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Introduction

SETTING OFF INTO THE WILDERNESS

The sun was setting on the majestic Teton Range, its long shadow sweeping across the wilderness, slowly darkening the view as I steered my car up a secluded gravel road toward a large home nestled at the base of these craggy and picturesque mountains.

I arrived at the property and pulled through a big stone gate that led down a long driveway. Unsure of where to park, I crept forward and was eventually greeted by valet employees who welcomed me, took my car, and pointed me toward the main entrance. As I walked across the expansive property, I passed the open doors of a four-car garage attached to the residence. The first door held a Chevy Tahoe SUV with muddy mountain bikes strapped on the back; the next had a vintage convertible peeking out from underneath a blue tarp; the third was bustling with ten well-dressed workers cooking food and preparing drinks; and the last contained a collection of kayaks, winter ski gear, and old cowboy boots.

Walking through the house's front door, I was welcomed by Erika Raddler, the executive director of the environmental organization sponsoring tonight's event here at the home of Julie and Craig Williams.

“Welcome!” said Erika, handing me a name tag and a pamphlet describing this “grassroots meeting of local environmental advocates.” She continued, “Feel free to make your way to the back deck, where there are drinks and hors d’oeuvres.”

The name tag read “Justin—Yale Professor.” While my job title had surely gotten me in the door at this exclusive event, it wouldn’t allow me to play my preferred role of fly-on-the-wall while conducting my research. Slipping the name tag into my pocket, I headed toward the back deck.

As I left the entryway, I was struck by a photo of an impoverished Navajo girl prominently displayed on a four-foot-high marble base. Looking despondent, her face covered in dirt, she carried a burlap sack over her left shoulder. I walked past the display toward an enormous, colorful Navajo rug and stepped down into a grand living room. Its towering vaulted ceilings and multistory glass windows looked out onto Grand Teton peak, behind which the sun was dropping, the mountain’s shadow now covering the entire valley 7,200 feet below. The enormity of this room easily accommodated a full-size bronze statue of a stoic-looking Lakota man, flanked by a mural of Western wilderness dotted with roaming cowboys, and three 8-by-8-foot acrylic paintings depicting a moose, a grizzly bear, and an elk, respectively. I made my way across the room and into a long glass hallway, through a cavernous white kitchen, and finally out onto the back deck.

Of the roughly thirty-five people in attendance, most were neighboring homeowners interested in learning more about environmental issues in the region and how they might be able to contribute to the cause. To that end, Erika gave a short presentation about various threats facing the area and offered ways to get involved. After her talk, I mingled with the crowd to get a sense of who they were and the nature of their environmental concern. As it turned out, the casual Western dress of many in attendance—Wrangler jeans and cowboy boots—belied the fact that these were people of elite social status and immense wealth.

And there was no shortage of local environmental concern among those in attendance. I chatted with a prominent tech CEO from San

Francisco who described his distress over the level of dissolved oxygen in the stream behind his house. I stood in the yard with a globally known political leader, making small talk about how this local community has changed in recent years. I sat on the deck stairs with the founder of a multi-billion-dollar oil and gas company and learned of his work as chair of the board for a wildlife art organization. I conversed with the heiress of a multi-million-dollar foundation in Texas about her efforts to slow housing and tourism development in this community. I ended the night over a craft beer with an affable hedge fund millionaire from Boston, who lamented the declining moose population in the national forest adjacent to his Wyoming property.

On the surface, these were friendly and informal conversations about water, animals, trees, and other natural things—but a closer look revealed much more.

These folks are members of what used to be a tiny class of ultra-wealthy millionaires and billionaires. But in recent years, this class has soared to unprecedented levels, in terms of both its size and the amount of wealth it commands.¹ In just one year between 2016 and 2017, there was a 13 percent increase in the ultra-wealthy population (255,810 people) and a 16 percent surge in combined wealth (\$31.5 trillion), with no signs of slowing. And while the United States is home to the largest ultra-wealthy population (90,440), these staggering increases are a global phenomenon.

But surprisingly, nowhere is this global storyline seen more clearly, or perhaps with greater local impact, than in a little, overlooked corner of rural America. Teton County, Wyoming, is well known for its pristine and awe-inspiring natural landscapes. Boasting one of the largest intact ecosystems in the world, it is a crown jewel of the West and cradles both Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks. What most people don't know is that the grandeur of its wilderness is matched by the awe-inspiring concentration of wealth and a canyon-size gap between the rich and poor there: It is

both the richest county in the United States² and the county with the nation's highest level of income inequality.³

This center of extreme wealth and wealth disparity creates a powder keg of intertwined problems, affecting both those who hold the wealth and those who don't, as well as the ecosystem that encircles the community.

Billionaire Wilderness offers an unprecedented look inside the world of the ultra-wealthy, focused on their increasingly significant relationship to the natural world. More specifically, *it shows how the ultra-wealthy use nature to resolve key predicaments in their lives*. Along the way, it reveals the surprising ways in which nature and wealth intersect in America, and the swelling impact of these relationships on the nation's social and environmental landscapes.

The first set of problems the rich seek to resolve are rooted in *economic concerns*: how best to enjoy, share, protect, and multiply the wealth they've acquired. The second set of problems are more *social in character*: how to wrestle with and respond to the social stigmas and personal guilt sometimes associated with great wealth. Nature comes to play a unique role in their struggles to deal with these ongoing financial, political, moral, and existential dilemmas.

Thus, investigating the ultra-wealthy requires a wide-ranging look into a number of compelling puzzles about money, nature, and the meaning of authentic community in the twenty-first century: Why did their lives turn out the way they did? Does great wealth actually make life more difficult? Why do they love and emulate the rural working poor? Why do they love Wrangler jeans? How do they define "community"? Are they aware of the fast-growing gap between the ultra-rich and everyone else? Do they feel criticized or have trouble sleeping at night? How do money and materialism contrast with the "innocence" and "purity" of nature? How do they conceptualize environmental problems, and by extension, philanthropy? How do they relate all of these issues to racial and ethnic inequality? And, moving beyond what they might *say*, how do their views actually influence their *behaviors*?

