flexibility, and travel environment) shape an individual's subjective experience of commuting and its spillover effects (Chatterjee et al., 2020). Societal and commuting contexts interact to determine how the commute affects individuals. While this model is useful, varying results across space, time, and sample size suggest that results are inconclusive about how commuting experiences may "spillover" into other life domains and overall SWB suggesting that further research is needed to illuminate the complex relationships between commuting and SWB (Chatterjee et al., 2020).

This review establishes that the resort geography has a unique spatial footprint of a resort core and a continually, expanding resort sphere onto which externalized costs can be easily dispersed. High rents force workers to commute from the outskirts of the sphere, thus long commutes across varying landscapes are a key feature of the resort geography. This research seeks to describe a range of experiences of commutes and understand how commuting functions as an internalized cost. To do this we use existing literature on SWB and commuting to design our inquiry. At the end of the paper, we then return to the resort geography that we've described in this review and examine how findings on commuting experiences develop existing understandings of the resort geography. Thus, this study aims to 1) describe the range of commuting experiences within the resort geography and how these experiences function as costs within the resort and relate those costs to key economic and spatial features of the resort geography.

Methods and Approach

This study parts ways with quantitative and deductive approaches common in commuting research, instead opting for mixed qualitative methods. Observations and semi-structured interviews captured the subjective dimensions of resort workers' commuting experiences. We used an inductive approach to make sense of the interviews and observations and describe the phenomenon of resort commuting in relation to political economy. Throughout, we applied the concept of shifted social costs to interrogate the relationship between the resort economy and patterns in commuters' subjective experiences. By describing and cataloging the subjective experiences of Big Sky commuters, this paper offers new insights into how the material and

social realms create forms of economic marginalization and expressions of social and economic power particular to the mountain resort economy.

Case Selection

Big Sky, Montana is an unincorporated resort district on the West Fork of the Gallatin River in the Madison Range (Figure 1). The community's resort district status allows it to collect a sales tax which is against Montana State law outside of resort districts. An island of private land consolidated via land exchanges in the 1970s and 1990s, the resort district includes the Big Sky Resort and real estate development around a mountain and meadow village, three private clubs with their own amenities and real estate (the Yellowstone Club (YC), Spanish Peaks Mountain Club, and the Moonlight Club) and another cluster of services and industrial and residential development concentrated just outside the West Fork Valley on Highway 191. The private clubs are archetypes of the resort village model with high-end real estate development and inclusive amenities, including a private ski area at the YC, the ultra-exclusive hotels (Hirschfeld 1998; Robert 2005). Like most resorts, Big Sky depends on a huge service workforce: while the 2020 census data lists 2,887 workers, estimates compiled from various employers suggest that number is closer to 6000.³ These extreme labor demands to fulfill the

³ In a 2020 presentation, CHCP Managing Director Matt Kidd estimated a 2020 winter employment high for all CrossHarbor Capital Partners Big Sky interests and associated construction projects as 4,042. Big Sky Resort estimates its winter workforce at 1700 employees. In addition, I did a non-comprehensive search of the websites of a few larger employers in Big Sky: Big Sky School District has 42 employees. The Big Sky Fire District has 31 employees. Morningstar Learning Center has 15 employees. Discovery School lists 12 staff on its website. Not including three local grocery stores, any property management firms, a large residential dude ranch, and many other small to midsize businesses. This amounts to 5,827 employees (Big Sky Community Organization, 2022; Big Sky Fire Department, 2022; Big Sky School District, 2022; Discovery Academy, 2022; Kidd, 2020; Morningstar Learning Center, 2022). Regardless of the actual number of employees it is clear that there are significantly more workers in Big Sky as those included in the census's count of 2,887.

high-growth phase of ultra-high-end luxury real estate and amenities. At least 78 percent of the of this labor force is not local to the immediate resort area but commutes from the surrounding towns of Bozeman, Belgrade, West Yellowstone, Ennis, and beyond (US Census Bureau 2020).

This research on Big Sky, Montana is what planner Bent Flyvbjerg calls a critical case study because of its “strategic importance in relation to the general problem” of unknown commuting experiences of resort laborers and an unknown relationship of those experiences to the resort economy (2006, p. 229). Big Sky is an ideal critical case study for the relationship between laborer commuting experiences and the resort political economy because Big Sky has extreme characteristics that make such patterns obvious for four key reasons. 1) Big Sky’s resort sphere is particularly diffuse due to large bottlenecks of public land and private landholdings under easement which are unavailable for housing or other development. Thus, commuters travel especially long distances. 2) Big Sky has exceptionally little housing suitable for workers and no short-term vacation rental (e.g., Airbnb) regulation, which has led to very high in-commuting rates (Sukut 2021). 3) Big Sky’s real estate and tourism sectors trend towards high-end and luxury, which have exceptionally high labor needs (Vincentelli, 2022). 4) Due to its unincorporated status, Big Sky has limited representative public institutions (Local Government Center, 2018). All these traits make Big Sky an exemplary case study to examine labor mobility and its relationship to the resort political economy.

This paper focuses on two commuting routes into Big Sky, identified by On the Map 2018 Census commuting data and research informants (U.S Census Bureau, 2018). Most commuters from Bozeman (population 53,300), Belgrade (population 10,500), and other unconsolidated parts of the Gallatin Valley (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Commuters converge at

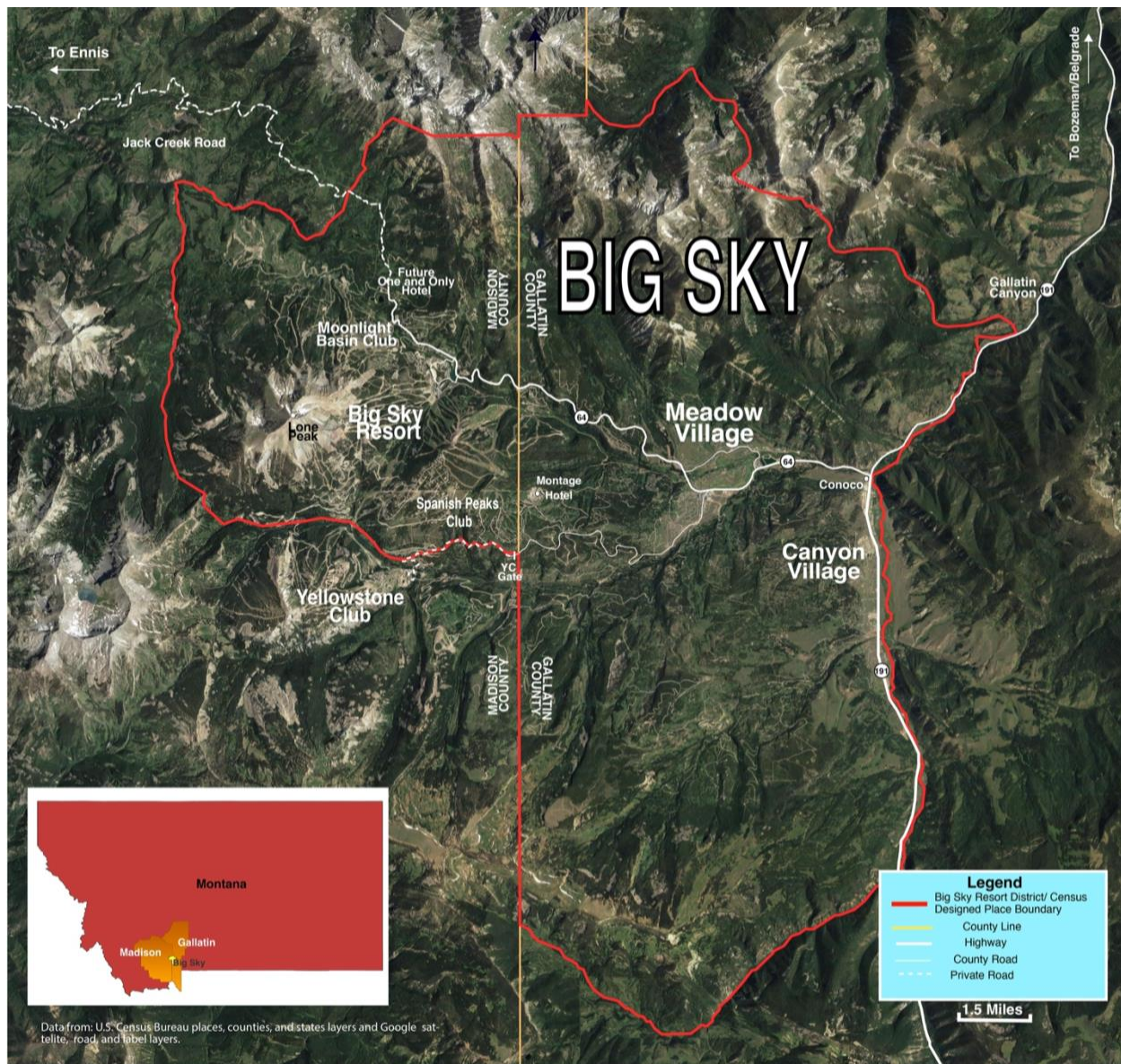


Figure 1: Map of the Big Sky Resort District, with notable commuting destinations and routes marked. Data sources include U.S. Census Bureau—places and states data, and Google satellite, road, and label imagery. Data downloaded 1 June 2022.

Four Corners, a busy intersection on Highway 191 that has transformed into a pop-up unincorporated community and resort economy staging ground. The route then turns south through more roadside sprawl in Gallatin Gateway before entering the scenic and wooded Gallatin Canyon, which splits the Gallatin and Madison Ranges. Drivers travel 30 miles along a

winding two-lane highway toward the Big Sky Conoco gas station, where they turn right onto Highway 63 and drive (or ride) into Big Sky’s resort core.

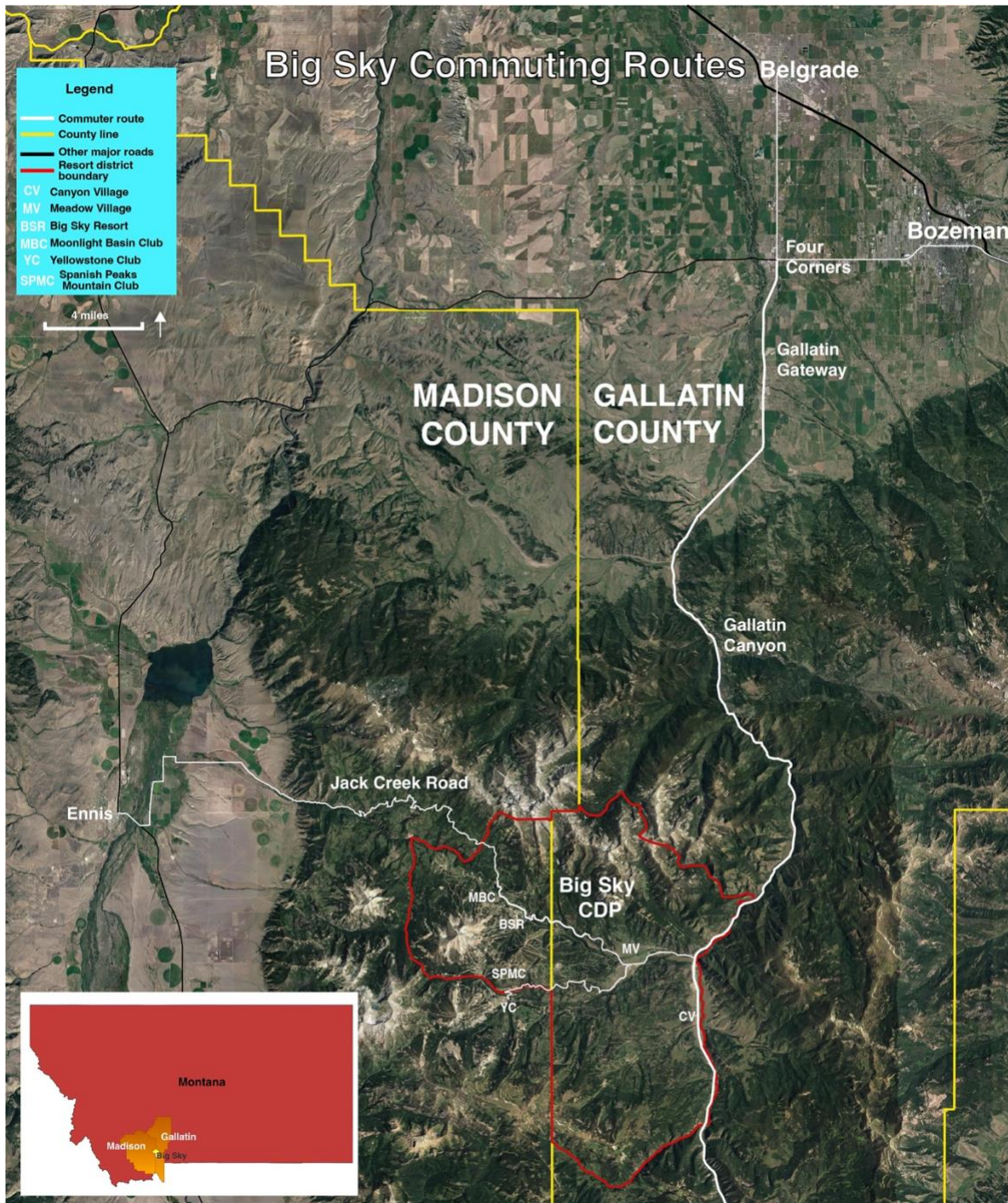


Figure 2: Map of Commuting Routes to Big Sky, Montana. Data sources include U.S. Census—county, states, and places data, and Google satellite, road, and label imagery. Data downloaded 1 June 2022.

