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To cite this article: Rex J. Rowley (2018) Voluntary regions and the case of Las Vegas, *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 35:1, 102-132, DOI: [10.1080/08873631.2017.1375371](https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2017.1375371)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2017.1375371>



Published online: 14 Sep 2017.



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Voluntary regions and the case of Las Vegas

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ABSTRACT

A shifting American cultural geography, stemming from clustering of like-minded people, has been much-discussed in recent years. The “voluntary region”, proposed by Wilbur Zelinsky in his path-breaking *The cultural geography of the United States*, is a regional construct relatively unexplored by cultural geographers that may help in their contributions to such conversations. As described by Zelinsky, voluntary regions are places that attract individual, like-minded people away from long-standing “traditional regions” based on a desire for amenity and economic opportunity. I review the concept and its sparse embrace in the literature and suggest that it has much to offer our discipline. Using Las Vegas as a paradigmatic example, I explore methods that can be used to explore the formation and character of voluntary regions. I argue that the voluntary region framework is an encompassing lens through which cultural geographers can examine the complex nature of place and regional construction at the hands of dynamic forces that lead people to resettle in new places.

KEYWORDS Wilbur Zelinsky; regional geography; sense of place; place identity; regional construction; voluntary region

Introduction

Following the 2016 American presidential election, many conversations addressed voting patterns that may have contributed to the final result. Such conversations often centered on the clearly identifiable electoral patterns seen in maps of election returns. They showed islands of blue (for Clinton) scattered throughout the country in urban areas and pockets of African-American, Latino/a, and Native American concentration amidst a sea of red (for Trump) covering the rest of the country. After the election, commentators and pundits noted these voting patterns in their discussions about the growing polarization in the American political system as people increasingly live among like-minded neighbors (Aisch *et al.* 2016, Brownstein and Askar-inam 2016).

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This process is nothing new. In the decades following World War II, driven by economic prosperity and increased education, Americans moved in large numbers to locations throughout the country, restructuring the demographic map in dramatic fashion resulting from a cultural clustering of like-minded people that continues today (Zelinsky 2011). Bill Bishop (2008) has referred to this as “The Big Sort”, describing it as a clustering of Americans – largely by choice and ability to migrate – into areas where they live near and associate with people who think, worship, and vote like themselves. Whereas in years past, political and religious diversity, as well as varying education levels, existed *within* neighborhoods, American mobility has now lead to more pronounced clustering of like-minded people, causing a greater divide – cultural, political, and economical – *between* neighborhoods and regions. As Bishop has argued, “between places across the country ... we are differing more than ever in how we act, think, and vote. But within the places where we live, there is increasing conformity in how we act, think, and vote” (Bishop 2012). Michael Barone has also recognized American “volitional migration” to “culturally congenial surrounds” (2013, p. 10). He noted how the migration of individuals to cities with political and cultural sensibilities “compatible with their lifestyle” (p. 11) has contributed to the sorting of conservative and liberal ideologies into distinct regions of the country. Additionally, Richard Florida has described, in great detail (2002a, 2002b, 2005), how such clustering is affecting American cultural geography. He is most well-known for his work about the “creative class”, a broad collection of artists, educators, engineers, scientists, and bohemians. Florida argued that such groups are contributing to a transformation of the American economy and its urban fabric. The clustering of these individuals, he argued, can serve as an economic engine spurring on growth in their cities.

Cultural geographers have weighed in on conversations and debates surrounding the patterns and implications of such cultural clustering (Peck 2005, Shearmur 2007, Storper and Scott 2009, Johnson *et al.* 2016). More generally, they have had a long-standing interest in fundamental shifts in settlement and migration resulting from American mobility that have significantly altered urban landscapes (Hecht 1978, Mondale 1992, Adams 1995, McHugh 2000, Janelle 2004). Given the growing attention paid to the cultural divide and its geographic implications, cultural geographers still have much to contribute to discussions of the impacts of these ongoing demographic shifts (Zelinsky 2011). In this paper, I call attention to the idea of “voluntary regions”, a conceptual framework long neglected in our field, as a means of better understanding our changing cultural geography.

The notion of “voluntary regions” was proposed by Wilber Zelinsky more than 40 years ago in *The cultural geography of the United States* (1973). This path-breaking book is considered one of the most influential in the subdiscipline (Smith 2003), and remains a treasure trove of ideas for scholarly

research, though many ideas therein have yet to be examined by cultural geographers.¹ In its concluding chapter, Zelinsky proposed voluntary regions as an emerging phenomenon that resulted from changing patterns in American mobility. Zelinsky recognized a consequential shift in regional culture in which individuals with increased mobility move from long-standing traditional regions in the United States to new and uniquely constituted culture areas where transplants come to pursue opportunity among like-minded people (1973, pp. 134–135). However, in the more than four decades since Zelinsky first proposed the idea, voluntary regions have remained relatively unexplored by scholars. I argue that the concept of voluntary regions can help cultural geographers make better sense of the process and patterns accompanying the continuing cultural clustering of Americans. My intent here is to shine new light on this concept by examining it through the case of one representative voluntary region: Las Vegas, Nevada.

