

The Gnostic Tourist: Gambling, Fly-Fishing, and the Seduction of the Middle Class

Wayne Fife
Memorial University

ABSTRACT: Borrowing techniques from creative non-fiction, this article explores the parallels between gambling and fly-fishing in late modern capitalism. It introduces the concept of gnostic tourism and argues that some forms of contemporary leisure create moments of singularity in which the actor comes to feel as though he or she has penetrated to the heart of a deep secret. This, in turn, creates an affective state that fuels serial consumption. Implications are explored in relation to the potential for a more critical form of political consciousness.

KEYWORDS: gambling, fly-fishing, gnostic tourism, play, serial consumption

An Approach to Understanding Serial Consumption

In his classic book *Learning to Labor*, Paul Willis taught us about how a specific set of young males in England convinced themselves to accept similar roles as their fathers' within working class life in the context of an industrial economy of the early 1970s. A partial penetration of class structures, coupled with their desire to fight back against the social and bureaucratic conformity of formal schooling, helped create a situation in which "the lads" came to celebrate manual labour and the workshop culture that surrounded it over the white-collar life that formal education supposedly offered to them (Willis 1977). The lure of the steady pay-packet available at young ages, the value system of a shop-floor that resonated with their family socialization, and the pleasures of steady girlfriends and soon-to-be-wives allowed these young males to seduce themselves into lives that would eventually play out as the noisy desperation of the subordinate classes in a de-industrializing England.

In 1989, David Harvey argued that contemporary postmodern cultural formations are characterized by the ongoing contraction of both time and space in order to service capitalism's drive for continuous expansion through flexible accumulation. If so, it follows that the most highly valued forms of contemporary leisure might be those that offer to disrupt the flow of time and re-inflate a sense of space. In this article, I want to offer the suggestion that two seemingly opposite forms of contemporary leisure (fly-fishing in wilderness areas and gambling in Las Vegas casinos) actually helps to foster a very similar structure of feeling (Williams 1977). I will be arguing that those I refer to as gnostic tourists talk themselves into spending large sums of money in order to pursue an emotional state that allows them to create an affective moment that overrides the space-time compression of the contemporary economy and makes them feel as though they have

apprehended an inner truth about either capitalism or a natural environment that is assumed to exist outside of capitalism. Both gambling and fly-fishing offer participants a kind of supersaturated sensual experience (gambling in high tech and ‘cutting edge’ cultural worlds such as Las Vegas and fly-fishing in a romanticized version of the ‘natural world’). Seemingly opposites, they actually converge in the late capitalist economy as practices that allow self-selected consumers to seek out deeply sensual experiences. But they offer more than this. Each, in my opinion, gives the participant something extra. Each offers a chance to catch a glimpse of whatever it is that most fascinates that person about the present world they inhabit as human beings. In the case of fly-fishing (and many other kinds of sport fishing, hunting, and eco-tourism, e.g. Dunk 1991:112), the person involved often feels that she or he is gaining a glimpse into the ebb and flow of “the natural world.” Fed-up with contemporary social formations, the fly-fisher does not fish so much as pursue the opportunity to know nature in a way that seems to be unmediated by the institutions that dominate his or her daily life. Equally fed-up with daily routines in the capitalist world they inhabit, gamblers fly to casinos in Las Vegas in order to *feel* the ebb and flow of money in a direct and sustained fashion. In other words, both casino gamblers and fly-fishers in late capitalist economies have a gnostic desire to understand what we essentialize as ‘nature’ or ‘the economy’ as a form of direct, sensual and individualized experiences.

Inspired by the work of Marx, Dean MacCannell pointed out as far back as 1976 that contemporary alienation lay at the heart of the push toward a new ‘leisure class.’ “For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles” (MacCannell 1976:3). I am suggesting that, in 2015, large numbers of people have come to the realization that insight is just as likely to be found through tourism ‘at home’ and have begun an extensive exploration of our own cultural formations in order to better understand their place in the (capitalist) world. In particular, ‘authenticity’ can now be found in play rather than necessarily in the work of others,

as per MacCannell’s original suggestion. The foundation of this ‘search,’ of course, lies in the fundamental alienation that workers (members of the proletariat) experience through their assigned roles in production processes, including the concomitant ‘relations of production’ that they are pressured to assume as an adjunct of their wage economy lives (e.g. Marx 2011). Though Marx’s concept of alienation is multi-layered and complex (e.g. Meszaros 2005), it is enough to note here its importance for understanding larger issues such as the relation between alienated labour and Marx’s central theory of value (e.g. Ollman 2003:83).

Paul Willis undertook his study in a strongly industrialized urban centre that at the time still offered its working class inhabitants significantly better than minimum wage jobs in the manufacturing sectors. In contemporary North America and Western Europe, the late capitalist or service-based economy has taken on a new importance in the decades since this study was conducted. Many manufacturing jobs have shifted to less wealthy (and therefore lower wage) countries such as China, India, and Mexico. At the same time, in countries like the United States, Canada, Britain, France, and Germany permanent underclasses have been left largely to shift for themselves, while increasing numbers of wage-economy jobs have become located within the service economy. In an industrially dominated Fordist economy (Gramsci 1971; Harvey 1989, Allison 2006), the emphasis was on a relatively stable (i.e. geographically, and to some extent, socially) labor force that consumed its own products (e.g. televisions and trucks). Antonio Gramsci used Fordism as a term of reference for the industrial method of mass production, or production by assembly line, focusing on the United States (Gramsci 1988:275). This form of production calls for a morality that celebrates an almost puritanical and very disciplined worker, one who will make ‘rational’ decisions about what to consume as well as being the ‘kind of person’ who always shows up for work on time in order to keep the assembly lines running (Gramsci 1988:290-91). The labourer’s ‘high wages’ should not be used for excessive alcohol consumption or other indulgences that might impede him or her as a machine-like worker and she or he is

encouraged to maintain a strict self-discipline. These values were created not just because of Fordism but also through the business philosophy of Taylorism (Taylor 1911). As Lisa Rofel tells us, “Taylorism in the West treated the body as if it were a machine, so that movement would become rapid and automatic without involving any thought” (Rofel 1997:165).