In writing this book, I set out on a journey to answer questions like these, moving beyond common presumptions about the rich

toward a more open-minded and evidence-based account that allows the reader to see life from the perspective of the ultra-wealthy themselves. *Billionaire Wilderness* is not a sloppy finger-pointing exposé of greed and hypocrisy that some readers might assume exists (or hope to find). But nor is it an effort to defend or coddle my research subjects.⁴ Rather, my goal is to gather facts that allow us to better understand a rarely studied and little known but highly influential group.

Along the way, *Billionaire Wilderness* will introduce this world and the growing number of people who inhabit it. We will engage its social nature from the inside out, and from bottom to top, revealing findings that have important implications—not only for improving our understanding of wealth but also for improving our understanding of how we should envision the future of our communities and the ecosystems that sustain them.

One reason we know very little about the ultra-wealthy is that this powerful social group is extremely difficult to access for close study. So our contemporary understanding of the topic remains empirically shallow.⁵ Studies rely almost exclusively on reports of national economic trends that, while vital, are sterile and can distance us from the real-life experiences of actual people and local communities. Or we rely on popular stereotypes of the rich that oversimplify their lives, mask complexity, and discourage the empathy and objectivity researchers need to understand any social group from the inside. This current shallow understanding is especially disconcerting given the immense economic, cultural, and political power of the ultra-wealthy and their growing interest in and impact on environmental issues.

The final reason these problems are seldom studied is because rural places are too often written off as irrelevant, or just interesting bucolic sideshows. It is easy enough to view Teton County, with its spectacular natural scenery and its equally spectacular levels of wealth, as atypical, or as a relic of rich-and-famous consumer

culture: amusing, but certainly not to be taken seriously by scholars studying places more representative of “real” wealth disparity that we have come to expect.

This view is shortsighted. The increased concentration of wealth is not only an urban phenomenon, but it also deeply and directly affects tens of millions of Americans living in rural areas. Overlooking this reality denies the struggles of the rural working poor and ignores an entire range of other effects on rural gentrification, environmental health, public lands, and massive socioeconomic change in rural communities. Teton County and thousands of other rural places are part of a larger story of wealth concentration and inequality in the United States that has been unfolding over the past four decades. Far from a rural oddity, we have much to learn about this national story by turning to how it plays out at the local level. Perhaps nowhere else on the planet are these issues seen in sharper relief than in Teton County, which is an ideal real-life social laboratory for research into these puzzles because of its nation-leading wealth and inequality, as well as its location in what is arguably the epicenter of American environmentalism.⁶

Developing this story required collecting a massive amount of data, based on five years in the community conducting in-person observation and in-depth interviews with 205 different people.⁷ Interviews lasted between one and two hours, ranging from “ordinary” millionaires to billionaires. Counted among this group are some of the most powerful and well-known figures in business and politics.

I also collected a great deal of original quantitative data that provide unique insight into the shape and activity of ultra-wealthy social network interactions over two decades of time (based on more than 100,000 social connections), including information on philanthropic giving, board membership, environmental conservation, real estate development, and demographic and socioeconomic change, as well as compiling large amounts of digitized text for computational machine learning. These quantitative data informed the interviews and observations, as I fully immersed myself in the world of the ultra-rich, spending time at their exclusive clubs, homes, environmental

meetings, ski resorts, charitable events, art exhibits, recreation areas, houses of worship, watering holes, restaurants, and other haunts.

Through my research, I found that nature takes on unique power for the ultra-wealthy, allowing them to confront the urgent *economic* and *social* problems they face—such as how best to enjoy, share, or multiply their money, and how best to respond to social stigmas and feelings of inauthenticity or guilt. They resolve these dilemmas in two corresponding ways, each of which has a sizable impact on themselves, the environment, and the wider community.

First, whatever their good intentions, those at the very top of the socioeconomic pyramid leverage nature to climb even higher. Ironically, environmental conservation becomes an engine for multiplying wealth and gaining social prestige for wealthy people and wealthy institutions. And seeking to enjoy their wealth, landscapes and wildlife are transformed into ultra-exclusive enclaves, where money ensures private access to the healing tonic of nature and a sanctuary from crass materialism. Importantly, all of this is entwined with—and often under the guise of—genuine concern for ecological science and environmental health, an unselfish commitment to environmental philanthropy, and an uncritical devotion to nature as an affluent storehouse of spiritual and therapeutic wellness.

Second, burdened by social stigmas, status anxiety, and feelings of inauthenticity or guilt, the ultra-wealthy use nature and rural people as a vehicle for personal transformation, creating versions of themselves they view as more authentic, virtuous, and community minded. They model their personal transformation on a popular idea of the working poor in rural, outdoors-oriented places in the West—people who, despite their low-status careers and lack of material comforts, seem free from the snares of wealth and power, and are thought to live a noble life of contentment, frontier authenticity, pastoral simplicity, community cohesion, wilderness adventure, and kinship with nature. Wealthy folks' outward performance of this social conversion includes friendships with moneyless people,

sacred experiences enjoyed in untouched nature, professed environmental concern, appropriation of frontier art and style of dress, and love of bygone small-town character. By living in such rural and nature-oriented communities, they are literally buying into the idea and experience of a primordial America that offers salvation from the careerist rat-race and the moral temptations of high society where life is simpler, and the honest rural values of the dusty cowboy, noble native, and nature-loving bohemian prevail.