Other commuters travel from Madison County using the private Jack Creek Road. From Ennis (Population 721), commuters travel through the valley before starting to climb the steep and remote Jack Creek drainage on a county dirt road (U.S. Census, 2020). Workers pass through a coded gate onto a ten-mile section of road owned and maintained by Lone Mountain Land. Workers or their employers pay for access—as much as \$100 a week to use the road (Jack Creek Road, 2022).

Once travelers have entered Big Sky’s resort core—either at the Conoco or on the private Jack Creek Road—many still have a long way to go. From the Conoco, commuters travel three miles to the meadow, nine miles to the resort, eight miles to the entrance of the YC and Spanish Peaks Club Montage Hotel, and 11 miles to the Moonlight Club (Google, 2022). As they get closer to their destinations, the roads become steeper and more primitive, winding up into the mountains before ending at luxury clubhouses and residences.

The idiosyncrasies of resort economies and the experiences of laborers there present complex terrain for research. A case study methodology was necessary to understand the real-life complexities of social-economic systems through the qualitative case study methodology which mimics normal processes of human learning (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Study Design

This project draws on semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of commuters. During the summer and autumn of 2021, the first author interviewed 28 Big Sky commuters. Eleven of the participants were interviewed in Spanish with the help of a translator. Given that Big Sky’s workforce is a fluid, hard-to-enumerate population, we engaged representatives from a

range of sectors: full-time managers, self-proprietors, construction laborers, resort employees, seasonal and full-time workers, and low-wage service workers (many of whom are Latinx).

Thirteen participants identified as construction workers, five work in social and health services, and ten work in recreation, food, or hospitality services. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling, starting with contacts made during informational interviews with representatives from governmental, non-governmental, and business organizations in Big Sky. To specifically reach Latinx workers, we conducted informal outreach at local businesses and worked with the Montana Immigrant Justice Alliance to identify participants. Participants included 17 men and 11 women earning between \$20,000 and \$120,000 each year. Six participants reported dependent children.

Participants were interviewed either during a commuting ride-along or at a static location (e.g., their home or a public place). We conducted seven ride-along interviews, nine individual static interviews, and six static interviews with pairs of commuters. The ride-along offered a direct examination into intimate and private “automobilized time” (Sheller and Urry, 2005 p. 209) and an environment of deep thought and contemplation perfect for interviewing (Bourdieu, 1993 p.30). While the mobile ethnography provided generative interviews, it did not reach the range of perspectives we hoped to include (largely due to difficulties recruiting and periodic disruptions associated with public health concerns around COVID-19). No ride-along interviews were conducted in Spanish.

All interviews—ride-along and static—followed a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit information about the experiences, effects, and context of commuting. Interviews began with open-ended questions on the commuting experience and contextual

narratives around housing and work. We then asked more specific questions about the day-to-day experiences of commuting, including equipment, carpooling arrangements, driving alone, other preferences, financial costs, and hazards. Both ride-along and static participants narrated the mode, pace, and flow of their commute with attention to the flexibility of their schedule, the sensory and social experience of commuting, and accidents and near misses. To understand the context of the commute, we asked about work, housing, and why participants were in Big Sky. The guide was accompanied by a structured survey to gather demographic and economic information. Interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed. These protocols were approved under human subjects IRB #EO061521-EX.

Interviews ranged from 10 minutes to 2.5 hours. The interaction quality varied from deeply personal to somewhat impersonal and removed. Despite dedicated efforts and genuine intentions to categorize a wide range of experiences, this sample did not replicate the demographic distribution of Big Sky's workforce. To elicit a range of qualitative impressions on resort commuting, we prioritized depth of interaction and engagement with our study participants. Quotes are attributed to participants using a number. Some details about locations and occupations have been withheld to protect participants (i.e., some workers are identified by generalized job titles).

Analysis

This research utilized an iterative grounded theory approach and multiple rounds of analysis and coding (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). The first author developed the code book and coded interviews. A research assistant also read through all interviews that were conducted in Spanish to check for any translation errors. Interviews were initially coded into categories based

Category	Codes		Description
Experience of the commute	Nature/place		Mentions physical and aesthetic features of the commute.
	Alone time		Describes solitude experienced while commuting.
	Group time		Describes group time during commute carpool.
	Flow		Describes sensation of movement, travel and flow state experienced during commute.
	Logistics		Describes non driving activities of commuting.
	Congestion		Mentions an interruption to flow, usually due to traffic.
	Entertainment		Describes activities that occur during the commute.
Effects of the commute	Mental health		References stress, sadness, or tiredness related to the commute
	Physical health		Describes lack of exercise, sleep, or pain associated with daily driving.
	Social time		Mentions lost time with family, friends, and other activities.
Context that shapes the experience and effects	Material context	Equipment	References the performance of car type, tire etc.
		Workday flexibility	Mentions flexibility or rigidity in the schedule.
		Employer's role in commute	Describes day-to-day aspects of commute influenced by the employer.
	Shaping context	Housing context	Describes how housing context shapes the commute journey and experience.
		Work context	Mentions how work aspects determine commute logistics and experience

Table 1. Commuting Codes: Experience, Effects, and Context.

on Chatterjee's model (experiences, effects, and context) using NVivo. The second round of coding identified thematic subtopics (see Table 1). We grouped *experiences* into nature/place, alone time, group time, flow, logistics, congestion, and entertainment; *effects* into mental health, physical health, and social time; and *context* into material context and shaping context. We then organized our interview data into a geographically-oriented, detailed description of the route segments. This piece included traffic, historical, and ethnographic findings and took the reader step-by-step through each commuting route. Two discrete phenomena—flow and friction—emerged as composite categories to describe the Big Sky commuter experience and its subjective costs. We offer these categories as an emerging grounded framework to describe the subjective costs associated with commuting generally.

Flow and Friction: Experiences of Commuting in a Resort Geography

Our analysis plays on the double meaning of 'flow'. In transportation network analysis, flow occurs when "the benefits derived from transport exceed transport costs" (Giuliano, Chakrabarti, and Rhoads, 2015; para 1). However, psychologists also use the term to describe a positive state in which an individual is fully absorbed in an activity (Nakamura & Dubin, 2015). Characteristics of flow state include: "total concentration," "merging of action and awareness," 'a sense of control,' a "loss of self-consciousness," a "distorted sense of time," and an "autotelic" or "process driven experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2000, 1990, cited in Nakamura & Dubin, 2015, Table 1). Flow is aspirational and value positive. The commuter simply *flows* from one node to another as the benefits of commuting subjectively contract travel time or even turn it into a net positive. Therefore, we define flow as an individual commuting experience in which

the benefits derived from transport exceed its costs, not only financially but as an affective aggregate.

Our data analysis directly informs this definition of the term. Originally, we coded “flow” as the continual movement of traffic. However, as we read interviewee statements and coded for aspects of positive SWB, we realized that positive commuting experiences shared a common theme: the commuter was focused on or distracted by things beyond time costs, hazards, discomfort, or inconvenience. In one explicit example, an interviewee described accessing a flow state while driving instead of dwelling on the negative aspects of immediate road hazards. Our definition includes and extends the fluid movement of traffic to encompass the multifaceted ways in which commuters are transported beyond the hazards and costs of the commute. Our analysis recognizes that contextual factors (e.g., physical, material, structural economic) influenced the participants’ subjective experiences of flow.

In contrast, frictions slow or stop flow—under conditions of friction, the costs of travel (e.g., financial costs and affective experiences like fear, anger, frustration) exceed its benefits. The concept of friction emerged from the original codes of congestion and logistics. It entails congestion (which interrupts traffic flow) and the complex logistics of carpools, buses, and work schedules which prevents the mindless commute and the ability to “just go.” As with flow, we observed a broader pattern between congestion, logistics, and other challenges faced by commuters. Other “frictions” emerged from obstacles to safe and efficient commuting. Slick, snowy roads (ironically) created friction for those without the right equipment, as their cars slid or worse. Poor credit scores (sometimes from medical bills) also keep people in commuting purgatory, preventing them from replacing vehicles, getting credit cards, or moving to a new

rental (Chatterjee et al., 2020). We also included some discussion of “home” in our concept of friction since many participants wanted to live in Big Sky’s core but could not afford it.

Results and Discussion

Experiences of Flow in the Resort Geography

The Canyon—a 22-mile stretch of road with five crossings over the Gallatin River—features spectacular vistas of alpine ridges and rocky crags. This section of Highway 191 features fishing holes, wild sheep, elk, and moose, sharp turns, and slippery bridges. It is an archetype of the natural⁴ aesthetic that attracts tourists and laborers alike to Montana. Flow happens along the Canyon section—a mix of private and public land that is either too rugged for or protected from development. Participants extolled the natural beauty, fast-moving traffic, and unoccupied time they experienced while driving the Canyon.

Commuters can recharge alone or in a community of friends or perform deep work during the drive. Participant 23, a carpenter who regularly drives to the YC for work, describes getting into his groove:

I feel like I'm a great driver. I could almost drive this thing blindfolded ... I like cruising ... I feel like I just have really good reactions, and I don't know. In the heat of the moment, I don't freak out. I'm just like totally calm, and time slows down a little bit and we kind of snake through.

The driver describes a psychological flow state, in which he is entirely focused and present to avoid danger. For him, “the big drive helps me get away,” but he is also aware of the

⁴ “Nature” and “wild” are loaded terms that necessitate interrogations into their direct and indirect connotations. I use these terms to reflect research participants’ language to describe this landscape, not to participate in the erasure of indigenous people who have lived here for thousands of years.

danger that it presents. The relaxation he experiences is dependent on specific attributes of the journey. Participant 23 continues, “I wouldn't want to do this rat race in a big city...[or] in a congested area.” Many participants believed the lack of congestion associated with driving in an undeveloped area was crucial for flow.

Another commuter, Participant 8, a nonprofit administrator, compared her twice-a-week commute to Big Sky to her time in a large city:

Living in [a metropolitan area], it was a third of the distance, but sometimes I'd spend just as much time. Because you're going through traffic lights, and you're cutting across town, and oh God, it was just hot stop-and-go traffic. And I hate that. [Here], I am moving the entire time, gorgeous scenery.