In the post-Fordist or service-oriented economy that has emerged in an unprecedented period of ‘free trade,’ however, flexible accumulation becomes the new model for both production and consumption, as well as other aspects of human behaviour. Production shifts to whatever location offers corporations the best compromise between cost and quality, and consumers themselves become consumed by the idea of the next best thing (Allison 2006: 97). This shift is closely related to the proliferation of mass media and the advertising industry, which encourages individuals to abandon their enlightenment-led beliefs in “the sovereign subject” and begin seeing themselves as an unstable collection of signs, most of which may be purchased or sold (e.g. MacLaren 1991:147). As David Harvey (2001:121) suggests, these trends tend to lead capitalism to “a restless search for new product lines, new technologies, new lifestyles, new ways to move around, new places to colonize – an infinite variety of stratagems that reflect a boundless human ingenuity for coming up with new ways to make a profit.” A very high level of personal consumption becomes necessary if capitalism is going to create market increases in the super-industrialized nations in order to sell the huge range of new products produced by multinational companies through the cheaper work forces located elsewhere (e.g. in India, China, and other countries in Southeast Asia and Latin America). Zygmunt Bauman notes that this reversal of moral pressures now denies the desirability of a delay of satisfaction and celebrates a kind of consumerist syndrome in which any economic procrastination is a vice rather than a virtue (Bauman 2005:83).

It might be said that the late capitalist economy is a middle class economy, in that it turns an unprecedented percentage of the population into believing that they are a new kind of professional. It is important to note that I am using the term

‘middle class’ throughout this paper to refer to a kind of vernacular middle-class – a ‘class’ position that is embraced principally through self-definition (by large numbers of North Americans, for example). This self-definition is primarily expressed through consumption patterns and holds even in the face of the historically increasing economic gap between the truly wealthy and the rest of the population. In a sense, I am referring to people who do not understand their own class positions in Marxist terms (e.g. as an outcome of a relation to a mode of production; Marx 1992) but who have a more Weberian sense of social stratification (e.g. Weber 1968). In particular, they accept the notion that social ‘status’ is an important part of defining stratification (or what for Marx would be class) position (e.g. Weber 2005:155-157; Bendix 1962:85-87; Parkin 1982:90-108). As Reinhard Bendix (1962:86; italics in original) puts it: “In content, status honor is normally expressed by the fact that a specific *style of life* can be expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle.” In the contemporary period, I am suggesting that status is largely confirmed through consumption, and consumption is justified by a sense of entitlement as a member of the ‘professional’ middle class. In the present time, the terms ‘profession’ and ‘professional’ have undergone unprecedented extension. This can be confirmed by speaking with those who occupy various jobs that would have, in the past, relegated a person to ‘non-professional’ status. Nurses, school teachers, mechanics, hair stylists, plumbers, and many others occupying similar occupational positions now typically see themselves as “professionals” in some fundamental sense. As such, they demand the kinds of wages that they believe professionals should receive and, most importantly, expect to consume within the late capitalist economy in a similar if sometimes lesser manner than “other professionals” – even if it means going into substantial debt in order to do so. I am suggesting here that large numbers of people who live in countries that are becoming dominated by service-oriented economies expect to live in a similar way to the older bourgeoisie and their allies; that is, they expect to fully participate in the consumption of what used to be called luxury goods or services (such as diamond rings or foreign

vacations). Zygmunt Bauman (2005:81) suggests that in this situation it becomes vital to turn individual dissatisfaction into a permanent state; former 'must have' products very quickly become denigrated as old fashioned or 'so yesterday.' An even better way to stimulate this form of economy is to create products and services that constantly give birth to "new needs/desires/wants." "What starts as a need must end up as a compulsion or addiction" (Bauman 2005:81). Both gambling and fly-fishing are capable of producing not only many new needs/desires/wants, but also plenty of compulsions and addictions. This is addiction in both the strong sense (as a compulsion that *must* be met or at least dealt with), but also in the weaker sense (as something that we convince ourselves we voluntarily want to do, over and over; becoming serial consumers of a single type of product, service, or experience).

As any walk and talk through a Las Vegas casino will remind us, the 'leisure class' today (i.e. those who are willing to pay for relatively expensive leisure activities) can include hair-dressers, car mechanics, plumbers, or carpenters almost as easily as it encompasses lawyers, dentists, and university professors. Other than the true underclasses in geographical areas such as North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan (e.g. the unemployed, people working for minimum or near-minimum wages, those relying on social welfare or employment insurance incomes or old age pensions), almost any more than a minimally waged person living in these places is likely to indulge in the consumer society and use credit in order to buy a boat for bass fishing, a motorcycle for weekend cruising, or just decide to take the family out for a Sunday brunch at a restaurant. The difference lies in the level of indulgence. In Las Vegas, for example, hair dressers and plumbers are more likely to book their rooms in the older Fremont Street hotels, while middle-managers, school teachers, and non-corporate lawyers are more likely to stay in hotels right on the Las Vegas Strip such as Mandalay Bay, or Paris Las Vegas – or perhaps even the Bellagio or Venetian hotels on the nights when they have room sales. Members of the true bourgeoisie might in turn be found in the Four Seasons or at Wynn Las Vegas. However, any of these

visitors can and often do pay from \$98.50 to \$155 (US) for seats to watch the Cirque du Soleil show called O (for Ocean) at the Bellagio Hotel; and any of them might be found watching the free dancing fountain show that occurs every fifteen minutes in front of that same hotel and then afterward wander into the Bellagio's casino for a little gambling. These potentially shared experiences are part of the luxury economy that we have created for ourselves in North America, Western Europe, parts of Asia, the Middle East, and the Pacific. This is a consumer economy that, in many other areas of the world, only the truly wealthy can expect to experience.