These two uses of nature and romanticized rural people allow the ultra-wealthy to effectively manage the economic and social dilemmas they face, often behind the *semblance* of good-faith commitments to the community, philanthropy, and environmental concern. Yet for many observers, these local commitments reek of hypocrisy when viewed in light of how some ultra-wealthy made their fortunes, often involving financial and industrial practices that have greatly contributed to global socioecological ruin.

This does not mean that all rich people are hell-bent on ruthless domination or live their lives in bad faith. Like most of us, they want to do good but don't always live up to it, and even the most disparaged fossil fuel CEOs or scorned hedge fund managers don't fully grasp the extent to which their lives benefit from larger social, economic, and ecological systems. These systems ultimately matter much more than sloppy or inaccurate stereotypes that cast individual rich folks as either greedy monsters or philanthropic saviors. Yet, while I avoid these stereotypes—and certainly give the ultra-wealthy a fair shake—their use of nature and rural people leads to what seems to be some unjust and regrettable outcomes.

In the end, love for nature and rural people can create a thick veneer that helps to morally justify vast natural resource consumption, romanticize the ugly reality of rural hardship as an idyllic choice—iconically modeled in the past by rugged cowboys and noble natives and lived out today by lovable white ski-bums and “van-life” bohemians—rather than the actual face of modern rural poverty as an overworked immigrant family living on razor-thin margins, deliberately conceal outward indicators of socioeconomic and racial and ethnic inequities, gain rewards for trivial acts of individual charity

and selective environmentalism that hide patterns of structural harm, alleviate personal guilt, and ultimately disguise and foreclose the need for economic and political action to address pressing local and global problems.

Paired Experiences of the Rich and Poor

Once my research into the ultra-wealthy was completed, I recognized another important piece to this puzzle: It wasn't sufficient to study the "haves" created by decades of extreme wealth accumulation. This era had also created "have-nots." Who are they and what can we learn about the ultra-wealthy from their firsthand experience? The working poor of Teton County are often in close contact with or employed directly and indirectly by the ultra-wealthy. Most are Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico. Some are U.S. citizens and others are undocumented. Sometimes their relationships with the wealthy can be intimate, such as playing the role of home caretaker or providing childcare.

I talked at length with the ultra-wealthy about their views of what life might be like at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. But to complete the story, I wanted to know how those at the bottom view themselves in relation to such immense wealth, and to the ever-increasing dilemmas in the community revolving around race and ethnicity, immigration, affordable housing, and environmental protection.⁸

So, with a team of researchers from a community-based nonprofit in the area, we conducted fifty in-depth, in-person interviews with this mostly poverty-level population. In some cases, I was able to pair low-income interviewees with the ultra-wealthy persons for whom they worked. I was then able to interpret many of the *same* stories, events, experiences, and behaviors in relation to each other, and to explore questions such as: What do they say about one another? Do they think the rich deserve all the wealth they've accumulated? What do they make of ultra-wealthy's love of nature, their environmental philanthropy, or their attraction to rural culture as a means to transform themselves into "normal" authentic people?

Collecting these “paired experiences,” as I call them, is a novel methodological advance that, to my knowledge, has not yet been done in recent social research.⁹ It provides unique analytical insight—from the very top, the very bottom, and the direct connection between them—into the themes and questions earlier concerning the cultural logic of wealth, the character of communal bonds between the rarefied top and the bottom social strata, how money affects one’s relationship to the natural environment, and political action within a community that is so top-heavy with wealth. As Plato wrote in Book Four of *The Republic*, “For indeed any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another.” These are age-old concerns, and in a place like Teton County that is the modern prototype of Plato’s idea of a city “divided into two,” it is critical to consider both sides of the linked divide.

Let’s return to the party at the Williamses again. One person at the event is ultra-wealthy, and the other is near poverty level. They interact quite frequently. One considers the other a friend. They epitomize the two main storylines in a grand narrative that has unfolded in this area, and around the country, over the last thirty years. In some ways, these two people could not be any more different, but they depend on each other to live their version of a good life.

JULIE WILLIAMS

Julie Williams sees herself as no different from anybody else. Reflecting on her life, she tells me “money hasn’t really changed her.” In my time spent with Julie and her husband, Craig—who had been fortunate enough to make more than a hundred million dollars during the 1990s and 2000s—it became clear that immense wealth hasn’t made their lives any simpler. Julie admits that money “is certainly nice to have,” but reminds me that “it doesn’t remove the stresses that are common to any other American, and having great financial

means can actually make life harder sometimes.” She describes the disquiet running through her life, whether it’s worrying that her kids are overburdened with activities or that Craig is working himself to death. Craig acknowledges that he invests a lot of time into his work, but absolves himself a bit, telling me that the meteoric rise of his hedge fund over these past twenty-five years would not have happened without his putting in long hours.

Lately, both Julie and Craig have been more involved serving on boards of directors for a handful of prominent corporations and nonprofit organizations. I can tell that they are proud to share a place on these boards alongside so many distinguished business and political personalities.

But all of this, too, can be quite stressful, says Julie. One solution to this stress, she explains, was building their grand home here amid the Tetons, and hosting conservation events like this one where her neighbors can organize for a good cause. Even though they decided to buy this \$14 million property on a whim, in response to a “crisis moment,” she says that looking back, it was “just what the doctor ordered.” It pulled the family from their routines at their primary home in Fairfield County, Connecticut, and provided experiences that were, in her words, more “authentic” and “natural.”

Joyfully, she tells me, “All our kids go out there in the summer. We would go out for a month at a time or sometimes more, and all of them fly-fished. They all ski, they all rock climb, mountain climb, so we just love it. It just feels like our souls are happy. That’s kind of how we ended up there and we love it. We absolutely love it.” Her neighbors share a similar sentiment, explains Julie. “They care about nature and love the peace and the beauty. I’m never happier than when I’m out in the middle of Grand Teton National Park, and I’m there all the time. It’s my backyard. I just love that place.”