Flow is attributed to the continuous movement of traffic and the natural beauty of the drive. Participant 14, who works in social services and drives or rides the bus, summarizes the effect of natural beauty on her commute: “If you're going to have an hour's commute anywhere in the world, like, this is the most beautiful one.” The scenery also provided entertainment for carpooling workers who held competitions to spot moose, elk, sheep, and eagles. During ride-along interviews, drivers pointed out moose in the river, eagles, blue herons, light hitting the rocks, improvements to a new fishing access site, and the emerald-blue deep holes in the river.

Their hundreds or thousands of commutes through the Canyon fostered a relationship to place that carried them through unexpected stoppages and congestion. When Participant 8 got stuck for a few hours due to guard rail construction, she was not stressed by the experience:

I was in a beautiful spot, turned off the car, rolled down the windows, heard the beautiful river go by. I had my podcast downloaded, and honestly, I was like, ‘Everyone's going to be late. I don't care.’ So, I'm not doing anything that's so time-dependent that those things really get me.

The shared experience of delay meant that she did not need to arrive in Big Sky at a definite time. Traffic congestion became a relaxing experience with nature. Similar examples of natural beauty contributing to experiences of flow were common.

Some workers—generally those who commuted alone—found the drive to be a welcome respite from the chaos of work and home, what other researchers call a “gift of time” (Jain and Lyons 2008; Lyons and Chatterjee 2008; Knowles, Shaw, and Docherty 2008). Sometimes they engaged in deep work during their commutes. As Participant 14 explained,

I feel like that's when I do my best thinking to come up with plans and connections, programs, you know, programming ideas, things that I need to do for the day or things I need to do for the week. I feel like that hour's worth of dedicated time just to think has been a real benefit.

Others used the commute to prepare for the day, as the drive was their only alone time to prepare for work in the morning or gather themselves before returning to family in the evening. Participant 26, a construction manager, spent the time “running through...how the day is going to go.” He reported that his “wife gets jealous” of his alone time, during which he listens to podcasts and music. Similarly, Participant 1—who works multiple jobs in Big Sky for the resort, running a small business, and in the restaurant industry—uses the time to “gather herself for the day.” She was a single mother who balanced multiple jobs in Big Sky but was motivated by her lifelong passion for skiing. She also enjoyed the respite of the commute when traffic was moving smoothly: “It gives me a lot of quiet time in between jobs and going home from kids. So, one of the other reasons I do like to drive alone is it's my own mental time to sort through my brain and figure out what my thoughts are.”

Workers also enjoyed the camaraderie of traveling together. Participant 23—who would leave his coworkers behind if they were two minutes late for the 5:15 am meetup—explained

that once everyone is in the car, “I think the stress is, ‘let me [get there on time] for the guys.’

But then after that, that's a high point of our day is getting together, doing the drive.”

Participants 21 and 22—a mother and daughter house cleaning team—listened to music or discussed recipes and cooking techniques as they drove. Participant 4 describes the social interactions of a beloved neighborhood carpool:

We did have great conversations, and I always thought it was kind of cool. It was like an hour hanging out with your buddies before and after work. And I valued that time. I made some of the best friends I have during the carpool... You really get to know people, and I mean, you talk about it all. You talk about your day. You talk about everything. Had some deep conversations, and I've laughed my ass off, and I'm like everywhere in between.

Such a sentiment was echoed by all types of carpoolers who, with the right people, appreciated the camaraderie and “beautiful, deep, spiritual chats with folks,” “bumping,” “rocking out” to music, and drinking “road sodas” (beers). These workers found flow through the connections they made with others during the commute.

Commuters from Ennis using the private Jack Creek Road experienced similar dimensions of flow as they appreciated the beauty of the drive and enjoyed time alone and with others. However, traffic travels slower on the washboard dirt road, which is often slick in the winter. Participant 2 explained why she prefers the Jack Creek commute:

I could never envision myself feeling comfortable commuting 191 on a daily basis. That road makes me pretty nervous in winter ... it's fast, and it's windy, it's icy, and it's just a high volume of cars. A lot of potential for accidents, and if there is an accident, it's high consequence. Versus Jack Creek, you go off the road, and you wait for the truck, for the next truck to come around and pull you out.

The slow, low traffic volumes on Jack Creek contribute to this commuter's comfort. While going into the ditch is not uncommon, she does not consider it dangerous or particularly inconvenient.

All Jack Creek drivers are required to carry a tow strap so they can:

...just pull the car off the road a little bit in a ditch, and if you hang out and wait, somebody with a truck will typically drive by and help you out. That is one thing that is nice about the road is, the people who drive it regularly, everyone is in it together, and there's some camaraderie there of helping each other out (Participant 2).

These experiences show that flow can arise from the expectations of fixed speed on a busy highway or the perceived safety of a slow dirt road. Commuting flow occurs under conditions of natural beauty, continual movement of traffic, and utilizing time as a gift to recharge, work or connect with others. The contrasting experiences from the Canyon and Jack Creek highlight how commuters experience flow at speeds appropriate for the road type. However, all experiences of flow are closely balanced with instances of friction.

Flow and Costs

Workers' experience with flow can make the commute manageable and even enjoyable. However, results also suggest that experiences of flow are not completely free of costs associated with commuting. First, flow is precarious. It relies on a specific set of traits such as the undeveloped open scenery, the continual movement of traffic, and the right people (or the lack of people) to carpool with. Though characteristics such as open land, beautiful scenery, and rapidly moving traffic are associated with resort geographies, they can easily disappear over time. Continued development leads to less open space and increased congestion. Secondly, commuters sometimes choose situations that induce flow but add other costs to their commute. Commuting alone might be enjoyable, but it comes with added financial costs and a larger risk exposure from repeated driving. Our data suggests that flow is not the absence of costs internalized by commuters but an adaption to and/or transposition of their presence. In this next section we discuss frictions that emerge as part of resort commuting experiences. Friction can

occur in-route (e.g., congestion and accidents), in the “in-between” of the resort sphere, and the resort core’s private clubs (e.g., the complex logistics to travel safely and efficiently to and from work).

Experiences of Friction in the Resort Geography

Before entering the Canyon, commuters traveling south from Bozeman and Belgrade in Gallatin County drive through the unincorporated communities of Four Corners and Gallatin Gateway, straight-aways of billboards, gas stations, lumberyards, storage facilities, prefab workforce housing, and a strip club-turned-gourmet market. This industrial sprawl forms part of commuters’ daily rhythm; it is a staging ground and transfer station for workers and construction materials. Flow stops as many workers board buses, meet carpools, or load into work vehicles.

Every day, before daybreak, hundreds of workers arrive at Cardinal Distributing in Four Corners, a former hockey rink parking lot turned stop for the public Skyline bus service which runs between Bozeman and Big Sky. Workers who gather at Cardinal Distributing will not ride the Skyline service during prime commuting hours since the bus often fills before reaching this—its third stop. Instead, workers park in dirt lots rented by large tourism and construction sector employers to carpool. Some of the YC laborers load into 15-passenger vans provided by their employer while others board buses provided by Suffolk Construction, a large Boston-based construction firm contracted to build the 500,000 square foot Montage hotel.⁵

The friction here is obvious: during the winter workers step out of warm cars into pitch black and sub-zero temperatures to load onto crowded buses and vans. Participant 3, who rides in

⁵ According to other workers and management, on the busiest days of the Montage’s three-year construction, Suffolk transported 620 workers to the job site.

a 15-passenger van to the YC, describes his morning routine: “I usually try to show up 15 to 20 minutes before [the van] leaves, to make sure I actually get a seat.” Sometimes the van is full and, despite his best efforts to carpool, he is forced to drive alone. He leaves his house between 4:40 am and 5:20 am and arrives home around 7 pm—a 14-hour day. Though riding in the van saves money, it adds time, stress, and presents the risk of catching COVID, a cold or the flu.

Other workers meet at company shops in Gateway or organize their own carpools, bearing the brunt of the logistics and safety of shared travel. Participant 4, a long-time worker and carpooler, discusses how picking up passengers and changing cars adds time and interruptions to an already long and strenuous day:

So, I carpooled with people in Gateway for a while, and I just got so damn sick of that, because ... even when they're driving, I still have to drive 20 minutes. And they might not be [ready]. I hated the transitions. I hated all that bullshit.... I like to just go.

Despite the social flows discussed previously, carpooling adds stress and friction to many workers' days. Participant 4 continues, “all the transitions, like driving 20 minutes, getting in their car, which is cold and [the ice] hasn't been scraped. That was stressful. Because you had to build that time into your commute.” These logistics interrupt flow. After these frustrating commutes, several of Participant 4's coworkers moved to his area, bringing flow to his commute.

My friend and coworker ... lived across the street, and him and I carpool[ed] for four years, year-round. We were also route partners, and we went on exchange together, but he lived across the street, so it was like the best carpool ever. And we worked together in the summertime too. And then we had up to four in the winter. We would have other people meet at our place and pick up. No more than four. In the last few years of carpooling, I became selective geographically ... I would rather have people that were close by because it's nice and easy when you can just pick somebody up, and they can pick you up, and I would choose people that I thought were reliable, but also lived close. ... The whole old neighborhood commute is, it was the best.

The conditions for carpooling to “flow” are narrow. Living nearby and working synchronized schedules allows workers to easily and rewardingly carpool, but when these conditions changed, carpooling becomes unsustainable. Thus, Participant 4 stopped carpooling after the neighborhood carpool members moved away.

Another commuter, Participant 1, enforced rules to keep her carpool safe and efficient, which was particularly important when she had to pick up young children from daycare. Drivers in her carpool weren’t allowed to let texting distract them from driving. If the carpool went to the bar, the driver followed a “the two-drink rule.” This meant that if the driver got a second drink at the bar they got it ‘to go’ and couldn’t finish it until they arrived at the carpool drop-off. This rule prevents the driver from drinking too much and keeping the carpool at a bar too long.

Drivers also had to have good tires, a good vehicle, and working seatbelts:

Zach wasn't allowed to drive often because he didn't have good tires. He didn't have a good vehicle ... Julie, when she jumped into the carpool ... Yeah, she was born and raised in Montana, and she had studded snow tires, but she was flighty, like ‘ah la la,’ and it was like, ‘Whoa, Hey Julie, you're driving, you know,’ and we'd have to remind her of that.⁶

These social negotiations reveal that carpooling is not simple and straightforward; it requires governance and structure to be safe and convenient, but this creates additional work for carpoolers. Participant 1 never found safe and punctual people, so she now drives alone. Commuters who drive together must balance the obvious financial and social advantages of carpooling with the frictions of logistics and social negotiation.

Other frictions emerge in the unseen “in-between space” in the heart of the resort core. Commuting *within* Big Sky’s luxury clubs—after leaving the car or bus—also adds time and

⁶ The names in this quote have been changed.

logistical friction to commuters' journeys (Sheller and Urry 2007). Participant 8, who had worked at the YC in front-of-house services, explained the steps to start work after completing the hour-plus drive to the Club:

When I was concierge, they were like, 'You have to be at your seat at starting time.' Which means that you had to have been up there, get up to the parking lot, so you can get on the bus, that you can get to the [locker room] so that you can clock in so that you can walk. And by that time ... I have had to spend twice the commute just to make sure I hit the schedule just right.

Participant 8 describes her coworkers' unsustainable schedules (at the Moonlight Club), which included about four hours of waiting because their schedule at a remote food truck lunch spot did not align with the public bus schedule:

[Management was] like, 'This is how things happen,' regardless of the realities of the fact that those two employees lived in Gallatin Gateway and had to ride the bus up. Which meant that they did their shift, and then they had to wait to get to the bus stop. Then they had to wait for the bus, and it just wasn't efficient. They were just two of the most miserable people I've ever met because they were just so fucked over by this commute.

Participant 28, who worked at the Moonlight Club as a low-level administrator, also detailed the complicated parking logistics. Employees parked in a remote lot about a half mile away from their lodge. An hourly shuttle was dispatched to transport employees, so if employees were late or did not start work on the hour, they often had to wait at the lot or the lodge before starting work. To get home, employees had to wait for a valet to take them to their car. Again, these logistics add time and stress to commutes which translate into costs absorbed by laborers.