Before proceeding further, I would like to take a moment to reflect on what this article has to offer to the reader. This work has been written as an experimental form of literary ethnography (e.g. Sharman 2007; Tsao 2011). Since there have been a great many "experimental" and perhaps even more "literary" forms of ethnography written since the call went out for a greater variety of exposition in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), I would like to further clarify what I mean by this statement. More specifically, I see this work as being within the tradition of creative nonfiction, in which the author tracks back and forth between vivid and even visceral scenes and narrative summaries (Narayan 2007:138).

Creative nonfiction has emerged in the last few years as the province of factual prose that is also literary – infused with the stylistic devices, tropes and rhetorical flourishes of the best fiction and the most lyrical of narrative poetry. It is fact-based writing that remains compelling...that has at its heart an interest in enduring human values: foremost a fidelity to accuracy, to truthfulness. [Forche and Gerard 2001:1]

Unlike Narayan (2007:138), however, I do not see narrative as automatically opposing argumentation, but rather prefer to develop an argument through narration. I agree with Sharman (2007:119) that we should not shy away from either the aesthetics of ethnography or from the emotions of the senses. I also parallel Paul Stoller (2007:188) in thinking that imagination is indispensable to ethnography and, again, with Sharman (2007:128) in believing that a

more aesthetic anthropology is also a more personally and politically engaged anthropology.

A more literary form of writing need not imply that the critical side of intellectual activity is being left behind (for good examples, see Benjamin 1968, Jameson 1992, Williams 1977). Using elements of montage (e.g. Benjamin 1999; Mickel 2013; Taussig 1987) or the technique of *in medias res* (launching into a description in the middle of the action, without our usual anthropological contextualization leading up to the description beforehand) (Mickel 2013:182) need not imply that the work is somehow less scientific or valid. This article, for example, is not just about telling stories; it is about the serious issue of hyper-consumption in our contemporary world. As a form of science, all inductive assertions presented in this paper are written in such a way as to be fully challengeable or even testable by other ethnographers or even by our more statistically oriented colleagues. That shouldn't have to mean that everything has to be written in the form of staid hypotheses, or show up in our work as relentlessly rational argumentation of the 1, 2, 3 variety. I would also suggest that not only first-hand descriptions can be fruitfully subjected to more literary techniques, so can the words of other people (i.e. quotations). Juxtapositions rather than the usual transitions are relevant in this regard and can serve as a corollary to the cinematic technique of jump cuts (offering the reader two or more slightly different angles onto what seems to be the same subject and thereby offering a meditation on the notion of seamless continuity in relation to that subject, e.g. see Marcus 1990). Montage need not imply radical differences in imagery and small things can often lead to conclusions with broader implications.

[I'm] attempt[ing] to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representation of reality, its scraps, as it were. [Walter Benjamin quoted by Hannah Arendt 1968:11]

[Montage involves] the ability to capture the infinite, sudden, or subterranean connections of dissimilars, as the major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology. [Stanley Mitchell quoted by Michael Taussig quoted by Allison Mickel 2013:178]

This, then, is not a more traditional work of “thick description” (Geertz 1973) or a standard piece of empirical ethnography. However, I reject the notion that this automatically makes it a work of thin description. I prefer to see it as an ethnography of width, in which what at first seems to be about relatively narrow or even trivial actions and events can be teased out in such a way as to point to much larger social processes (for other examples of this, see Fife 2004b, 2006, 2014). The goal is not to present a fully formed and detailed analysis of either fly-fishing or gambling (e.g. in the valuable way that Washabaugh and Washabaugh 2000 did for fly-fishing, or Schull 2012 for machine gambling in Las Vegas). Rather, its purpose is to use observation and evidence gathered during the course of shorter periods of field research in order to couple that with a detailed reading of secondary literature in a comparative framework as part of an attempt to generate new ideas regarding underlying processes of over-consumption in the contemporary service-oriented economy. In more specific terms, I have been undertaking periods of field research on a yearly basis since 2000 on the issue of tourism in the island of Newfoundland (e.g. Fife 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2010). In the course of that ethnographic work, fly-fishing became one important sub-set of activities that I needed to investigate (e.g. Fife 2010, 2014, in press) and I draw upon that research here. Observation and informal conversations rather than systematic research (e.g. Fife 2005) informs this paper in relation to gambling (in Las Vegas and elsewhere). Three visits (totaling roughly 20 days) to Las Vegas, half a dozen several day visits to a casino in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and two single visits to a casino in Hull, Québec, have convinced me that such seemingly disparate activities as fly-fishing and casino gambling have something very much in common in the contemporary social milieu of North America and that this “something” is worthy of consideration. It is therefore on the basis of informal observations in casinos in Las Vegas (and elsewhere) and over a decade of on and off field research involving fly-fishing on the island of Newfoundland, numerous conversations with both fly-fishers and gamblers, extensive reading of the literature involving both topics, and the auto-ethnographic analysis

(e.g. Chang 2009; Reed-Danahay 1997)) of my own experiences engaging in both activities, that I offer the anthropologically informed speculations in this paper.