Given their substantial wealth and professional financial acumen, I wondered if their part-time move from Connecticut to Wyoming might also have been influenced by Wyoming’s lack of an income tax. Wyoming consistently ranks number one on *Bloomberg Wealth Manager Magazine*’s rankings of “America’s wealth-friendliest states,” and Sotheby’s real estate and local elite clubs aggressively advertise

this fact.¹⁰ For example, all things being equal, a household making \$10 million annual income could potentially save around \$700,000 *every year* just by relocating at least part-time from Connecticut to Wyoming. When asked, Julie admits that much lower taxes are a “nice perk,” but expressed with a genuine tone that the real reason they came is to be closer to nature and experience authentic rural community.

In addition to providing respite from the pressure-cooker of the finance industry and the kids’ busyness, Julie has developed an identity as an environmentalist, becoming politically active in local conservation groups. She laughs as she tells me this, and her kids roll their eyes, saying, “Oh my God she just went on a rant about the environment . . . she picks recycling out of the trash!” Julie responds, chuckling, “Well, why did you put it in there in the first place!?” Continuing, she explains “Anyway, it’s so funny, but I love Wyoming for that, because the people here are very green. They’re very careful about the environment. People care. It’s a community that really cares. I find also that the people who are drawn to that area are the same kind of people like us, people who care about the environment.”

Julie is also aware that Teton County has America’s highest per capita income, as well as the nation’s most extreme income inequality. She reflects a bit, saying, “I don’t know if you did any research on wealth here. But I think it was *Forbes* who came out with the two wealthiest counties in America, and at the time it was Teton County and Fairfield County. And my husband Craig goes, ‘What is wrong with this picture? We live in both places.’ [laughs embarrassedly].”

But in her experience, immense wealth inequality does not mean that the community is fractured, or that there is resentment among those way down at the bottom. She continues, “There’s a lot of wealth here in Teton County, but the people are very under the radar. It’s not showy . . . you wouldn’t even know it was wealthy, because money is not important, people don’t give a hoot.” In fact, Julie describes the community in quite positive terms, as one where people are as laid back as the Western casual dress they sport. In her view, as long as people’s basic needs are met and the environment

is protected, members of the community just don't seem to "give a hoot" or get too worked up about who has immense wealth and who doesn't.

As evidence, Julie explains that she "has many friends who are not as financially fortunate . . . ones who struggle to make ends meet," citing as examples her caretaker, ski instructor, and the manager of their favorite local restaurant. When I asked if she feels guilty when she sees these people she calls friends, she says that money doesn't really come up. Certainly, everybody is generally aware of the financial gulf that separates the haves and have-nots. But as Julie describes this world—where people wear jeans, enjoy nature, and are simply too laid back to be resentful—feeling guilty just doesn't make too much sense to her: "By far, the best thing about the area are the laid-back people. I mean our friends are everything from ski-bums to people who are very successful with immense wealth, and you would never know it because we're all just in our jeans and flannel shirts. It's very casual, and money just doesn't matter to people like it does other places. I like to say that there is a 'no asshole' policy in the community."

HECTOR PADILLA

Hector Padilla is an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who arrived in Teton County about ten years ago with his wife Dolorita and their two children. At Julie's conservation event that opened this chapter, Hector was working in one of the four garages attached to the house, mostly cooking hors d'oeuvres and serving drinks. He typically works twelve hours each day, six days a week, laying brick for a construction company that specializes in elaborate homes, and then, to help make ends meet, he picks up a few more hours at night doing catering jobs for folks like Julie. Dolorita also works for Julie and a few other well-to-do families, cleaning and doing domestic odds and ends around their homes, as well as helping out with childcare. Between the two of them, they just barely cover rent for the small trailer they share with two other families, where they all take turns sleeping on the bed, couch, or floor.

During the course of our interview with Hector, he explains that he and Dolorita took a risk and made the long journey from Mexico to Teton County because they knew it was a safer place to raise their children, and because they had heard jobs were aplenty. Looking back, he knows it was the right decision—they love the area and the natural beauty, but with the skyrocketing cost of living, life is getting to be more difficult. Dolorita explains that people are crammed in tough living conditions, sometimes ten people to a trailer. Nevertheless, she and Hector continue to work hard, juggling multiple jobs to make it all work.

The previous month, the Padillas were unexpectedly and immediately evicted from their trailer to clear the way for a new upscale development called “Nature’s Escape.”¹¹ Despite pleading with the developers for more time, they were forced out in two weeks. Unable to find affordable housing in town, they were pushed forty-five minutes away into Idaho, on the other side of the treacherous Teton Pass, where a good majority of the working poor now live. Each day, both Hector and Dolorita make the dangerous and sometimes even deadly drive to work and back, up and over the steep 8,431-foot mountain pass. Living on razor-thin margins, Hector says he doesn’t have time to bemoan setbacks that seem to be more frequent—instead, he mostly keeps his head down and focuses on his work and his family. He expresses gratitude to people like Julie who provide him with a second job.

Hector and Dolorita’s daily lives are radically shaped by ultra-wealth. They live amid it every day, journeying in and out of ultra-wealthy life through their work at upscale homes, restaurants, construction sites, and social events. As we will see in part 4 of this book, perceptions of ultra-wealth and ultra-wealthy people can vary greatly among the low-income community. Even though from Hector’s perspective, his relationship with Julie is a purely economic one—and would not approach the depth of “friendship” that Julie waxes lyrical about—he still speaks highly of her because she has treated him and Dolorita with respect and provides them with much-needed income.

When asked, he says that, sure, Julie mostly deserves her wealth because she and her husband, Craig, have likely worked hard for it.