On Jack Creek Road, drivers must also negotiate private space to maintain access to the road that takes them between home and work. Access to use the road costs as much as \$100 a week, though many businesses pay for their employees' passes. Security guards enforce access, so road users stop to chat with the guards to maintain rapport and preserve these relationships, so

that they wouldn't lose access. Participant 3 describes how access can be lost without due process:

We have employees ... [getting] ... reports of them driving too fast and they've had their passes taken away and it's really tough...but a lot of those reports are opinion based or rumor, like somebody who saw them driving on Jack Creek, calls it into security and security then tries to take away their pass, and it's somebody's livelihood and access to work, so it can be really tough.

In some instances, the gate itself impedes workers from getting home at the end of the day. Participant 5 recalled trying to get home to Ennis, but the gate—which requires a passcode— was not working: “I have came down to the bottom of the gate and the punch code, the gate would not open up ... [I] witnessed two gentlemen tearing the gate open with a pickup truck and a log chain ... I told them I didn't see a single thing.” Here, private infrastructure malfunctions (not accidents and traffic) impeded commuters. However, in a pinch, these private infrastructure issues can be solved with a long chain and a pickup truck. Still, access to Jack Creek saves workers an additional 45 minutes each direction that it would take to drive to Big Sky without using the private road. So, for many it is worth the added work of negotiating access and dealing with the road's quirks.

Commuters experience flow from the unimpeded movement of traffic, but these experiences change when traffic is slow or comes to a stop. While scenic beauty and time for contemplation might prevail when the commute is quick, easy, and flows without interruptions, such conditions are not always present. Traffic data and the interviews suggest that Big Sky's main thoroughfares—Highways 191 and 63—are becoming significantly more congested. In 2021, traffic in the Canyon climbed to its highest level ever between 8,400 and 10,000 daily trips a volume increase from 2020 of between 14 and 28 percent (MDT 2022). Commercial semi-truck traffic also increased and the stretch of road traffic congestion grades ranging from C to F

(Peccia, 2020). Interviewees who traveled during peak hours corroborated this data, reporting growing congestion, unsafe driving, accidents, and delays due to construction. Participant 9, a receptionist who is paid hourly and must get to work on time, describes slow traffic in the Canyon: “It's stressful when...you can get stuck behind two, three big construction trucks...you're like, ‘okay, I just need to get through’...But you can't go around, there's nothing to do.”

Participants described days when the drive flowed easily and others when congestion slowed their progress. Participant 1, a driver who extolled the virtues of the Canyon's uncongested traffic, described how summer construction can increase her commute by 45 to 60 minutes each way. During our ride-along interview, chip sealing in Belgrade delayed us by 40 minutes. She also describes the stress of being slowed down by other drivers: “there are definitely times when the stress of it can wear on my life. I'll come home, agitated, angry, doing 25 in the canyon on crystal-clear roads ... somebody just didn't know how to drive it.” During our interview, we found one such driver. The interviewee worried about missing her online therapy appointment, muttering, “Oh my god you've got to get off the road. Bye Felicia.”⁷

After turning onto Highway 63, congestion can get even worse. Workers and tourists from Big Sky join traffic. The two-lane highway (with few turn lanes and fewer lights) sometimes sees 40-minute wait times as a seemingly never-ending line of cars coming out of the Canyon crawls by. Abundant wildlife, including Big Horn sheep near the 191 Junction and the Lone Mountain Ranch elk herd, also stop or slow traffic. Participants report that one or two

⁷ Felicia is a popular culture reference to a female gendered person who annoys or inconveniences someone through their lack of awareness or naivety.

minor accidents in the winter can stop thousands of cars from leaving the Big Sky Resort. In one such case, a worker traveled for two hours to reach the meadow, a drive that normally takes less than 15 minutes. Drivers depend on everyone in the long line of cars to travel safely and quickly. One person's mistake can mean delay or even injury for others. Yet this communal dependence is in tension with an individual driver's experience of unimpeded flow and fast, rural driving, especially when there are so many cars on the road.

The route from the Gallatin Valley to Big Sky has also seen a rise in crashes. Crashes increased 130 percent from 2009 to 2018, according to the Montana Department of Transport (Peccia 2020). Drivers noted a variety of hazards, including icy roads, unsafe passing practices, and accidents. Participant 23 provided commentary as a truck charged past us in the dark at 5:30 am:

For me, it's kind of like at this hour, the hour that we're at right now, there's so many fucking cars. It's like, this guy's passing right now. And it's like, what are you even doing? You're going to pass and you're going to run into another car in like 15 seconds. And when you get into the canyon, even if there's a really slow car, I guarantee you, if we passed past them, we'd run into another one in no time.

However, this risk was too high for some drivers. Participant 6, a nurse, was evicted from her hospital-owned condo so management could convert it into a dormitory for nurses from Bozeman to work double shifts. When she could not find another place in Big Sky, she decided the commute was too dangerous: "I feel like that was...my dream job that I had to leave. But I wasn't willing to risk my life driving the Canyon with the thousands of people that do and how aggressive and terrifying some of those people are...It's really bad."

As the commuters weave up into Big Sky's slope-side private clubs, the roads become steeper and sometimes poorly maintained and plowed. Participant 24 discusses her daily journey to clean houses up in "el club": "In the winter, a [two-wheel drive car] isn't useful because you

can't go up and past where the gasoline station [Conoco Junction] is; it's all uphill.... All the way up to 'el club'". While homeowners and tourists usually drive the newest trucks and SUVs or rely on professional shuttle services, the roads present challenges to those without the right equipment. Participant 24, a house cleaner, described a day when she was caught off guard by unexpected snow. She was driving a two-wheel drive van instead of the four-wheel-drive SUV that she and her partner usually borrow when it snows. "We couldn't make it up and [the van] wouldn't go up...we had to turn back. These are learning experiences when you don't have experience [driving in the snow]."⁸ They had to drive back to Bozeman without working. As Participant 23 relays, "The climate here in Montana ... is sunny and then suddenly the next day it's snowing...my gosh., you think everything's fine and then all of a sudden, it's snowing again." Like many other wage laborers, she faced friction navigating a landscape of the ultra-wealthy without an SUV and new snow tires needed for winter road conditions.

A minor accident or failing to report to work may not be a life-changing event for many people. However, as a director of a local immigrant rights nonprofit explains, there can be deeper consequences for workers who are not legally in the US or who are on temporary visas:

You as an American person, you're worried because you're sliding back [down the road]. This is what they're worried about: ... [T]hey're sliding back. They're undocumented. They don't have a driver's license. They don't have insurance. And now someone's going to have to help them. They don't speak the language. Who's going to help them? The police? Oh yeah. So 'you' only have one worry. They have like a hundred going through their head.

⁸ This quote is translated from Spanish.

Managing the logistics of shared travel, navigating luxury spaces in the resort core or private space on Jack Creek, increased traffic, congestion, construction, and accidents all create friction for commuters.

In conclusion, these frictions highlight the spatial and economic factors that shape costs within workers' experiences of commuting. Development, exclusive spaces and of course the long distances of the commute emerge as characteristics of the resort geography that may shape frictions. This next section describes other contexts of work and housing endemic to the resort economy that shape workers experiences of flow and friction.

Commuting Flow and Friction in Contexts of Home and Work

Commuting is inevitably shaped by the location of work and home. While the locations of housing and work are often thought of as static characteristics of a geography, they are shaped by planning decisions which explicitly incentivize certain types of development in some places while slowing or preventing other types. In the case of the Big Sky resort geography, the absence of planning and zoning regulations enable development in second homes and luxury hotels, forcing most workers outward to commute from the resort sphere. In this section, we discuss how the location and characteristics of both the resort core and the sphere, and the commuters' relationships to them are important contexts shaping experiences of flow and friction. Waking up where they want to live and traveling to a place they want to work informs commuter subjective experience. If either is not the case, the commuting experience becomes imbued with an affective friction.

Laborers' motivations for working in Big Sky included higher pay, benefits, and opportunities for exciting work like building certain types of houses or ski patrolling. Many

participants sought jobs in Big Sky *because* they wanted to live there. However, other workers preferred to reside in the “valley.” Those who preferred living in Bozeman cited the small-town character of Big Sky; it was compared to a “small fishbowl... you're so close to everybody, and you're close from the top down, and you're all crammed together. And so, it's like you can't go out and be anonymous.” Additionally, it was seen as a tourist destination, not a real community: “It's kind of snooty up here...there's a lot of rich people and things are more expensive. Not really my vibe” (Participant 13). The village was said to be “resorty” with little “character to the town.” (Participant 12).

Participant 8, who often works from home and only commutes two days each week, found the valley's amenities more appealing than those on the mountain:

I prefer to commute [to] work rather than to commute to come do social activities or grocery shop. When I lived in Big Sky, I would be like, ‘Okay, I need to go grocery shopping. But also it'd be great to do some clothes shopping. But also there's a movie I want to watch or a concert I want to go to.’...So, I feel like any time I came to Bozeman from Big Sky, I would spend \$500 and be exhausted and then waste an entire weekend day. Commuting, you just kind of get in the track, and you go, and you do it. But then I live in Bozeman, so I'm like, ‘Oh, I just need to pop in and do some groceries real quick.’ So, I can do that on my way home.

Traveling for chores and entertainment on the weekend became an exhausting burden that created friction on one's day off. Participant 27, a manager tradesman, also wanted to avoid running into his clients during his off time:

I actually kind of like the separation between Big Sky and Bozeman ... my dad owned a business back in Michigan. So, it's the same old thing. When you go out to eat, you don't always want to be talking shop because you just end up bumping into everybody, and they're like, ‘Oh hey! I got some work for you.’

For this participant, separation itself creates flow more than the culture or characteristics of place. The workers who shared this feeling were often managers who drove alone or office

workers with the flexibility and control to commute on their own time and own terms.

Flexibility seemed to reduce the burden of working so far away from home.

Other workers want to live in Big Sky. They were attracted to the community and amenities or simply loved their job and wanted to be closer to it. Participant 4 describes the draw of his work in Big Sky, which has kept him coming back for more than a decade: “I vividly remember the first time I got off the tram, and I was like, this is it... I love the treeline. I like the wind, the whatever. It's challenging. And it's just an awesome mountain, and yeah, that's why I commute for so long...The place is sick.”⁹ He continues more pragmatically, “I wouldn't have been able to do some of the things I do and lead routes and whatnot at Bridger [a ski area close to Bozeman] ...even with 15, 16 years of experience, I would've been the new guy.” Each day he wakes up knowing this is the only place he wants to work.

Other workers would not choose to work in Big Sky if they could not also live there. Participant 10, a restaurant worker who had been in employee housing at a hotel in Bozeman, but was able to move to Big Sky in recent years, explains:

I love Bozeman, it's not a knock on Bozeman, but I didn't move across the country to live in Bozeman and work in Big Sky. So, for me, I was like as long as I live out here, and as long as I want my career to be out here, I have to live in Big Sky or bust.

He describes what his schedule was like when he lived in Bozeman in a room at the Holiday Inn and took the bus after he totaled his car hitting an elk.

There was certain nights where I'd get out late and then have to catch the 2:15 AM bus, which means I was home by 4:30 AM on days where I'd have to turn around and get back on the 7:30 AM bus. So there were days with that commute I would

⁹ Sick is slang and in this context is interpreted to mean awesome or wonderful.

have more time commuting than I would actually have in that Holiday Inn room. So, there were several times where I actually slept in the restaurant.

Like many others, this participant moved for the ski town amenities in the resort core, so living within that core was non-negotiable. Given the incredible frictions of long days and the logistics of waiting for buses (sometimes in below zero temperatures) he experienced while living in Bozeman, this was hardly surprising.

But living in Big Sky didn't eliminate friction from laborers lives either. Participant 10 also experienced friction in his never-ending search for housing in Big Sky, where he had to "[update my] Facebook feed every two seconds [to check for housing listings]—every single conversation you have with someone at the bar, at work, anywhere in public you're trying to ask people if they know anyone." Participant 11, who also works in the restaurant industry in Big Sky reported, "you have a squad of people looking for you and you still can't [find anything]." He would ask bar customers—often tourists—if they knew anyone who had housing. Even those with a lease were constantly looking for their next spot in case they got the "Airbnb notice." Having pets or children further narrowed one's opportunities.