At Play

Play, including types of play such as gambling and fly-fishing, can be thought of as forms of enchantment. As such, the moments in which play occurs are moments of vulnerability – easily broken or shattered. As Johan Huizinga (1950:21) elaborated for us over seventy-five years ago: “The play mood is *labile* in its very nature. At any moment ‘ordinary life’ may reassert its rights either by an impact from without, which interrupts the game, or by an offense against the rules, or else from within, by a collapse of the play spirit, a sobering, a disenchantment.” What, then, stops myself or others from standing up from the slot machine, excusing ourselves from the next deal at the blackjack table, or pausing in mid-throw on the craps table and saying: “What am I doing – this could cost me a lot of money. And, for what?” Alternatively, what keeps mosquitoes, black flies, sunburn or bad weather from driving us away from the trout streams? What hinders the sobering moment from developing along the hundred plus kilometer highway journey to a favorite fishing spot, when we might pause long enough to think: “Wait a minute, why am I risking my marriage or at least my domestic harmony, blowing off the book that I really should be writing for my professional betterment, and spending thousands of dollars to catch a little fish that I’m going to put back anyway?” What is it that we seek in these moments that allows us to remain enchanted, at least enough to keep coming back for more?

The Seduction

Gambling:

It is three or perhaps four in the morning, I’ve lost track after being at the slot machines steadily for five or six hours. Two machines over, hell (or perhaps heaven) breaks loose. A sleepy-eyed woman is startled awake and bursts into a sing-song voice: “I’ve won, I’ve won.” She repeats this many times, getting louder with each phrase, until it becomes a kind of mantra. Even the machine seems to be excited, emitting an array of shrieks and moans that

sound as if they will continue forever, never leaving us in silence again. A bright light circles a clock-like device, as if something important has occurred and the many sounds being produced are not yet enough to draw proper attention to it. “I think it’s over a thousand; I’m pretty sure it’s over a thousand,” she says. A man who appears to be in his fifties runs over and gives the woman a hug, then quickly returns two rows over to his own play. A husband? Lover? Friend? It is hard to tell by her reaction, which is friendly and knowing, but not quite intimate. Perhaps she doesn’t want to fully share the moment with anyone else. “Yes, it is; it’s well over a thousand.” She lets out a whoop that makes the bedraggled group of us scattered around the same row of machines smile. Restless, I get up to find another machine. Passing her, I make sure to lean in and say “Congratulations, that’s great.” She beams up at me and inadvertently parodies Elvis Presley’s famous tag line: “Ah, thank ya, thank ya very much-ah.” I laugh, and she thinks I’m laughing in happiness for her rather than because I’m getting a bit loopy after the free drinks and the non-stop gambling and the accidental parody. And perhaps I am genuinely happy for her. I’m not quite sure at this stage of the night, or morning, or whatever it is outside of the world of dimmed lights and soft voices – as if we have been speaking to lovers rather than to slot machines. And each of us thinks: perhaps something will happen again, soon, and maybe to me.

Fly-Fishing:

I’m standing knee deep in a very cold river, just outside of Gros Morne National Park. There is a keen edge to the wind, as there so often is in Newfoundland, but the sun plays peek-a-boo behind the clouds and it’s not unpleasantly cold in my thigh-high wading boots and the old anorak that I use for fishing. There are salmon in the river – I caught glimpses of them through binoculars when I scanned the water from a roadside bridge. The river is flowing at some speed, so I move very little from my initial spot. A splashing sound occurs to my left, and I turn just in time to catch the tail end of a good-sized Atlantic Salmon disappearing back into the water. Damn, I should have had my fly in the river by now. I tie on a Blue Charm, the favourite salmon fly for this part of Newfoundland, and begin casting toward a place I saw from the bridge, where several Salmon are resting

slightly away from the current. After a number of casts there are more splashes, to my right this time. I move back up onto the riverbank and make my way upstream; slide back down into the water, and try my luck again. This scene begins to repeat itself, moving up or down stream as I become tired of my useless casts in one location or another. I chase the splashes – seldom a good idea, but the action always seems to be someplace just a little out of the reach of my admittedly amateurish casting and I can't bring myself to resist the temptation. Besides, the water is chilly and I welcome the brief interludes of time spent back upon the land. At the same moment, I also resent leaving the water, having just gotten used to the insistent pressure on my legs and the feeling of being part of the flow that only comes after the passage of time. It is as if each moment I re-enter the river I have to begin again, looking for that sweet spot of calm familiarity. After a few hours, I get a sharp tug, but when I jerk my rod to set the hook, there is nothing at the end of the line but my own adrenaline. It is enough to keep me going. A Belted Kingfisher chatters his way back and forth across the river as he moves from tree to tree. Perhaps he is scolding me for being in his river. At one point, I'm casting repeatedly when splashes begin in several directions at once. The fish are everywhere, jumping simultaneously as if someone has given them a signal. Are they mocking me? I don't seem to notice that I cease casting, simply standing in the river watching the Salmon leap, twist, turn and flop back into the water – again and again. It seems to last for a very long time, but cannot be more than seconds, gradually diminishing in intensity, before they finally go quiet. Eventually, I notice that what sun there is outside is closing down for the day and I leave the water for good. It has been one of the best days of fishing that I can remember.

Sensual Worlds Within Social Worlds

Fly-fishing often takes place in rural, even remote locations – far from our everyday lives (for an exegesis of fly-fishing, from the perspective of those who have spent an inordinate amount of their lives pursuing it, see: Geirach 1988, 2003; Leeson 1994; McGuane 1999; Richards 2001; Douglass 2002; Tapply 2004; Wickstrom 2004; Reid 2005). Alongside of the banks of rivers, at the edge of ponds, and at the estuary mouth we fly-fish for salmon and trout. Whether