He also sees Julie as philanthropic and environmentally conscious—noting that she makes sure that all workers recycle any plates and beer cans when holding social gatherings at her property. Altogether, Hector certainly didn't express any initial resentment of ultra-wealthy people that some people might expect or wish to find.

This is beginning to change, however. Lately, Hector and Dolorita have made an effort to attend civic events and meetings led by some advocacy organizations in Teton County, as well as at the local Catholic Church they attend. Like many low-income people, their views of wealth in Teton County are evolving as they connect their recent struggles to the explosion of all the money in the area, and some of the problems that have come in its wake. Hector is beginning to question his positive perception of wealth, philanthropy, and environmentalism—and even the genuineness of community relations between people like him and people like Julie. He wonders aloud whether wealthy people care more about saving a moose or a bear than helping him and other immigrants who are suffering.

Hector's ponderings are becoming a common refrain among the working poor in Teton County, pointing out what they view as the self-serving hypocrisy of affluent philanthropy and environmentalism and questioning the authenticity of their relationships with ultra-wealthy people. Yes, the ultra-wealthy treat them kindly, call them friends, and at times even dress down like them. Yet at the same time, people like Hector are seeing more clearly how these same friends who have so much extra money and power to help nevertheless support the status quo and perpetuate a system that is making it increasingly difficult for Hector and his family to live a decent life.

Shielded from Intrusion: Two Walls Blocking Up-Close Research

Given these two stories, the tendency among social scientists has been to write books about Hector rather than Julie. To research and write about poverty rather than wealth. To shine a light on those at the bottom rather than those at the top. To document cases of extreme inequality rather than extreme social advantage. Over the

years, most social scientists and journalists have done just this, and done it well. Scores of books and articles have shed light on the people and communities plagued by incarceration, employment discrimination, gang violence, health disparities, economic anxiety, environmental harm, eviction, police brutality, rural poverty, and labor abuse, to name just a few problems.

This literature remains integral to understanding the causes and consequences of inequality, and the systemic struggles people face. We need more of it. But the gaping hole still remains: We know relatively little about the flip side of economic hardship—namely, the lives and experiences of those at rarefied heights who sit atop the socioeconomic strata. And while they may not be exposed to inequality and harm at the same rates as others, their involvement in these processes is just as important, given their economic, cultural, and political power. Perhaps by focusing on people like Julie we can learn more about people like Hector.

My study is not the first to examine the top of the American class structure. Moving beyond the Marxian “ruling class” concept, the classic work of Thorstein Veblen and C. Wright Mills on the culture and structure of elite power set the stage for thinkers like E. Digby Baltzell, who first sketched what he called the American “WASP” establishment in Philadelphia and Boston. Within this tradition, sociologist William Domhoff has done more than anyone to teach us about the influence of the upper-middle-class power elite, with his 1967 classic *Who Rules America?*, his 1974 study of Bohemian retreats, and numerous books and articles in the decades since.¹² Also beginning in the 1970s, the now defunct Boston College Center on Wealth and Philanthropy provided important insight into charitable giving among the affluent.¹³ Since the 1980s and 1990s, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has become a theoretical cornerstone for the study of elites. And we have recently witnessed a revival of this area, spanning such topics as the influence of gender,¹⁴ elites in educational settings,¹⁵ religion and politics,¹⁶ styles of speech among the upper class,¹⁷ twenty-first century impacts on democracy,¹⁸ elite status insecurity,¹⁹ life on Wall Street,²⁰ class reproduction among

the French bourgeoisie,²¹ elite upward mobility,²² lifestyle “down-shifting,”²³ and elite networks of political funding,²⁴ among others.

The Columbia University sociologist Shamus Khan, a pioneer in this recent revival of the study of elites, has called for more methodological diversity, especially of the kind employed in this book: interviews, ethnographic observation, social network analysis, and content analysis of administrative data.²⁵ An excellent contemporary example of this approach is Rachel Sherman’s in-depth interviews with fifty affluent New York City parents to understand how they grapple with the stigma of wealth, their desire to be normal people, and internal conflicts about how they ought to spend their money and still remain good people.²⁶ Especially interesting is that the majority of these New York City parents identified as liberal, and thus were less reticent to discuss their wealth openly, given their general knowledge of, and concern for, increasing economic inequality. Similarly, Elisabeth Schimpfössl’s recent book on wealthy Russians unpacks, from the inside, what it’s like to sit atop Russian society, and their justifications for having such great wealth, as well as the civic responsibilities that come with it.²⁷ Hanna Kuusela has taken up a similar line of work among the super-rich in Finland, showing how these Finnish families construct meaning and moral boundaries that help to legitimize their economic position in Nordic welfare society.²⁸ Taken together, the work of Sherman, Schimpfössl, and Kuusela, along with the revival of research on elites more generally, reveals the fascinating diversity of wealthy culture, and highlights just how much more empirical work needs to be done to understand how the culture of wealth can vary by location.

The topics taken up here build on and extend Sherman’s work in particular, by integrating her insightful diagnosis of the “anxieties of affluence” with the paired experiences of fifty low-income people like Hector and Dolorita, and the various perspectives of a more geographically diverse and politically representative sample of ultra-wealthy people who are among the several thousand to have congregated in this corner of the Rocky Mountains in hopes of using the natural environment, philanthropy, and moneyless rural culture

to transform themselves, in search of salvation from the anxieties that Sherman so aptly describes.