Even some of the most die-hard Big Sky enthusiasts were forced into the valley by the costs of housing, relationships, kids, injuries, and life circumstances. Participant 1, a divorced mom, shared why she moved to the area almost 20 years ago: "My motivation [to live in this area] is the skiing in Big Sky. Due to having kids in the school system in Belgrade and the inability to afford living in Big Sky, I would've lived in Big Sky, could I ever have afforded it. We tried numerous times." This was not a one-time decision, but a continuous fight. The financial crisis of 2008 and bad credit from knee surgery debt kept her from buying a home in Big Sky in the early 2000s, when she could have afforded one. Now divorced, she stays in the

valley for her kids but occasionally parks a trailer in Big Sky while working or skiing over multiple days. Working in a place she wants to live, but living elsewhere, created friction, but she tried to stay positive:

I mean, it's definitely two to three hours a day that is just simply sitting in the car. I try to always see the silver lining, and the best side of it that I do get that relaxed time. I try to focus on that and focus on the beauty of the Canyon. But, yes, there are definitely times when the stress of it can wear on my life. I'll come home, agitated.

Commuting experiences are influenced by many contexts, however, these contexts are easily grouped by their effects: some commuters want to be commuting and others do not. For those that want to commute, higher wages, exciting opportunities, and temporary arrangements for a season or a job were a means to an end, rather than a manifestation of a relationship to a place or an identity. These workers generally experience flow in their commute. For others, however, Big Sky is not just about a high-paying job. Their work is part of their identity, and not being able to live in Big Sky contributed to frictions in their commuting experience and their search for housing in Big Sky. Affective frictions and flows based on where commuters want to live and work are important contexts contributing to the commuting experience.

Big Sky's resort economy relies on workers who do not live in the resort core and who experience increasing frictions as the resort's sphere expands. Not all workers can live in the resort core, where land and real estate earn firms high profits when they are sold to wealthy buyers. Such dynamics are shaped by the political economy of planning in which resorts form and grow, and where communities in the sphere remain focused on other economic interests while supporting the labor needs of the resort core. These dynamics shape workers experiences with housing and work. Some workers embrace and others tolerate this spatial separation, harvesting surplus wages available in the resort core to make a better material life in Montana,

and beyond. Others experience affective friction, wishing they could live within the flow of the resort village. These contexts determine how workers experience flows and frictions as costs.

Discussion

This paper categorizes the subjective experiences of resort workers using the concepts of flow and friction. When a commute flows, it exists as an insignificant cost, or even a net positive as the commuter appreciates the drive's natural beauty, can drive continuously, and may use the commute as time to relax or recharge. However, these regimes of flow are precarious and dependent on traits of the resort economy that are apt to change with added development, and workers may disperse costs elsewhere or absorb increased financial and hazard costs in order to maintain flow.

Frictions reveal costs that clearly burdened workers. Many frictions identified by our research participants align with the wider SWB commuting literature (e.g., congestion, time, rigidity in schedules, and a lack of control increase stress and reduce wellbeing) (Chatterjee et al 2020). However, the spatial structure of the resort economy added other, location-specific frictions. In the staging grounds of the resort sphere, commuters navigate ever-changing and exhausting logistical and communal negotiations for ride-sharing. In the luxury spaces of the resort core, workers experience friction from the “hurry up and wait” logistics of providing high-end luxury services in a rugged and sometimes unpredictable mountain environment. Such costs are caused by characteristics inherent to the resort geography where costs are shifted outwards across the resort footprint.

In this paper, our interviews with commuters helped define a set of commuting experiences and costs experienced by laborers. Our analysis then pivoted to examine these

experiences in tandem with the specific characteristics of resort geography discussed in the literature review of this paper. First, in Big Sky, firms develop high-end luxury real estate and services for profit. This chosen model increases frictions and social costs for workers who must navigate rigid practices to provide luxury services within the exclusive spaces of the resort core. Secondly, the resort economy continually expands outward into its sphere, displacing low-end workers farther away as real estate prices increase. The development associated with the continual growth of the resort sphere and core reduces flow by increasing commute times, eliminating beautiful and undeveloped land, and adding congestion, hazards, and rigidly controlled private space. Thus, as the resort footprint expands, frictions increase, and flows diminish for commuting workers.

Resort economies market and sell flow—from the swish of skis to wide-open spaces and the all-inclusivity of temporary resort village life. Yet these economies also depend on laborers excluded from this friction-less existence. The resort's footprint spreads rapidly outward into largely unregulated space, building increasingly high-end luxury amenities within its sphere. The mountain resort economy is not regulated by planning, zoning or other restraints that would localize its costs. Thus, the real estate market trends towards the biggest return on investment: usually second homes, and luxury hotels. As a result, workers commute. Our findings suggest that this economic model creates friction for laborers through the daily activity of commuting. The flows of the resort economy equate to friction for the laborers who power it.

Conclusion

This paper examines the commuting experiences of Big Sky laborers. In these experiences we identify themes of flow and friction which show how social costs are internalized

by resort laborers via commuting. While we describe a range of experiences, more research is necessary to understand what costs affect whom. To this end we recommend research on resort commutes that asks—how is social vulnerability experienced via commuting in resort geographies? Much is known about the resort core, which has well defined boundaries, but additional research is needed to understand how resorts effect peripheral sphere spaces. Recent real estate gentrification has extended far beyond what is normally considered part of the resort sphere, and it is possible that most people who live near mountain geographies will bear the externalized costs of gentrified real estate. These costs can too easily go unseen.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGY

The day-to-day lives of resort laborers feature centrally in this study, which explores the subjective experiences of commuting in mountain resort landscapes. However, this focus poses methodological challenges. As this thesis has emphasized, commuting in mountain resort towns is usually a private activity, occurring primarily within personal or work vehicles and out of public space (Gray, 2004). This can make transportation an intimate experience that both commuters and researchers find hard to quantify (Sheller & Urry 2006).

One objective of this study is to reclaim and record commuting time as an economic activity by understanding how workers experience commuting and how it shapes other areas of their lives. To this aim, I wanted to use a methodology that would capture commuting experiences with as much depth as possible while respecting workers' time and needs. To best do this, I used a mobile ethnographic approach via participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Big Sky commuters. I engaged reflexively with participants to alter interviewing methods to meet the needs of different individuals and demographics. While this approach presented limitations, it produced profound and generative research content and positive relationships with research participants.

In this chapter, I provide an in-depth overview of this methodology and discuss its limitations and complications. I then discuss the broader limitations of the study. Lastly, I recommend possible next directions for research inquiry and policy.

Approach

This research project uses an exploratory, qualitative approach to examine commuting experiences for laborers in Big Sky, Montana. To complete this inquiry, I conducted semi-structured, ride-along interviews as part of a mobile ethnography. The study was designed to be reflexive and revolve around the research subjects rather than the researcher. I tried to honor these values in how I structured the research process, including theory selection and analysis, interview practices, and relationship building with research participants – drawing on inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu’s (1993) essay, *Understanding*.

Grounded Theory

I used a Grounded Theory approach to guide simultaneous, iterative data collection and analysis. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss developed Grounded Theory in the 1960s in reaction to positivist trends in social science. This mode of inquiry allows categories of analysis to “emerge” during the research process rather than be imposed upon data (Bryman, 2015; Luker, 2008). Grounded Theory is touted as theory generating rather than theory testing (Bryman, 2015; Luker, 2008). Bryman (2015) and Luker (2008) emphasize that Grounded Theory allows the researcher to move back and forth between data collection and data analysis as research ideas evolve. In this research project, analysis occurred iteratively through memo writing and discussions amongst researchers. After interviews, I continued to refine ideas through multiple rounds of coding, note taking using thick descriptions, and writing the manuscript – often returning to coded interview data in between drafts.

Ethnography

Ethnography has a colonial and extractive history. Ethnographer Anthony Kwame Harrison describes ethnography's controversial genealogy alongside its value as a methodology: on the one hand, early and current ethnographers make the unknown known so that it can be consumed and altered as a new space of capitalism under the guise of personal relationships (Harrison 2014). On the other hand, human observation and collaboration are not inherently colonial practices. Rather, they are practices inherent to human nature. How these observations and collaboration are conducted and how results are leveraged for power determine if ethnography is an extractive and unethical practice. Thus, when conducted honestly and in partnership with communities, ethnography can provide deep engagement with a research subject that mimics human learning more effectively than impersonal deductive methodologies (Flyvbjerg 2006, Harrison 2014). This research employs ethnography as a form of participant observation and seeks to challenge historical power relations between the observer and the observed.

For this research, I define ethnography as sustained and embedded participant observation that informs both research methodology and analysis (Hart, 2009). I utilize ethnography in several ways. First, I have been an active participant in the commuting practices and tourism spaces that this research examines. I worked in Big Sky eight years as a ski instructor, shuttle driver, caterer, and babysitter. My experiences working and commuting to Big Sky informed project design, methodology, and implementation. I chose an ethnographic approach to this research to provide transparency of my own experience as an insider-outsider who both worked in and researched in Big Sky.

Second, I employ ethnography to disrupt rather than entrench power relations. In Big Sky, a space where democratic practices are thin and the boundaries between corporate interests and governance are blurred, worker experiences are noticeably missing from the community's rich narrative. This research seeks to use ethnography to understand resort geographies through labor experiences rather than perspectives that reinforce social and economic privilege.

Mobile Ethnography For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews as my primary form of data collection (see Appendix A for interview guide). When possible, I conducted interviews while riding along with workers on their commutes. In this form of mobile ethnography, commuters shared details about parts of their journeys in real-time. I experienced delays, icy conditions, traffic, and wildlife sightings firsthand.

A mobile ethnography approach provides an in-depth examination of commuting experiences while also respecting the time of busy research participants. Bourdieu (1996) argues that a researcher can create “an exceptional situation for communication” and through this intentionality can encourage researcher-participant trust (p. 30). In short, the venue of an interview has a large influence on the quality of discourse with the research participant. Inspired by the countless heartfelt conversations I engaged in when I carpooled to and from work, I wondered if, for some commuters, their car and journey may offer such an “exceptional situation.”

Sheller and Urry (2005, p. 209) comment that the transportation literature has “primarily ignored how the car reconfigures urban life, with novel ways of dwelling, traveling, and socializing in, and through, an automobilised time.” I designed my research methodology to fill this gap. Big Sky commuters typically spend over two hours in the car each day commuting. This

travel is impossible to avoid. Their commutes are thus both a predictable and convenient time during which interviews could be scheduled with research participants. While participating in an interview always includes some inconvenience for the participant, by interviewing commuters during a mundane and unavoidable activity, I hoped to lessen any burden. In addition, because ride along interviews didn't require eye contact, and had a definitive end, participants seemed to quickly develop a comfort with, and control of, the conversation.

Bourdieu (1996) argues for a reflexive approach to research that strives to equalize power dynamics and be responsive to participants' needs. Researchers should address their positionality and privilege, while also examining the potential of data collection to be extractive, inaccurate, and even violent (Bourdieu 1996). Bourdieu (1996, p. 19-20) recommends an anecdote of "a relationship of active and methodical listening, and to center interviewing around the experience of the respondent through language, material, and structure" as well as a 'familiarity' with one's subjects. The interviewer's job is not primarily to extract information from the participant but to give the participant their time, energy, and undivided attention.

This exercise in active listening is not only an instrument of scientific inquiry but a "spiritual exercise" in forgetting oneself and lending one's energy and attention entirely to another person's experience (p. 24). Bourdieu does not end with the experience of the researcher. He also suggests that some of data collection's power is what it seeks to avoid through attempted neutrality: to aid subjects in processing and understanding their trauma through "explicit discourse – where an effort is made to bring to light these things which are buried away within people who experience them" (p. 30). In this sense, I set out to actively listen to and provide support to commuters as they processed their experiences with commuting

between housing and work. Bourdieu's ideas informed the orientation and research design of this study. I selected these methods to draw attention to the concerns and experiences of an overlooked population in resort economies—the commuting laborer.