sitting in a small drift boat and sliding down a river system, using our waders to carefully walk out up to our waist in the stream, or crawling on our knees through tall grass so that the trout will not see our presentation of the fly, we are part of what we think of as the natural world. Water brushes against us as it slides by; soil stains our pant legs as we kneel or crawl; trees provide cooling shelter for us (as well as for the fish) from the strong sun; overcast and even rainy days leave us wet and chilled but often produce the best fishing. As we pursue what many fly-fishers (e.g. Eisenkramer and Attas 2012) think of as an art-form or a spiritual discipline (e.g. Fife in press), we feel the breeze on our face and the sharp sting of the mosquito; hear the throaty roar of a spring or fall warbler; see the startled leap of a nearby deer as it becomes aware of our presence; or feel a thrill of fear as we stumble upon a bear who has staked out the salmon stream before our arrival. There is a feeling that almost anything can happen, because we are no longer in the world of concrete and steel that make up most of our everyday lives. We assume that what will happen will be good, but know (though probably do not really know) that it could also be bad. We might fall on the slippery rocks and drown while trying to wade to a likely looking pool in the middle of the river; tumble out of a boat as we reach with the net for a large rainbow trout; wander around lost in the woods trying to find our way back to the car or discover that we are unable to re-scale the steep, almost cliff-like sides of the valley that we unthinkingly scrambled down in our waders when we were in a hurry to reach the river. Mostly though, these possibilities produce *frisson* rather than fear and enhance our fly-fishing experiences. It is what makes water crashing over rocks seem louder, birdsong sound brighter, and the well-known bumper sticker “the worst day of fishing beats the best day of working” seem like real wisdom. For many, fly-fishing is the essence of a wilderness experience; one of the few true ways to feel a part of what they see as a natural as opposed to a social world.

In contrast, gambling in Las Vegas casinos would appear to be everything fly-fishing opposes. Las Vegas is a city of cities and even of countries – utilizing a semiotic sleight of hand in order to saturate our

senses by appearing to be every city condensed into one (for an exegesis of gambling in Las Vegas, from a number of different perspectives, see: McCracken 1997; Martinez 1999; Earley 2000; Schwartz 2003; Green 2005; Stratton 2005; Zaremba 2009; Schull 2012). A visitor may stay at the Paris, New York-New York, Venetian, Bellagio (representing Italy's Lake Como area), Monte Carlo, Luxor (Egypt), Riviera, or many other "real" or imaginary (e.g. Mandalay Bay; Excalibur; Circus-Circus) locations represented by hotel complexes. If fly-fishing represents nature, Vegas is concrete, glass, and neon lights. Being in a casino at one of the larger hotels is being in a 24-hour, seven-day a week, 365 days a year cultural event. The loud calls from craps tables mingle with the whirls, clunks, bells and whistles of slot machines. Multiple screens play basketball, football, hockey, horse racing, and other major sporting events simultaneously for the benefit of the sport-book; the sounds of half-heard singers or other acts spill out from adjacent barrooms onto the casino floor; and the soft talk and barking laughter of card players can be heard coming from the poker area. If fly-fishing offers sights, sounds, and feelings at a leisurely pace, gambling in a Las Vegas hotel offers a cacophony of competing sensations – a sometimes joyful and sometimes sad excess of experience.

Las Vegas! The name conjures a collection of images: To people around the world, it means fun, excitement, bright lights, entertainment, escape... or, more concretely, mega-sized hotels – the ten largest in the world – and casinos, measured in acres; luxurious showrooms; theme parks; monorails; marquees as large as office buildings, lit with the names of the biggest stars; shopping centers; specialty stores; and nearly every type of restaurant imaginable. [McCracken 1997:ix]

It is as if there is an attempt to condense the excess of the city of Las Vegas into the over 100,000 square feet of casino space offered in any of the single larger hotel complexes. No clocks remind players about the time; floating waitresses in hotel-themed costumes offer free drinks; smokers light up anywhere and everywhere they wish, and – above all – there is the non-stop action. In the casino, as in Las Vegas more generally, the human senses are not

so much seduced as assaulted. A riot of colours, flashing lights, gambling noises, and free drinks play upon us as we in turn play the games. We lose ourselves and become the dice, the cards, or the slot handle in our quest to be cyborg gamblers; i.e. gamblers who strive to fully incorporate "the action" into our bodies (on cyborgs, see Haraway 1989, 1990, 2000; Gray 2002). To gamble in Las Vegas is, above all, to participate wholeheartedly in the service-oriented form of capitalism.

Las Vegas is the first city of the new century, the one that owes its allegiance to the shape of the new universe, to the signs and symbols of a culture of entertainment. (Hal Rothman 2003:31).

Although both gambling and fly-fishing are long-standing practices in many parts of the world (e.g. Schwartz 2006, Washabaugh and Washabaugh 2000) each has achieved a changing emphasis in the entertainment-led economy of 21st century super-consumption. Turn on the television set, and if you have cable or satellite service chances are that you will come across poker tournaments being broadcast on almost any given evening on half a dozen different stations. Fishing (like golf) has its own cable channel: the World Fishing Network (WFN). Fishing shows are a staple form of programming for several other networks that specialize in outdoor or sport pursuits. Sport fishing, like poker and other forms of gambling, also has its tournaments. In particular, bass (spinning-tackle) and trout (fly-fishing) contests are popular among both viewers and participants. Go to a well-stocked bookstore, and dozens of glossy poker and fishing magazines can be found in the magazine racks. Each helps to sell both the idea of poker (and gambling more generally) and sport fishing as not just hobbies but as ways of life. Thousands of books on each topic do the same thing (e.g. a visit on April 15, 2015 to the internet site of book seller Amazon netted 11,368 titles about sport fishing – 4,451 about fly-fishing alone – and 14,497 titles for gambling). Gambling and fly-fishing (along with other forms of sport-fishing) are not just something that a small number of people do on the odd occasion, but rather ubiquitous forms of serial consumption for the masses in the entertainment economy.