Thus, while there is a small but quite robust tradition of interview and participant observation-based work on elites, we still need more—especially in locales beyond those typically studied (for example, Paris, New York). And we need more research not just on elites, but on the elite of the elite who sit at the lofty *pinnacle* of the economic hierarchy. In his recent book on poverty and eviction, Princeton University sociologist Matthew Desmond wonders why there is such a lack of contemporary research on the wealthy, asking social scientists and journalists who study inequality, “Where were the rich people who wielded enormous influence over the lives of low-income families and their communities—who were rich precisely because they did so?”²⁹ I agree. How could we be missing out on such an important part of the story? This research gap is especially troubling given the ultra-wealthy’s immense influence, and puzzling in light of the recent flood of attention to inequality and to wealth concentration in particular.³⁰

This scholarly shortfall did not happen by chance. Part of it has to do with particular discomforts characteristic of left-leaning academic social scientists. Conducting high-quality ethnographic or long-term participant observation research can require a great deal of empathy for one’s subjects. Such research involves more or less taking on the perspective of the people and culture being studied. It means listening to their stories with honesty and, if only for a moment, giving their experiences and their explanations the benefit of the doubt. But most social scientists know the facts about inequality, wealth, and privilege, and thus find the empathy required for ethnographic research in short supply when it comes to the ultra-wealthy. Empathy is more naturally given to the people and communities obviously suffering harm, rather than, say, a Wall Street financier who struggles with the life complexities and social-psychological dilemmas that accompany immense wealth and power.

In her recent immersive study of the Tea Party, renowned Berkeley sociologist Arlie Hochschild describes these mental barriers as “empathy walls,” “obstacle[s] to deep understanding of another

person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs. . . . In a period of political tumult, we grasp for quick certainties. We shoehorn new information into ways we already think. We settle for knowing our opposite numbers from the outside.³¹

Within the academic community, which tends to be left-leaning, these empathy walls can limit the people and topics we research. With best intentions of making a difference, qualitative researchers have focused disproportionately on stories that expose systemic inequality from the perspective of those who suffer it.³² Like Hochschild, who chose a more difficult path and set out from her comfortable Berkeley enclave to deeply and charitably understand the Tea Party in rural Louisiana, scholars must scale the empathy wall that is currently limiting our scientific knowledge of ultra-wealthy culture.

Second, and perhaps more importantly in explaining the dearth of in-depth studies is the fact that ultra-wealthy culture has all sorts of ways of shielding itself from intrusion by scholars and journalists.³³ As one might expect, the first hurdle is the barrier to entry, as these people live within a tightly knit, elite social system with multiple layers of security and privacy. Physical barriers (for example, private clubs, box seats, isolated neighborhoods, pricey restaurants) and communicative barriers (for example, unlisted numbers, private personal assistants, layers of phone/e-mail screening) make it very difficult to obtain access to ultra-wealthy people. Then, if access is obtained, cultural barriers (for example, educational prestige, high art, elite forms of recreation) can create an uncomfortable and emotionally taxing power discrepancy between researcher and subjects.

Similarly, people of great wealth and power do not often expose themselves to vulnerability, which entails loss of control and is a complete reversal of their accustomed role. One mechanism protecting ultra-wealthy people from vulnerability is the remarkable level of deference they enjoy in their day-to-day lives, both from people at work (for example, administrative assistants and other staff) and from people they encounter as they go about their normal routines (for example, wait staff, salespeople, caretakers). This position of

social dominance means that they are rarely subject to honest scrutiny, especially outside their workplaces.

Even when pressed, they are well-educated in the ways of public relations and political speak, able to deliver credible canned answers. Further, some researchers, such as Brooke Harrington, have been threatened with legal sanctions by the elites they research.³⁴ At best, this situation makes it tricky to obtain information. And at worst, it can mean never breaking through the shell protecting personal ideas and behaviors relating to wealth, community, politics, and morality.

Taken together, all of these barriers can become insurmountable. They are a major reason why most research on the ultra-wealthy tends to rely on impersonal, macro-level economic data, or mirror popular stereotypes such as John D. Rockefeller Sr., Bernie Madoff, or the fictional Jay Gatsby.

How I Gained Access: Yale Professor and Ignoble Westerner

My dual identity—as an Ivy League professor at an ultra-wealthy and prestigious institution and at the same time a seeming ignoble native Wyomingite—was essential to accessing this exclusive population. Like recognizes like. The status associated with being a Yale professor was very similar to that held by many of the people I sought to interview and observe. While I do not have a hundred million dollars in the bank, my professional identity largely leveled the playing field between my respondents and me. The elite cachet this group attributes to a place like Yale opened the door for my initial access to this exclusive world.

In many more ways, however, I was also an outsider, which proved to be critically important. As a native Wyomingite and first-generation college student, I symbolized and represented in good faith the role of the authentic, anti-aristocratic, rural Westerner that Teton County's elite found so attractive and often romanticized. I intentionally conveyed this identity through our many conversations, but also outwardly because of my clothing, Old West mustache, and penchant for the refined taste of Coors Light.

In addition to possessing the social currency of affiliation with an elite and ultra-wealthy university, I am also a white guy. My light pigmentation and masculine appearance implicitly and explicitly improved the access I was given and how I was treated, especially by some of the more intimidating and pugnacious white guy respondents (and there were many). For example, while my intention—to conduct accurate research—was in honest good-faith, I still expected to raise suspicions in those I studied. But to my surprise, other than one notable instance (described in chapter 2), I experienced very little distrust or questioning in my years of freely wandering through and observing ultra-elite spaces, including highly securitized private clubs, gated neighborhoods, and exclusive restaurants. These spaces are overwhelmingly inhabited by white people, who in the United States make up the large majority of the ultra-wealthy population. Sadly, the same unquestioned trust likely would not have been afforded to a researcher with even a slightly darker shade of skin, which would have made it nearly impossible to get the kind of coveted access needed to probe beneath the surface of ultra-wealthy lives.

But once these doors were opened to me, I found the über-elite culture foreign and often intimidating. My mother cleaned houses, ran an in-home daycare, and was a homemaker, and my father had been a lifelong railroad worker since his teens. I was entirely ignorant, therefore, of elite rituals such as attending exclusive summer camps in Maine, the social currency of graduating from an elite college, and the aristocratic legacy of mainline Protestantism. I had never before read the *New York Times*' wedding announcements, and I am still doing my best to enjoy red wine. As I embarked on this research, I began to think that I lacked the cultural capital needed to survive in this rarefied world.