Community Involvement

In response to social science research that has been deemed extractive, alternative methodologies have arisen to protect and work on co-determined goals with communities and vulnerable populations. In this spirit, I created an advisory board of two members who identified as Big Sky commuters to help develop the project and interview guide. Additionally, local Latinx organizations and businesses provided support and guidance in engaging the Latinx community. Findings will be shared with community partners and research participants to solicit feedback and input before finalizing publications.

Data Collection

During the summer and autumn of 2021, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with a total of 29 Big Sky commuters. Of those interviews, seven were ride-along interviews, each consisting of one research participant. Five interviews with nine individuals were conducted in Spanish with the help of a native-speaking undergraduate research assistant. These interviews took place at a local taco truck, a market and deli, and a local nonprofit's office. Most participants were interviewed in pairs. No ride-along interviews were conducted in Spanish.

Sampling

I recruited interview participants in two phases. In the first phase, I recruited interviewees through purposive and snowball sampling methods using known contacts from the project development phase. I asked my own acquaintances from years of living in Big Sky for recommendations and then asked my community advisory board members to do the same. In addition, the Big Sky Chamber of Commerce posted an announcement in their monthly newsletter to help recruit participants. Participants were given the choice to be interviewed during their commute or at a static location such as their home or a coffee shop. During the first phase of research, I conducted seven interviews as ride-along interviews and six as static interviews. A full breakdown of interview participant demographics can be found in Chapter Three.

The second phase of interview recruitment focused on Big Sky's Latinx worker population. By October 2021, it had become clear that my initial sample was primarily middle-class, white workers and lacked Latinx research participants and low-wage service workers. In addition, the Delta Variant of the COVID-19 virus had begun to fill hospital beds in Gallatin County. While the IRB did not prevent in-person indoor research interviews, I did not want to seek out ride-along interviews with vulnerable populations while COVID-19 was surging. I started thinking about alternative ways to conduct interviews with primarily Latinx research participants.

I, with the help of my native Spanish-speaking research assistant who is well-connected with the Latinx community, obtained permission to solicit and conduct interviews at a local Mexican market and at a taco truck. We enjoyed a cooperative relationship with staff and owners who suggested good times to come and helped us get situated. I also provided incentives

to research participants. At the local taco truck, we offered to buy people lunch who would talk to us. At the Latinx market, we offered gift certificates to the market. Not everyone accepted the incentive as some said that they just wanted to help.

After collecting data at these sites, I again reflected on the research sampling and noted that I had not interviewed any female or non-male-identifying members of the Latinx community. My research assistant and I brainstormed additional recruiting methods and obtained permission from our grant funders to provide a larger incentive to female Latinx research participants: gift cards of \$50 to the local Mexican market. We asked for participants and advertised the incentive on the private Facebook page of a local Latinx organization. Initially, we did not receive any responses but did get a lot of Facebook “likes.” Eventually, the leader of the organization reached out and agreed to do a stakeholder interview with us. Afterward, she connected us with additional interviewees who identified as women. We provided these participants with \$50 gift cards.

Inquiry

All interviews – both ride along and static – followed a semi-structured interview guide focused on the experiences, effects, and context of commuting. The guide was accompanied by a structured survey with demographic and economic variables. Interviews began with a short description of the study and an opportunity for the participant to comment. Then, I asked one of three open-ended questions asking the participant to tell me the narrative of how they came to commute, work at Big Sky, or live where they do. These questions were meant to generate conversation around the commute or around the context of the participant’s housing and work. I used that narrative as a springboard to ask other questions from the interview guide, making sure

that each topic was covered. These topics covered day-to-day experiences, the effects commuting has on other areas of the commuter's life, and the context in which the laborer commutes.

Questions were guided by the literature on the subjective well-being of commuting covered in Chapters Three and Four, as well as input from advisory board members.

I wrote extensive notes during the interview process. I also used the time I spent waiting for and riding on the commuter bus to and from Big Sky to take additional notes and reflect on themes. When working with my research assistant, we discussed the content of interviews and emerging patterns after each set of interviews. A detailed account of the analysis and codes can be found in Chapter Four.

The Ride Along Method: Comments and Challenges

The ride-along method provided unique challenges and opportunities. Ride-along interviews provoked generative and thoughtful conversations. Car travel is, in Bourdieu's words, an "exceptional situation" in which to conduct an interview. The act of receiving a ride from someone can alter the normal power relationships between interviewees and interviewers by sharing in an experience. Further, the structural aspects of the ride-along format seemed to ease awkwardness: interviews had a natural and finite end (at the destination) and there was no pressure to make eye contact. Everything that occurred outside of the car, from the actions of other drivers to trees shading the road to construction, provoked conversation that felt more natural and thoughtful than interviews in static locations.

This methodology also engaged an unintended 'logistical ethnography' where I often had to think creatively and utilize public transportation and my community in order to get to and from interviews. Ride along interviews were logistically challenging to orchestrate. While I was

never stranded, I often had to arrange pick up and drop offs, walk, or ride my bike, or wait for buses to meet and depart interviewees' cars in places that would not interrupt their commute. I waited at 5:30 am in the dark at a lumberyard or in a parking lot, listening to the sounds of the highway and trusting that my participant would swing in and pick me up. I waited for buses, in the Big Sky Meadow, sometimes for hours during the reduced schedule for the off-season.

Meeting a participant in Ennis, Montana, I organized complicated logistics to get back to my car because I could not travel on the Jack Creek private road and no bus service existed to Ennis. Because I relied on others not only to share their commutes but also to pick me up and to drive safely, I felt the stress of vulnerability, the comradery and enlightenment that comes with uncertainty about travel arrangements and relying on others for transportation.

In addition to the logistical challenges of the ride along, there were also circumstances when it seemed too personal. For participants that I perceived as especially vulnerable, it seemed inappropriate to even request a ride-along interview. Ride-along interviews generally relied on a snowballed personal connection, and thus the reach was limited and excluded many commuters. A partnership with a dedicated community organization that represented commuters or certain populations of commuters could have significantly broadened the reach of ride-along interviews. However, I was hesitant of such a partnership due to the strong links between nonprofit networks and employers in Big Sky. I was weary of having interview participants view their participation in the research as entangled in the power relationships of their employment. In retrospect, I could have partnered with population-specific organizations in Bozeman and avoided these dynamics. Ultimately, I did partner informally with several organizations that helped with interview

recruitment. However, the lack of a dedicated labor organization or a network that represents those who commute to Big Sky for work is notable.

Riding in a car with a stranger is an act of trust. I accepted and respected that not everyone would want to make the journey with me. In addition, shifting to outside, static interviews was a response to the realities of conducting human subject research during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Thus, to diversify my participant sample and respond to rising COVID-19 cases, it made sense to alter my interviewing technique in phase two of the research. While I always offered static and ride along options for interviews, I began to shift toward soliciting and conducting interviews in public outdoor locations. This logistically simpler interview method allowed me to talk to a greater diversity of research participants and provided opportunities to ask more targeted questions based on themes from the first round of interviews. The variation in interviewing method was a part of my reflexive approach and gave interviewees the power to control if, when, and where they talked with me.

Ride-along interviews made up only 25 percent of total interview participants. Nonetheless, they were generative interviews that provided in-depth data on individual commuting experiences. They also helped guide and target my approach in the static interviews. By providing me a wide range of experiences to ask about, I was able to mimic the congenial structure of the ride-along interview in static interviews. Thus, while ride-along interviews were limited, they had an outsized influence on data collection, analysis, and writing throughout the research process. Engaging in this interviewing style on a limited or broader basis can strengthen many studies' inquiry, especially when ride-along interviews are conducted in early stages of the project.

This study included individuals from Big Sky's major economic sectors: accommodation, food services, construction, public services, healthcare, and recreation/entertainment. Interview participants identified as 61 percent men and 39 percent women, closely reflecting Big Sky's workforce gender divisions reported within the 2019 census data (63 percent men and 37 percent women). I took care to interview both men and women within the growing share of Big Sky workers who identify as Spanish speakers. The goal of the research was not to create a statistically significant sample. Rather, the goal was to document a range of commuting experiences with a rich amount of detail.

Study Limitations

This study is an original, in-depth look into commuting experiences amongst commuters in a resort geography. It includes generative discussion on the resort economy and footprint, as well as how large labor forces of the resort geography navigate these spaces. However, this study has limitations. First, this study should not be construed as a cross-sectional study of Big Sky commuters but rather an exploratory account of commuting experiences. The findings can guide future cross sectional or survey approaches to understand and develop policy changes that address spatial inequity across the resort geography.

This study was designed with imperfect representativeness. I was intent on capturing perspectives of Latinx laborers as part of this research. Hispanic residents are a growing demographic in Big Sky and the surrounding areas, representing 5.4 percent of the workforce (2019 American Community Survey). However, 39 percent of my research participants identified Spanish as their primary language. Thus, it is quite likely that I oversampled Spanish speaking workers. This was a conscious decision with several motivations. First, interviews with

Spanish-speaking participants were shorter, and they generally reported positive commuting experiences. I did not feel like I reached saturation with commuting experiences as quickly as I did with non-Hispanic participants. Secondly, local organizations and stakeholders that work with the Gallatin County Latinx community report that available public statistics under-represent the Latinx population significantly. I wanted to highlight immigrant perspectives in the study and therefore targeted Latinx participants in the sampling.¹⁰

Despite my efforts, the results of this study do not speak to the full, complex range of Latinx experiences working and commuting in Big Sky. Latinx interviews, especially those with men, portrayed a positive experience with commuting and employment in Big Sky. While this may be because commuting is an active choice to earn more money, my research assistant whose parents are immigrants from Mexico, pointed out how cultural differences may shape these responses. Latinx individuals may be less interested in reflecting introspectively on their work experiences through the interview process, particularly with strangers. Latinx workers operate within a different set of cultural norms, expectations, and experiences, and thus Latinx and non Latinx responses cannot necessarily be directly compared.

¹⁰ This research balances several divisions to describe immigrant labor with ties to Mexico and Central or South America. 1. Latinx is a gender-neutral geographic descriptor for people that have ties to these regions. This term is preferred and is used broadly throughout this paper 2. Hispanic describes people who speak Spanish and are from these regions. I avoid this descriptor because of its colonial genealogy and because it excludes non-Spanish speaking Latinx people. It is only used in this reference to US Census data, and research which already uses it. I did not ask research participants if they were Hispanic or Latinx. I simply asked them what their primary language was. I tried to ask as few questions about identity as I could to avoid the any appearance that I was involved with immigration officials. While this might exclude some Latinx individuals, no one I interviewed identified any language other than Spanish or English as their primary language.

I also believe that this study oversamples middle and upper-middle class workers and under samples laborers in low-wage or low-skilled positions. I know of two explanations for this. First, I recruited primarily through personal networks, which may have limited the participant pool. Secondly, workers who are established and have higher wages likely have more time to participate in interviews. Again, this is something that a strong community partner who works with labor populations could have helped. Still, many research participants shared experiences from current and past employment when they were more financially vulnerable, providing important contributions on the variety of experiences of Big Sky laborers.

Lastly, this study did not include many experiences of commuters who use the Skyline bus system which connects the Bozeman area to Big Sky. Bus commuters only make up 1 percent of the total commuting population, so it did not make sense to focus extensively on bus commuting in Chapter Three. In addition, I did not conduct any interviews or ride-along interviews with commuters who solely ride the bus, though this had been my original intent. I rode the bus numerous times prepared to solicit participation, but each time I was struck by how tired workers sat down, slept, put in headphones, or chatted with friends. I remembered my own experience riding the bus during the first three years I worked at Big Sky and how it was often my only time during the day to unwind. For this study, I decided to respect the right to privacy in a public space and not solicit interviews on public transportation. I focused instead on individuals who primarily ride in private and company vehicles. While less than 1 percent of Big Sky laborers commute on the bus, this leaves a notable gap in the data.