Gnostic Moments: In Search of Illumination

In general terms, Gnosticism can be thought of as referring to the desire to obtain assumed-to-be-secret knowledge about a key aspect of life. In early Christianity, Gnostics were a very loosely organized sub-set of Christians who generally believed that our world was created by a lesser divine being. This secret knowledge helped explain why life on earth often appeared to be a kind of living hell. The true God could only be found in the spiritual realm, and enlightenment could only be discovered through gaining a Gnostic understanding of the human predicament (e.g. Churton 2005; Filoramo 1990; Jonas 2001; King 2003; Meyer 2005; Pagels 1979).

In their Secret Book (Apocryphon) of John, written sometime in the second century A.D., we hear of how the Demiurge... took counsel with the archons and created the seven planets— hence the false god's claim to “have none before him.” (The zodiac provided the image for the grim fetters that held humans in ignorance, or agnosis: that is, without gnosis”). [Churton 2005:23-24]

It has been connected with Buddhism, nihilism, and modern movements such as progressivism, positivism, Hegelianism and Marxism. Gnosticism was pivotal to Carl Jung's reflection on the collective unconscious and archetypes. Gnostic themes have been detected in the novels of Herman Melville, Lawrence Durrell, and Walter Percy, among others. The literary critic Harold Bloom even contrived a new Gnostic novel, *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*. [King 2003:5]

A gnostic tourist, therefore, is someone who is searching for a true experience; one that rises above everyday life and offers insight into an important aspect of the world “as it really is.”

Gnostic: One seeking or using secret knowledge in order to achieve salvation. (Valantasis 2006:149).

Achieving a gnostic consciousness is often understood to involve a lot of time and effort on the part of individuals. Becoming the ultimate poker player, expert sport handicapper, or consummate fly-fisher

is not something that occurs overnight. Invariably, as in all forms of gnosticism, those who consider themselves to be moving toward true insiderhood also assume that most other people are likely to be either unable or unwilling to work hard enough to achieve the same insights as themselves.

I was in a fly shop once when a guy walked up to me and asked how long it took to get really good at this [fly-fishing]. ...I said, ‘Ten years, if you fish three or four times a week.’ His face fell. He was thinking a couple of weeks, tops. The face of the clerk who was signing him up for a few courses fell a little, too (Gierach 2003:70).

Fly fishing, as I have come to know it, is not really a form of fishing at all. It is an art, and its practitioners must be prepared to spend years accumulating a fine sort of knowledge, the sort that I, as a poet in another room of my life, squeeze from memory like the gush of leaves in spring (Reid 2005: 35-36).

Even while spending large amounts of time fly-fishing, the assumption remains that only the few will truly come to understand its essence.

The guy running the store was loading them up with the most expensive gear he had to offer, and they weren't flinching. I knew what would happen to all that gear, and the salesman probably did too. These two middle-aged guys' idea of fishing up to this moment was cruising a reservoir, flipping lures out of an overpowered, sparkle-painted bass boat. They would never put in the time to learn fly-fishing, and being too vain to fish badly in public, they'd soon ditch their fancy new gear in a closet. [Soos 2006:17]

How do insiders know who they are? They know through moments of deep insight, flashes of penetration into the heart of things.

The events of my life and brook trout often meet at the line of demarcation between the world of the fish and the world of the fisherman, between the seen and the unseen. This division will be the surface of a stream, which I imagine, from the fish's point of view, as a silvery horizon, but which I see as a green sheet. Still, the moment of illumination has often come here, with a trout taking a fly out of

the boundary between its world and mine. [Nova 1999:3]

You spend a lot of your time in the fisherman's trance, which is a comfortable enough place to be. Fishing is one of the few ways I know of to let go of the past, forget about the future, and live in the moment. And living in the moment is the only way I know of to accurately understand life without getting pissed off. [Geirach 2003:44]

Separation, alienation, letting go, and illumination combine to create a gnostic moment over and over again for many fly-fishers. These moments, I would contend, are most likely to happen during the kind of sensual saturation that blue skies, running water, intense concentration, and valley stream or mountain pond bring together during fly-fishing. To cease to be alienated from our own "true nature" as just another species in the wilderness is to achieve the gnostic moment through fly-fishing. It is a powerful cultural aphrodisiac and it brings many humans back time and again to chase similar experiences through serial consumption.

Gnostic moments are also likely to happen in the sensual saturation of Las Vegas casinos. In this case, enlightenment comes when one truly becomes part of the action.

Action expresses, in a word, the whole gambling experience. It means playing with chance, taking a challenge, the excitement of living in top gear. In gambling, this is the pay-off. In our routine urban lives, most of us are cogs in the wheel of work, taxes, social and family obligations. Gambling offers a fast way out. [Spanier 2001: 51].

The action is everything, more consuming than sex, more immediate than politics; more important always than the acquisition of money, which is never, for the gambler, the true point of the exercise. [Joan Didion, quoted in Spanier 2001:46]

Witness my words earlier in this paper when I described the woman who had just won over a thousand dollars at a slot machine. She was experiencing a moment of pure action and her joy in the moment was obvious for anyone to see on her face. Nor is win-

ning necessary to achieve this state. The trance-like state that Geirach speaks of above for fly-fishing can also commonly be experienced while throwing dice at the craps table, watching the roulette wheel spin, or when one has achieved a rhythm at the blackjack table.