While my own ignorance surely made things more difficult and uncomfortable for me personally, I began to use it to my advantage, and soon found my outsider status was my greatest asset. I began to notice subtleties that an insider might take for granted, and I became more confident relying on my naïveté to probe people about ideas or behaviors I found peculiar. So, while the privileged identity of Yale

professor provided me unparalleled access, my role as the ignoble Westerner and my class-based ignorance of elite culture let me take on the identity of the “stranger in a strange land,” to ask basic questions. Not only did this make me curiously confident, but it also created a blank slate upon which to form impressions and learn the ways of the culture on the fly, as I attempted to understand and decode it from the inside out.

Charting New Directions for Research: “Community” and Environment

Studying wealth can feel like studying everything at once and nothing at all. Everywhere we look, we see its influence. Yet paradoxically, money means nothing in isolation from culture, politics, and markets. I knew that I needed to ground my examination of ultra-wealth in something concrete and specific—tied to and interpreted within real-life contexts. Thus, I chose to examine the nexus of two of the most critical and far-reaching issues of our modern era: the form and character of “community,” and the natural environment. Just as these two issues cannot be separated from wealth, they also cannot be separated from each other, especially in Teton County, Wyoming, where environmental issues penetrate all aspects of the community.

RETHINKING “COMMUNITY” AND WEALTH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

What makes “community” has been a fundamental question for thousands of years, occupying most ancient philosophers and authors of major religious texts. It has persisted as perhaps *the* classical concern within sociology, playing a central role in the projects of early giants like Tönnies, Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. The early and mid-twentieth century produced several landmark studies about the character of American community, such as Robert and Helen Lynd’s series of field studies on “Middletown” Muncie, Indiana, during the 1920s and 1930s; C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar: The American*

Middle Classes; Riesman et al.'s *The Lonely Crowd*; and Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*. These texts focused mostly on white, middle-class experiences in the era of modernization and postwar capitalism, highlighting the effects of loss of tradition, alienation, and communal disintegration. More recently, "community" has come to the fore through the work of thinkers like Robert Putnam, whose *Bowling Alone* explored the collapse of civic and community involvement; Robert Wuthnow's prolific series of books on the changing nature of community in middle America; Eric Klinenberg, whose *Going Solo* examined the choice of more Americans to live alone; and accomplished journalists like Bill Bishop, whose *The Big Sort* focused on how Americans are clustering themselves into homogenous communities composed of like-minded people.

Despite the importance of recent studies of community, one thing always seems missing: a deep, first-person ethnographic understanding of the wealthy. Without it, we lack a complete picture of community in the twenty-first century. There is a great opportunity here to learn something new, far beneath the usual top-down aggregate of economic statistics, at the intersection of community and wealth.

For example, I asked the ultra-wealthy how they think about and perceive "community" in this new era of income polarity. Perceptions are one thing, and reality is another. So I also studied how these cultural perceptions interacted with economic realities to actually *alter* the form and character of community itself.³⁵ Beyond the obvious fact that wealth concentration alters the economic makeup of a community, my aim was to uncover the ways wealth actually shapes the restructuring of community boundaries (for example, who is in, who is out?), the performance of authenticity (for example, romanticizing and appropriating Western rural struggle and/or closeness to nature), the meaning of social bonds (for example, confusing servants for friends), acts of community obligation (for example, altruism, philanthropy), status markets and community recognition, poverty and conspicuous consumption, and even conceptions of "community" itself.

In other words, in our era of increasing wealth inequality, what does a rural community with extreme wealth disparity actually *look*

like and *feel like* according to those who live there? How does the community perceive of itself in the absence of a middle class? What are social bonds like between the top and the bottom? How does a community talk about, or justify, an extreme wealth gap? What are the perceived responsibilities of community members? Who is the ideal member of the community, and what individual personal qualities are esteemed the most? What are the primary boundaries of inclusion and exclusion?

I found that this approach, and these questions, were best answered by holistically examining an *entire* community—its history, people, culture, economics, and politics. All of this meant that one of the most important decisions I made for my research was selecting an appropriate community to study. Two important criteria went into this decision: First, and most importantly, the case study site needed to be somewhere that typifies the extreme wealth concentration that we have seen nationally. Second, it had to be small enough to allow me to examine the entire community from the ground level, but at the same time, be representative enough to allow me to generalize beyond the local specifics to learn broadly applicable lessons.

Teton County, Wyoming, proved to be an exemplary case study site because, as noted earlier, not only is it the richest county in the United States, and the county with highest levels of income inequality, but it is also a place where these patterns developed rapidly over the last thirty years or so, providing me a unique window into the unfolding of these dynamics over a relatively short period of time. Further, this community exists within the larger social context of Wyoming, a state in which, as a new report from Stanford University³⁶ has documented, 1 percent of the population owns the largest share of the wealth (50 percent). Thus, it is representative of national inequality and at the same time offers the opportunity to examine a distinctly rural locale, the type of place too often ignored in mainstream research.³⁷

Also, the source of wealth concentration in this community mirrors national patterns in that it comes overwhelmingly from financial investments. Thus, this community was an especially suitable site

for research because it exists outside the stereotypical halls of urban financial power (for example, Wall Street), yet it is intimately connected to this financial nerve center, given that many millionaires and some billionaires have relocated to Teton County not only for its rich natural amenities but also for its attractiveness as an income-tax haven. As such, a handful of interviews and observations with certain respondents were conducted in Manhattan and various Wall Street bedroom communities in Connecticut as well as in Teton County.