Suggestions for Future Research

Resort geographies have complicated economic and labor flows that have largely been overlooked by researchers. Scholars who wish to research the experiences of laborers living in resort geographies should work closely with a trusted organization. In Big Sky, nonprofit networks within the community are often closely linked with corporate employers and focus on in-town residents. Given these dynamics and associated power relationships, these organizations are likely not ideal partners for labor-centered research. However, organizations that have a broader scope, such as those that work with the Latinx community or on housing, have potential as research partners. An admirable example of a fruitful partnership between researchers and a community organization can be found in Chang et al.'s (2013) study of immigrant labor workplace safety in San Francisco. This study shows how immigrant rights and labor organizations shaped a study at each stage through strong partnerships between researchers and community leaders. Future researchers interested in labor and resort geographies may find these collaborations fruitful, particularly for those researchers who do not have prior experience working at the resort.

This research demonstrated the richness of ride-along interviews as a data collection technique. Ride-along interviews have logistical challenges and limitations but also many benefits. Research participants can multi-task on their commute instead of doing the interview during their non-work time. Additionally, the setting – the participant's vehicle – is likely a comfortable space, which may lead to more ease and honesty during the interview itself. For this study, ride-along interviews were particularly useful for the initial phase of the project. Future research on the opportunities and challenges of this novel interview technique would be valuable.

Framing and finalizing a study methodology and interview questions through ride-along interviews would likely contribute to the depth of a wide variety of projects both related and unrelated to commuting.

Conclusion

This chapter describes the epistemological orientation and methodology of my research. I also discuss the ride along methodology in detail and categorize its advantages and limitations for future researchers. I suggest that future researchers who wish to conduct case study research via ride-along methodology design their study in close partnership with a community-based organization. I encourage all researchers to engage in ride-along interviews or similarly engaging methodologies because of the depth of experiential understanding it brings between participant and researcher. In the next and final chapter, I will summarize and discuss results from this research on resort geographies and labor.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study explores the costs internalized by Big Sky laborers via commuting and the relationship of those costs to planning and governance practices that shape the resort economy. It identified a range of commuting experiences categorized as flow or friction. Flow comes unimpeded movement, experiences with nature while driving, and self-care that happens both alone and in groups in transit. Frictions are caused by congestion, logistics of carpooling, busing, or arriving at work, stress associated with long workdays or accidents, and the contexts surrounding work and housing that shape commutes. Workers adapt to remove friction and increase flow in their commutes by traveling alone, choosing specific carpool participants, or utilizing flexible work schedules to commute less often or at less busy times.

Literature has established that rapid and sprawling development and growing spatial separation between workers and work are fundamental characteristics of the resort geography. Growing development and spatial separation contribute to frictions and the associated costs internalized by workers by increasing traffic congestion, eliminating idyllic open space, and complicating the commute, which adds to the logistics that it takes to get to work. This suggests that as resort geographies grow, commuting costs internalized by laborers increase.

This study's findings on commuting experiences corroborate patterns identified by the subjective well-being and commuting literature. However, this study proposes an emerging framework of flow and friction by which to categorize and explain the mobile nature of internalized social costs associated commuting including decreases in subjective well-being.

Findings further articulate the core—sphere footprint of the resort geography described by William Travis (2007) and Thomas Clark (2006) by showing how the resort footprint is lived daily by commuting workers. I describe a resort economy that is popularly defined and marketed as a place of economic and personal flow, but, that this flow is predicated on a resort sphere where costs easily disappear into a less controlled space. For workers relegated to live in this sphere but work in the core, some of these costs are internalized via frictions associated with daily commutes. Resort economies rely on mobile workers who absorb costs by making the journey cross a sphere that by characteristic lacks the infrastructure to help disperse the costs of their journey.

Future Research

Resort Economies and Costs

If drastic wealth inequity remains a central feature of society, the number of people who make their living from the leisure experiences of the ultra-wealthy will continue to increase. Big Sky is one of many examples where labor forces travel long distances to work in the exclusive fast spaces of the ultrawealthy. These labor dynamics can be better understood through research that examines the externalities involved in the development of luxury vacation zones to inform broader societal conversations and reforms. I see three specific areas for inquiry: (1) While this study categorizes a range of commuter experiences, it does not link those experiences with any detail to the personal traits of individuals. Research examining the inequality of commuting experience by drawing on Norton's (2018) work on the experiences of female Latinx resort workers and from a body of work by geographers Lise and Peter Nelson and their collaborators could help policy makers develop targeted transport interventions to aid vulnerable and

precarious commuters. (2) While this research examines social externalities, through costs absorbed by laborers via commuting, it does not examine the environmental externalities of the resort geography. During the research process I was often struck by the scale of environmental externalities in Big Sky, particularly those associated with the construction of luxury real estate and hotels. A project that partners with construction companies or construction employees to quantify the environmental costs of residential and commercial real estate projects in the private Clubs of Big Sky, could help local and global audiences understand the role of wealth consolidation in the consumption that drives climate change. (3) Research in resort geographies is hindered by the low quality of national survey demographic data that can capture data in an isolated moment with questionable results. More accurate demographic research in resort economies would help communities, governments and researchers understand rapid changes to resort geographies. I wonder if using a participatory demographic approach—where researchers and government officials with local NGOs and business owners to track not just the number and demographics of workers, but trends in housing and regional population movement.

In addition to these specific areas for inquiry, I also believe that broader economic trends beyond the resort sphere will shape workers' experiences. There is reason to believe that the dynamics of housing within the United States are undergoing a significant change. The COVID-19 pandemic drove increases in housing prices not just near resort communities but across the United States (Lawson, 2021). Large financial intuitions have begun to invest heavily in all forms of residential housing, driving up purchase prices and rents (Semuels 2019). Increasingly, it is not just individuals who live near a resort who must internalize the costs of investments of the financialized economy, but everyone. This begs the questions: Where does the “resort

sphere” end? And where will workers live and what will their lives be like if there is nowhere affordable to live? These trends are compounded by spatial distribution of jobs and homes—as shaped by land use policy, planning and governance. In the vast majority of the United States housing and transportation costs exceed 45 percent—the threshold for affordability—of the average household income (Center for Neighborhood Technologies, 2022). More research is necessary to understand the lived experience of living in rural places and resort geographies when real estate is expensive everywhere and the traditional lines between resort spaces and other communities are blurred by the financialization of real estate.

Commuting Experience

Recent media coverage around the growing share of remote work contributes to the illusion that commuting will become obsolete in an emerging digitalized ‘metaverse’. In reality, digitalization is supported by human labor in resource extraction, energy, manufacturing and services sectors. A meta future is not one without physical experiences of fun and leisure but where such experiences are reserved for the super-rich. Thus, the service jobs in ultra-luxury nodes of the fast world are likely to remain part of the commuting in person workforce. Remote work and meta trends do not eliminate in person work or commuting, but instead concentrate the burden of commuting on wage laborers.

Thus, commuting remains an important area of inquiry, as a driver of inequity and a significant part of many workers’ lives. Rural and resort commutes are of particular importance, as distributing centers and crypto data centers join resource extraction and agriculture in rural areas (e.g. Char-Koosta News, 2022; Dzieza, 2019). More research is necessary to confirm and further define the commuting costs and subjective well-being patterns across rural and amenity

geographies. Studies that examine the time spent working and commuting in tandem may be particularly valuable in understanding how these combined forces affect the lives of workers.

Policy in Resort Economy Communities

Amenity communities have struggled to address housing price increases that force laborers to commute farther distances. Two potential policy approaches emerge to address these issues. The first is to develop a large alternative deed restricted market sizable enough to house much of the workforce, which requires extensive local capacity and public capital in coordinating such efforts. Community members with high social capital who already own land will have a better capacity to build at the scale required. High costs of land and construction within resort geographies mean that these interventions require significant taxation, in addition to existing federal incentives and grants to build housing at scale. The implementation of such taxes is limited by local and state laws as well as by communities' and states' potential to embrace tax structures that are likely to adversely affect local residents with significant wealth or power.

Developing an extensive deed-restricted housing market also presents risks. Butler's resort area life cycle includes an end stage of inevitable decline (Butler, 1988). As this research discusses, resort economies are inherently consumptive and rely on an external sphere to disperse costs. Once that sphere is fixed by excessive development, will the resort core fail—rendering the public investment of housing worthless? More research is necessary to understand the implications of broad deed-restricted housing schemes might have.

The second option is to enact national tax structures that more aptly prevent both individuals and financial institutions from accumulating large amounts of capital, and to more universally tax trophy properties so that vacation homes not lucrative investments. Taxes could

make developers and owners pay more for these disruptions to society and the environment. Slowing capital accumulation at a spatially significant or local level may over time may slow the exogenous forces that drive high real estate prices in resort geographies.

However, these interventions are far and few between, thus hard to research. New Zealand, Canada and Hawaii provide the best example of tax structures that directly tax luxury properties via empty homes taxes and foreign buyer taxes. It is possible that slowing capital accumulation too much could send resort geographies into decline. If so, then perhaps this decline is the price a community must pay for open space and a locally attainable real estate market. More research is necessary to examine local and national tax structures that disincentive luxury property investment.

Conclusion

Resort geographies are an intersection of idyllic nature, decadent wealth, and the powerful forces of the political economy. Though a resort economy is relatively small in the scheme of human settlements, in comparison to other small settlements such as a coal mines or a meat packing plants, the resort economy has relatively chaotic and complex labor needs that require workers from different walks of life working drastically different shifts in buzzing chaos that brings to mind Richard Scarry's 'Busy Town' (1965). For many workers I interviewed and the others I know who are wholeheartedly dedicated to working and living in resort mountain geographies, the chaos and peace of the resort geography can exist simultaneously. But for others, the costs incurred living in resort geographies outweigh the benefits. These negotiations and adaptations provide new insight into how the resort economy functions.

In this thesis, I categorize a range of experiences of Big Sky commuters and explain them in terms of flows and frictions. I draw on existing literature that describes the resort geography to examine this space in tandem with the experiences of the commuters who traverse it. While a resort economy may present an illusion of flow to those who travel and live there, as the resort develops and expands this could translate to increased frictions for laborers via their commutes. I hope these findings will aid policymakers and academics alike in understanding resort geographies and how the activities of the super-rich shape the physical and social landscape.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INFORMATION, INTERVIEW GUIDE AND DEMOGRAPHIC
SURVEY



LETTER OF INFORMATION

Page 1 of 2

Department of Earth Sciences
P.O. Box 173480
Bozeman, MT 59717

Commuting Experiences of Big Sky Laborers

Introduction/ Purpose You are being asked to participate in a research study about commuter experience in Gallatin and Madison Counties. Dr. Julia Haggerty, and Master's student Elise Otto are conducting a research study to understand how planning for transportation and housing affect laborers through their commuting experiences. You have been asked to take part because because you work in Big Sky or your experiences and expertise are relevant to important development issues facing resort towns such as Big Sky.

Funding This project is funded through Ivan Doig Center for Western Lands and Peoples and the Montana State University Earth Sciences Department.

Procedures If you agree to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview aimed at understanding the social challenges associated commuting. Interviews will take place in person as a commute ride-along or in a different venue, over the phone or virtually on a ride-based platform. Interviews typically last between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. If you agree, the interviews may be recorded to help us accurately represent your answers in our analysis.

Risks Participation in this research study may involve some added risks or discomforts. These include a minimal risk of loss of confidentiality (though as we note below, we are taking steps to protect the individual identity of all participants).

Benefits Your participation in this the project will provide important information about housing and transportation planning in resort communities, and better understand the experiences of laborers who work in these communities.

Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence or loss of benefits.

Confidentiality Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with institutional review board regulations. Only the investigators will have access to the raw data from the interviews (including recordings) which will be kept in a password protected program. To protect your privacy, personal, identifiable information will be removed from study documents and replaced with a study identifier. Identifying information will be stored separately from data and will be kept. The interview notes and any recordings and transcripts will be destroyed within 5 years or as soon as analysis is completed.