Just as many fly-fishers commonly say that what they do is not really about catching fish, gamblers often say that the point of gambling is not about money. This does not mean that neither fish nor money count; each offers a way to keep track of what you are doing. In gambling, money is how you *know* that you are gambling. In a contemporary casino in Las Vegas, the flow of money reminds you that you are part of the constantly speeded up movement of currency that defines late capitalism. It is the tail by which you can grasp the beast of contemporary capitalism and turn it into a moment of illumination. Just as the moment of illumination in fly-fishing allows one to feel as though she or he is moving past the cobwebs of our socialized lives and finally grasping the natural world in its assumed-to-be naked glory. Each of these activities entails what I refer to as a moment of singularity. The gambling experience that I am speaking about involves the non-addicted (cf. Schull 2012), casual gambler or sporadic gambler, such as the tourist who comes to Vegas two or three times a year. For these people, the buzzing, light-filled, super-stimulated environment of Vegas remains an important part of what makes them want to take up temporary residence in the gambling world. I would argue that the gnostic tourist is in fact coming to Vegas because they are drawn to locations that seem to both *exemplify and overcome* the contraction of time and space that Harvey suggests is characteristic of postmodern capitalism. The flow of money can be felt by gamblers in Las Vegas. It can be felt as the craps player prepares to throw the dice, the poker player waits for the card in the air to land, or the machine gambler touches the button to set everything in motion.

When I'm gambling, I am having the best time of my life and I am having the absolute worst time too. I'm talking about those nanoseconds when you are waiting for that card to fall or the white

ball to drop into the red or the black or the dice to stop rolling. It can be absolutely terrifying and absolutely beautiful. ... You are terrified and you are also totally alive. ... People will tell you that they gamble to win, but I don't believe them. It's those brief seconds before you know the outcome that really turns you on. [Assistant Manager in a Last Vegas Casino, quoted in Earley 2000:478]

These are concentration points that serve as an experiential metonym for the speeded up/squashed down rush of capital through an economy that is defined as much by financial and information flows as by industrial production. In that moment, all other stimuli are crowded out of consciousness and only the flying dice, the falling card, or the touch of the button truly count. Soon afterward the sights, sounds, smells and other stimuli of the typical Vegas casino flood back into the gambler's consciousness. But for that brief second of being in front of a slot machine, the poker table, or the craps table, one is able to feel as if she or he has penetrated into the essence of capitalism and momentarily held at bay the ordinary fragmentations of the daily contemporary world.

Gnostic tourists who pursue fly-fishing seem to be attempting to get as far away from these sorts of service-oriented commodity forms as possible. Yet, they too seek an inner truth. In this case, they seem to be looking for the heart of Nature – defined as more or less everything that a concrete-mediated, urbane, bright lights/big city experience is not. This search is helped by becoming saturated within the sights, sounds, smells, feelings, and even taste of unfamiliar (in the sense of non-everyday) brushes with waterways, winds, skies, insects, fish, and other non-human elements. Singularity comes with a great cast, placed just right, falling softly on the water in front of where you believe a prime fish to be lurking. This is the moment of tense expectation, when everything else recedes in anticipation of a strike and your senses become concentrated solely upon the tension of the fly line.

A cast of my bamboo rod has directed me to this place, this moment, this fish. And I find that it is not in the having but the using of this rod that I

have found a way to live with my wanting. Catching this grayling has let me see again the beauty in the world. ... I will move on up the river, casting under the cut banks, into the eddies, and behind the sweepers. To be out on the river is enough. [Soos 2006:21]

This singularity explodes into a rapid motion upward upon the first feel of a hooked fish, when the insects begin to buzz again, the water recovers its sound, and the air regains its cooling feel. This encounter, too, is mediated by expensive outlays: thousand-plus dollar fly rods and reels, cabins and river guides, four wheel drive vehicles and drift boats. It is this mediation that allows one to search for the state that makes one feel as though both time and space have disappeared through the endless now of fishing, ordinary limitations giving way to feelings of being nowhere and everywhere – both in the moment and with all the time in the world.

Implications

Whatever else culture once was or is, it is now always about inequality: transforming it, localizing it, creating it, trapping people within it, making it necessary to oppose or evade it – all this simultaneously and sequentially, all this and much more. [Sider 2014:215]

As was true for “the lads” in England as described at the beginning of this article, these moments of illumination are only partially penetrating. There is no essence of nature that exists outside of contemporary social and cultural influences (e.g. Williams 1977); outside of contemporary capital. It is equally true that a momentary feeling of standing inside the monetary flow that ‘stands behind’ late capitalism does not necessarily imply a critical understanding of that type of economy. These are really moments in which human beings realize their gnostic desires to *know* the dominant social force of their lives (capitalism) and the underlying reality that this economic force seems to leave out (nature). These are experiences that capture and realize these desires within whole if fleeting moments *and* present them to ourselves not as if they were about our desires for understanding

but rather as if they were moments of connection with the essence of nature and the essence of the economy. To know the economy in this fashion, especially a service and financial oriented economy that is said to be knowledge-based, gives one a moment of great satisfaction. In such an economy, to be *in the know* is to achieve the promised key to success and happiness. In this sense, fly-fishing can be seen as an attempt to know the outside of capitalism; gambling to know the inside of it. Rather than attempting to ‘visualize power’ (Wolf 1999) or to understand their economic/social life through words and/or imagery (e.g. Toscano and Kinkle 2015), as intellectuals are inclined to do, I am suggesting that large numbers of people prefer to seek an understanding of their socio-economic situation by chasing a ‘feeling.’ These feelings are grasped through metaphor, as money stands for capitalism and chasing wild fish stands for all that is not capitalism. It is this affective state that ultimately fuels serial consumption and the growth of niche capitalism. It also very much speaks to Marx’s understanding that “the extension of products and needs falls into contriving and ever calculating subservience to inhuman, refined, unnatural and imaginary appetites” (Marx 2011:115-116).