CARVING NEW AVENUES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH

In the same way that perceptions and realities of “community” provide a unique window into the various cultural boundaries and interactions between the ultra-wealthy and the working poor, the issue of environmental sustainability offers a lens into ultra-wealthy ideas and practices around altruism, philanthropy, financial accumulation, social prestige, rural exoticism, consumerism, escapism, and activism. Rather than engaging in abstract conversations about these topics that could be seen as agitating or threatening in isolation, I was easily able to raise and discuss them within the context of non-threatening, local environmental issues (for example, moose, bears, national parks, and so on), which most respondents were more than happy to discuss, given the primacy of these issues in Teton County.

Importantly, I was often able to examine their *actual behavior* relative to environmental problems, be it through their philanthropic giving, consumer choices, volunteerism, leisure and recreation habits, or local political engagement. Furthermore, I was able to segue from the discussions of nonthreatening environmental issues into the social problems connected to them, such as affordable housing, services industries, fair wages, and immigration.

In doing the interviews and day-to-day observations, I pondered such questions as: Does environmental conservation actually make wealthy people wealthier? Do the ultra-wealthy use “nature” to recapture a lost sense of authenticity? How do people reconcile

their local love of nature with the ecologically destructive ways in which they made (or currently make) their wealth? Does nature offer salvation from the moral minefields of careerism, myopic materialism, and self-absorption? How does nature play into upper-class Americans' longtime love affair with the West? What counts as an environmental "problem," and why are some deemed more important than others? Are the poor and working class viewed as having a more authentic and direct connection to nature? Is it morally permissible to spend large amounts of money (for example, having a second home, hiring a private environmentalist tour guide) if it is for the purpose of enjoying nature? Which philanthropic issues receive the most time and money? Does wealth concentration create new environmental problems? Might the ultra-wealthy's interactions with the natural environment—whether through recreation, philanthropy, or spiritual encounters—serve to canonize and valorize a particular elite experience of nature for the rest of us to emulate?

Throughout, I argue that, despite the immense amount of attention given to environmental issues, we need to more closely examine the ways the affluent relate to and employ the natural world to achieve personal or political goals and resolve dilemmas they face. Certainly, similar dynamics have been revealed through historically important events such as the economically—and "scientifically"—motivated removal of indigenous tribes from their own lands to create the first national parks or, more recently, as documented in the seminal work of David Pellow and Lisa Park, the Aspen, Colorado, City Council's support of racist immigration restrictions as a means of preserving environmental and cultural purity in the region.³⁸ We know that the modern wealth gap presents new challenges and, unfortunately, the role of ultra-wealth is rarely a topic in today's deluge of public and scholarly discussions about the environment.

Granted, academia boasts a truly vast "environmental justice" literature documenting how and why some people (for example, the underserved and/or people of color) tend to suffer environmental risk, discrimination, and harms. This work is hugely important, but I concur with preeminent environmental sociologists Dorceta E. Taylor and David Pellow, who pioneered the study of

environmental privilege through the lens of race, that we are missing critical perspectives by ignoring those on the flip side of suffering.³⁹ Unfortunately, the same barriers to studying the ultra-wealthy also help explain why there continues to be a shortage of ethnographic research related to wealth and the environment.

There is a growing body of macrostructural research on inequality and the environment, including recent work by Andrew Jorgensen, Juliet Schor, Tammy Lewis, Kenneth Gould, Liam Downey, James Boyce, and many, many others. This research reveals the intricate linkages among the high-level institutions, organizations, nation-states, and macroeconomic systems that create environmental inequality from the top down. In this book, I aim to complement this top-down literature by exploring life created by, and existing within, the shadow of these macrostructures. I narrow in on the powerful ultra-wealthy actors who live and work within the seemingly impersonal systems whose huge impact on the environment and society has already been demonstrated. And by narrowing the focus still further using ethnography, social network analysis, and machine learning, I hope to expand the public and scholarly conversation on wealth and the environment in new directions.

Setting Off into the Wilderness

Back at the Williams's house, the event was coming to a close, and I had gathered more than enough field notes for one night. Hector and the other workers were sorting the recycling, removing tablecloths, and transporting the trash to the bear-proof dumpsters on the edge of Julie's property. I worked my way back through the house, into the living room with the bronze statue of the stoic Lakota man flanked by the towering murals of cowboys and wildlife, past the marble base displaying the young impoverished Navajo girl, and joined a short line that had formed in front for the valet car service.

Waiting in line, I thanked Julie and Craig for their generous hospitality, and filled them in about my plans to spend the next few years researching and writing about the area. Excitedly, Julie asked if I'd be interested in having dinner with her and Craig at their newly

completed country club. Selling me on the idea, Craig interjected, “It’d be a great place to meet other people who make up the community.” He continued, “I’m not sure what types of people you want to meet and talk with, but many of them are also involved in the environment.” We agreed that Friday night would work and exchanged phone numbers. Craig shook my hand, Julie gave me a hug, and I took my keys from the valet driver.

Leaving the property, I steered my car down that same gravel road into pitch-black darkness. Looking up into the starry night, I knew that the gigantic Teton Mountains towered seven thousand feet above me, but I could not make them out through the dark. It was a strange, and somewhat disturbing feeling. These massively important entities were right in front of my face, but they remained cloaked from view. Invisibly present, yet still immensely powerful as their tectonic plates kept pushing them upward, continuing to shape everything in their expansive range.

My journey into the heart and soul of the ultra-wealthy became much like this drive through shrouded mountain-peaked wilderness. I possessed the knowledge that something hugely important was out there, but despite strong indicators of its outsized influence, it remained largely unseen. This often happens when we fixate on the darkness itself—in this case, relying on blind stereotypes or impeded by elite barriers to access. But, curious to see what lay out there beyond the darkness, I set out on my ultra-wealth odyssey to shine a little light here in hopes of illuminating something important about everywhere else.

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