IRB Approval Statement The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at Montana State University has approved this research study. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights or a research-related injury and would like to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Administrator at (406)-994-4706 or email IRB@montana.edu to obtain information or to offer input.



LETTER OF INFORMATION

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Department of Earth Sciences
P.O. Box 173480
Bozeman, MT 59717

Commuting Experiences of Big Sky Laborers

Investigator Statement “I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual, by me or my research staff, and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered.”

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LETRA DE INFORMACIÓN

Página 1 de 2

Departamento de Ciencias de la Tierra
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Experiencias de Viaje de Los Trabajadores de Big Sky

Introducción/Propósito Se le pide que participe en un estudio de investigación sobre la experiencia de los viajeros en los condados de Gallatin y Madison. La Dra. Julia Haggerty y la estudiante de maestría Elise Otto están llevando a cabo un estudio para entender cómo la planificación del transporte y la vivienda afectan a los trabajadores a través de sus experiencias viajando al trabajo. Se le ha pedido que participe porque trabaja en Big Sky o porque sus experiencias y conocimientos son relevantes para los problemas importantes de desarrollo que enfrentan las ciudades turísticas como Big Sky.

Fondos Este proyecto está financiado por el Centro Ivan Doig para Tierras y Personas del Oeste y por el Departamento de Ciencias de la Tierra de Montana State University en Bozeman.

Procedimientos Si acepta participar en este estudio, le pediremos que haga una entrevista dirigida a comprender los obstáculos sociales asociados con el viaje al trabajo. Las entrevistas se harán en persona durante un paseo, en otro sitio, por teléfono o virtualmente usando una plataforma de paseos. Las entrevistas normalmente duran entre 45 minutos y 1.5 horas. Si está de acuerdo, las entrevistas serán grabadas para ayudarnos a representar con precisión sus respuestas en nuestro análisis.

Riesgos La participación en este estudio podría tener algunos riesgos o molestias adicionales. Entre ellos, un riesgo mínimo de pérdida de confidencialidad (aunque, como se indica abajo, estamos tomando medidas para proteger la identidad individual de todos los participantes).

Beneficios Su participación en este proyecto aportará información importante sobre la planificación de viviendas y el transporte en comunidades turísticas, y servirá para mejorar el entendimiento de las experiencias de los trabajadores en estas comunidades.

Carácter voluntario de la participación y derecho a retirarse sin consecuencias La participación en el estudio es totalmente voluntario. Puede negarse a participar o retirarse en cualquier momento sin consecuencias ni pérdida de beneficios.

Confidencialidad Los datos de la investigación serán confidenciales, de acuerdo con la reglamentación de La Junta de Revisión Institucional (IRB). Sólo los investigadores tendrán acceso a los datos originales de las entrevistas (incluyendo las grabaciones) que se guardarán en un programa protegido con contraseña. Para proteger su privacidad, la información personal identificable se borrará de los documentos del estudio y se sustituirá por un código de identificación para el estudio. La información identificativa se conservará aparte de los datos y se preservará. Las notas de las entrevistas y cualquier grabación y transcripción se eliminarán en un periodo de 5 años o una vez que se haya completado el análisis.



LETRA DE INFORMACIÓN

Página 2 de 2

Departamento de Ciencias de la Tierra
P.O. Box 173480
Bozeman, MT 59717

Experiencias de Viaje de Los Trabajadores de Big Sky

Declaración de Aprobación de el IRB La Junta de Revisión Institucional (IRB) para la protección de los participantes humanos de Montana State University ha aprobado este estudio. Si tiene alguna pregunta o duda sobre sus derechos o una herida relacionada con la investigación y desea contactar a alguien que no sean los miembros del equipo de investigación, puede comunicarse con el Administrador del IRB llamando a (406)-994-4706 o enviando un correo electrónico a IRB@montana.edu para obtener información o para ofrecer sus comentarios.

Declaración del Investigador "Certifico que el estudio de investigación fue explicado al individuo, por mí o por mi equipo de investigación, y que el individuo entiende la naturaleza y propósito, los riesgos posibles y los beneficios relacionados con la participación en este estudio. Cualquier pregunta que se haya presentad se ha sido respondido."

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Interview Guide: Inroads of Resort Economies

Elise Otto

Commuter Interviews

Resources and Communities Research Group—Earth Sciences Department—Montana State University

Topic: I'm researching commuter experience in Big Sky. As you may have noticed, Gallatin County is undergoing rapid growth, and with that has come many changes. Dynamics and factors that resort and rural commuters face are poorly understood. We are trying to understand more about what that commute is like and what role it plays in people's lives.

Informed consent: This research is entirely voluntary. You can stop talking to me at any time. This research is anonymous, and I will not use your name. The purpose of this research is to aggregate broad themes. Recordings will be stored on a password protected program and will be destroyed after the research is completed. This research is approved by the Montana State University IRB board. If you would like to see the finished product associated with this project, please let me know and I will contact you when it is finished. The accuracy of your answers is very important, and I would like to record the interview. Do you consent to being interviewed? Recorded?

Interview Questions

Tell me how you came to work at Big Sky?

Tell me about how you came to live where you do?

Tell me about how you get to and from work?

Commuting Narrative

Could you tell me about your commute?

What is your commuting routine?

How you get to and from work every day?

Where do you commute from?

How do you get to work? With whom? When do you leave? When do you get back?

Does traffic effect your commute? How? Where? How often?

How many miles do you commute on what type of roads?

About how long does your commute take you, each way? How long are you gone for?

How many times do you change vehicles (i.e driving to a bus stop meeting at a friend's house)

What type of vehicle (s)/tires do you use? What's the condition of the vehicle(s)?

Net positives and opportunities

What do you like about commuting? What is your commuting routine?

Do you ever see wildlife? Sunrise? Sunset?

What do you talk about during the commute? What do you listen to? Think about?

Are you able to relax, have fun, or do something productive while commuting? (Listen to podcasts or audiobooks, read the news, catch up on social media or with friends, meditate etc)?

What economic opportunities are opened up by working in Big Sky and living elsewhere?

Net Negatives and Uncertainties

What is challenging and stressful about commuting?

Do you ever leave late? What causes delays?

What else interrupts the routine of the commute?

Have you had any accidents or gotten stuck behind accidents?

How does weather effect your commute? The bus schedules? Your friends?

What would make your commute better?

Does your commute impact your health? How?

Does your commute impact how much sleep you get?

How well you eat? How much exercise you get?

How energized you feel at work?

Your temperament/attitude/interactions with coworkers or family members?

How much stress you feel on a regular basis?

How do you feel commuting affects your involvement in community and family?

What activities do you participate in (family, church, community clubs 'hobbies)? How of

How often does commuting influence your involvement in these activities? How?

Have you ever missed these activities due to commuting? Why?

Does commuting or working in Big Sky ever affect your ability to participate in family/ other activities? Why? (e.g. Too tired, late etc.)

Does commuting cause you stress? How and when? What do you worry about?

What would you do if you were not commuting?

Have you made arrangements for care of pets or family members while you are while you are commuting? Are there challenges to those relationships?

Financial Costs

How much do you think you spend on commuting each year?

Thinking about your commute, what types of financial costs do you have, in general, for your commute? How much do you think you spend on commuting each year (month/week)?

What are the costs? What type of car do you commute in? How many people are in the car?

Can provide commuter costs sheet (Appendix A) if participant is having a hard time estimating.

Do you consider indirect costs of commuting such as vehicle maintenance and upkeep

Does your employer provide any sort of financial reimbursement for travel costs?

Do you travel the canyon in a company owned and maintained vehicle?

Do you get paid during your travel time?

Housing

Does cost of housing play a role in why you commute? How so?

How do you feel about where you live? How did you come to rent/own/live in this house/apartment/condo?

What keeps you in the living where you do?

Do you own a house or rent?

How many people live in your home? How do you know them?

Have you tried to rent or live closer to your work? What factors determine where you live (affordability, access to good schools, type of town etc.)

If housing were available in Big Sky, would you be interested in living there?

What are other housing/commuting situations you've considered? Have you looked into living closer? Housing support programs? What were the results of those inquires?

Would you rather pay more for housing and live closer to work, or have cheaper housing and a longer commute?

Closing

Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

Is there anyone that you suggest I speak with?

Cost of Mobility

Annual Cost to Own & Operate a Car

Annual Mileage	Small Sedan	Medium Sedan	Large Sedan	Small SUV	Medium SUV	Minivan	Pickup	Avg.
10,000	\$6,060	\$7,487	\$8,994	\$7,182	\$8,743	\$8,705	\$9,163	\$8,048
15,000	\$7,114	\$8,643	\$10,403	\$8,394	\$10,625	\$10,036	\$10,839	\$9,385
20,000	\$8,185	\$9,817	\$11,836	\$9,629	\$11,819	\$11,389	\$12,557	\$10,747

Note: Based on 250 working days,
 10,000 miles equals 40 miles per day
 15,000 miles equals 50 miles per day

Source: AAA Your Driving Costs 2019 Edition

Survey

This demographic information helps us analyze our data

How often do you work in Big Sky?

Temporary: How often?	
Full time:	
Contractor:	
Seasonal If yes, what seasons?	

How many people live in your house? (household)

Children:	
Adults:	

Comments:

How many of those people work?	
--------------------------------	--

What is your occupation?

Do you have more than one job? Yes No	How many jobs? What types?
---	----------------------------

What is your native language?	
-------------------------------	--

What is the highest degree or level of school completed?

How are you paid?

Cash/ Under the table:	Comments:
Hourly	
Salary	
Independent Contractor	

No schooling:	Professional training
Primary school or lower	Associates degree
Some high school	College degree
High school graduate (GED or diploma)	Advanced degree
Some college or community college	Comments:

What is your total Income?	
What is your household income?	

Comments:

What gender do you identify as?

Male:
Female:
Other:
Prefer not to say:

Survey (Encuesta)

Esta información demográfica nos ayudara analizar nuestros datos

¿Qué tan seguido trabaja en Big Sky?

Temporal: ¿Qué tan frecuentemente?
Tiempo completo:
Contratista:

Estacional: ¿Si responde "si", durante cuales estaciones?
--

¿Cuál es su empleo?

¿Tiene más de un trabajo?	
Si No	

¿Cuántos trabajos?
¿Qué tipo(s) de
empleo?

¿Como recibe su sueldo?

Dinero en efectivo o "Bajo la mesa":	Comentarios :
Por Hora:	
Salario:	
Contratista Independiente:	

¿Cuánto es su ingreso total?	
¿Cuánto es el ingreso de su hogar?	

Comentarios:

¿Cuántas personas viven en su casa/hogar?

Niños:	
Adultos:	

Comentarios:

¿Cuántas de esas personas trabajan?	
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¿Qué es su idioma nativo?	
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¿Cuál es el máximo nivel de estudios completado?

Nada de escuela:	Entrenamiento profesional
Escuela primaria o menos:	Título de Asociado
Un poco de escuela secundaria	Título Universitario
Graduación de escuela secundaria (GED o diploma)	Título Avanzado
Un poco de colegio o colegio comunitario	Comentarios:

¿Con que genero se identifica?

Masculino:
Femenino:
Otro:
Prefiero no decir:

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

BK

Beiswanger, Kelly

To: Otto, Elise
Cc: Haggerty, Julia



Tue 6/15/2021 5:07 PM

Dear Elise,

Thank you for your application. This email acknowledges receipt of the request for IRB **Review** and serves as the Approval Letter for your research. Your new **IRB Exempt Protocol # is EO061521-EX**.

As the PI, it is your responsibility to facilitate subject understanding by informing subjects of all aspects of the project, providing an opportunity to ask questions, and describing risks and benefits of participation. Submit any new changes to the research protocol to the IRB via [Amendment Form](#) prior to implementing.

The research described in your submission is exempt from the requirement of additional **review** by the **Institutional Review Board** in accordance with 45 CFR 690.104(d). The specific paragraph which applies to your research is:

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

(ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB **review** to make the determination required by § 690.111(a)(7).

Thank you,
Kelly Beiswanger

IRB Administrator & Program Manager
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406-994-4706
<https://www.montana.edu/orc/irb>

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