Both of the above forms of knowledge/feeling are ultimately an illusion, as was the economic and social penetration of “the lads” of Paul Willis, because both achieve these affective states only by leaving out large amounts of relevant information and therefore actually play into the uncritical growth of contemporary capitalism and its concomitant environmental losses. The illusion is created through sensory saturation, which allows individuals to feel as if they are deeply embedded in the action (economic or natural) – a position that very much *seems* like knowing things that other people do not know. In each case, it is the feeling that one could almost reach out and touch the flow of money (gambling) or the flow of natural life (fly fishing) that creates the illusion of being in at the beginning of what makes a capitalist urban civilization or what makes nature “real.” Such a feeling is deeply seductive and it allows us to forget that both gambling and fly-fishing (and related activities such as other sport fishing, hunting, and eco-tourism) are big business. In pursuing these moments we are not

just hoping for a glimpse into the reality of economic activities or the natural world, we are also feeding the beast of capitalism without a critical regard for who or what gets hurt by this particular form of economic relations.

There is nothing inevitable about this situation. Our desires to fully know could become desires to fully critique and transform contemporary capitalistic practices. Many fly-fishers (and others involved in sport-fishing, hunting, and eco-tourism) use their moments of illumination as inspiration for becoming “environmentalists” (e.g. Dunk 1991:112). Unfortunately, this usually means little more than calling for the “protection” of certain rural spaces (so that they can continue to enjoy their fishing, hunting, bird-watching, and so forth in them; secure in the illusion that “wilderness” is still out there somewhere; often creating boundaries at the expense of rural populations; e.g. Fife 2010) or specific species such as salmon. It does not normally involve looking closely at contemporary capitalist practices in countries such as Canada or the United States (as well as globally) and creating both new laws and new social norms that would in any way threaten to curtail the consumptive orgy of cars, monster houses, massive energy use, and food wastage that fuels the environmental problems that make the idea of wilderness so necessary and attractive in the first place. I know fly-fishers who consider themselves to be radical environmentalists in relation to fish conservation, but who see no contradiction in their families owning and driving three cars, living in huge energy-wasting houses, taking a dozen trips a year in jet fueled airplanes, and above all insisting that their children are entitled to live the same high consumption life-styles as they take their places as adult citizens. But we do not necessarily have to settle for the limits of neo-liberal environmentalism. The illumination that fly-fishing and similar endeavours provide could just as easily feed a more practical and critical reflection of current economic and social practices. The moment of illumination could also become the moment of critique (of capitalist ecology, of capitalist excess, of capitalist inequalities).

On the surface, it is more difficult to see how casino (or other) gambling could lead to more

encompassing critiques of contemporary economic and social forms. However, I'm reminded here of something I noticed in the casinos of Las Vegas. It is common to come across players in wheelchairs, small motorized three wheelers, or using canes or even walkers on the casino floor. The physically challenged seemed to me (though I have no statistics to confirm this) to make up a much larger percentage of the population in a casino on any given night than would be true of a similar number of people in a non-gambling venue. I wondered, if this were true, why it might be so. Insight came to me on this issue when I was reading books that explained what every regular gambler knows – the house (e.g. the casino owner) always has a percentage advantage in every game of chance. What this means is that the law of statistics will, over time, ensure that anyone who gambles long enough, whether at such relatively low house advantage games as blackjack or high house advantage machine gambling, will eventually lose all of their money to the house (e.g. Schull 2012). We know this and yet we do it anyway. Why? One explanation is that, as stated above, non-addicted people gamble not really for the money or even to win, but for the action. Another take on this, and one that implicates the special knowledge available to physically challenged individuals, is that we *know* that we can only win for a short time but that we desperately want to experience those periods of winning as an affirmation that it is possible to win at all. Who knows this better than a physically challenged person? Life itself is a losing proposition. There is no way to beat physical deterioration (and, finally, death), whether it comes earlier or later in life. Just as in gambling, there is no way to beat the house over time. As an anthropologist acquaintance of mine who lives with a degenerative nerve disease that has long placed him in a wheelchair said to me in a phrase that rang for me in its simple truth: “We call you guys TABS: The Temporarily Able Bodied.” We *are* all going to be in the same physically deteriorating circumstances, sooner or later. We are all TABS and we will all lose over time to the house percentage. But, for a brief moment, we can experience being able to run, jump, fish or gamble – depending on the bodies that we have right now. In gambling, we might also

experience the moment of beating the house; holding off the odds for just a little longer, and therefore feeling like we know, really *know*, what our life in the overwhelmingly complex social economy of late capitalism is supposed to be about. This tends to lead us to seduce ourselves into seeking more and more gambling experiences and therefore continuing to feed capitalism as if nothing has changed. However, revelatory moments could also lead at least some people to reconsider the excesses of Las Vegas in relation to the excesses of late capitalism. Along with feeling the action, all gamblers experience being winners and losers in very graphic and immediate ways. There is no reason to assume that this could not prompt some gamblers to critically reflect on why we agree to wholeheartedly participate in any system in which the house advantage is rigged to create so many happy losers.

Similarly, it is difficult to ignore the growing signs of pollution in many of the locations where fly-fishers go to practice their sly craft. Too often we find bits and pieces of plastic on the lake shore or floating on the river current. It is not unusual to slip on bottom garbage while wading, or to watch a chemically induced foam roll into the shore. The beer and pop cans along the river-banks are near ubiquitous, even in locations that initially seemed difficult for the fisher to access. Fishers have of course also added to this pollution. It is common, for example, to pull in what seems to be a satisfying weight on the line only to find a tangle of someone else's broken off line, lure, and even lead weight hopelessly entangled with your own fly line. Fly-fishers are often keen observers and note when a place they are long familiar with changes in terms of water flow or volume, or when the fish stocks clearly become degraded because of other activities in the area, such as oil production, or mining, or other industrial activities upriver or in the ground water catchment area (see Fife 2010). Again, it is quite possible to imagine fly-fishers becoming increasingly radicalized in terms of environmental degradation, as they are so often in a position to have first hand experiences with that degradation and its effects on their own favorite fishing areas. As in gambling, revelatory moments have at least the potential to lead to a more critical form of consciousness.

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