Las Vegas is America's youngest big city. It is a place characterized by high growth rates driven by in-migration, a place where most residents are from somewhere else. As a city of just over 10,000 in 1940, around a quarter of a million in 1970, one million by the mid-1990s, and just over two million today, Las Vegas is emblematic of a place that has been built by newcomers (Paher 1971, Rothman 2002, Rowley 2013a; Figure 1). Pull factors for these newcomers are varied. Some come for entertainment or climate amenities the city affords, while others see opportunity in an economy that can support their entrepreneurial, career, or financial goals. But, a common theme in the newcomer experience is that each reason for coming, is in

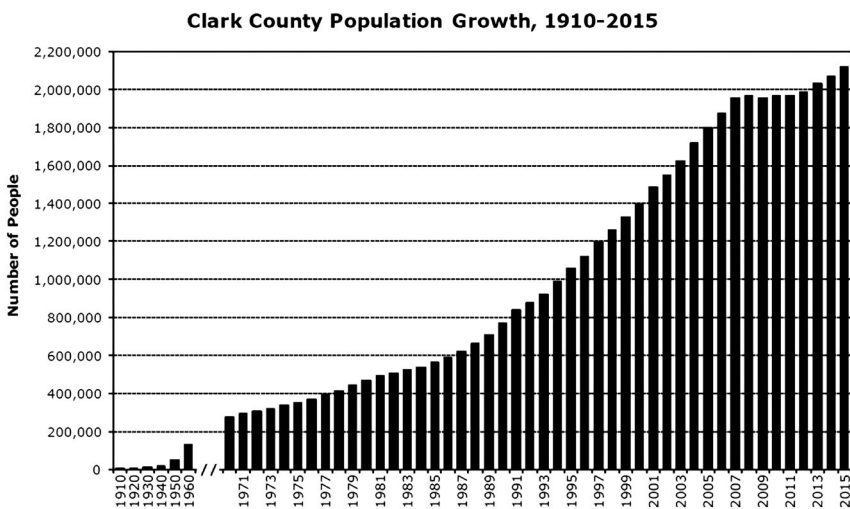


Figure 1. Population growth in Clark County. Sources: US Census Bureau and Nevada State Demographer's Office.

some sense, rooted in the city's long-standing status as a tourist town (Rothman 2002, Rowley 2015a). The famous "Welcome" sign symbolizes a "fabulous" weekend for visitors, a short escape from the monotony of a commute, office work, and community rules (that are legally breakable here), and a chance to hit it big. For decades, Las Vegas has been a place where residents have felt welcome to start over, build a better life for themselves, or follow their own dream to hit it big, a draw not unlike that of the tourist. Whereas reasons newcomers have for migrating here are particular to the individual, they are unified by a like-minded desire to make it in a city that they saw as providing them that opportunity. In short, Las Vegas is a classic example of Zelinsky's voluntary region idea.

My aim in this essay is two-fold. First, I will show *how* cultural geographers might approach the study of voluntary regions. Second, I will demonstrate *why* the voluntary region is something that geographers should develop further. It is, I will argue, a dynamic and encompassing framework that allows us to understand complex, and seemingly contradictory processes that occur in places, created and modified by cultural clustering in its varied manifestations. To do so, I will present a more detailed definition of the voluntary region, as well as a review of its evolution and treatment by scholars, including Zelinsky's own thinking on the matter as recently as 2011. Following that review, I examine its relevance in place identity research. Then, I present an exploration of the character of Las Vegas, Nevada, through a mixed-method approach, as a paradigmatic example of a voluntary region. I conclude with a discussion of how the lens of the voluntary region can provide clarity to the complex and dynamic nature of Las Vegas, and places like it.

Traditional and voluntary regions

In the final chapter of his book, Zelinsky (1973) presented a discussion of United States' regional geography and suggested two separate but related regional subtypes: traditional and voluntary regions. So-called "traditional regions" are areas that are "relatively self-contained, endogamous, stable, and of long duration" (p. 110). Inhabitants are born into such regions, adopt certain cultural traits based on various interactions therein, typically stay within its boundaries throughout their life, and have a deep attachment to its land and personality. Zelinsky's examples of traditional regions include typical national divisions most Americans would recognize, including New England, the South, the Middle West, and the West, in addition to a number of subregions.

Zelinsky noted, however, that a number of factors were contributing to a homogenization of American culture making traditional regions less distinct. Increased mobility in the post-World War II era, greater affluence, and more access to communication and information gave way to road trips and vacation

culture, heightened migration out of traditional regions, and subsequently changed the regional fabric of the United States. One might then expect this to result in an “unrelieved sameness from coast to coast, the progressive blotting out of local deviation, especially in urban areas” (Zelinsky 1973, pp. 111–112). This is a reasonable assumption, he argued, but untrue. Rather than yielding homogenization, he asserted, the country’s newfound mobility had the opposite effect.

Zelinsky hypothesized (in admittedly tentative verbiage) that while traditional regions themselves became less distinct, a new type of region “may have begun to materialize” (p. 134). This new regional type, the “voluntary region”, is characterized by “self-selected groups of like-minded, mobile, atomistic individuals”. It is inhabited by people seeking “opportunity to prosper”, proximity to like-minded people, amenity, and/or quality of life. In contrast to traditional regions, whose inhabitants are likely to trace their family’s roots there for multiple generations, the voluntary region’s character is “defined by the arrival of more strangers” who bring with them new traits that they share with other transplants. As such, its personality is “constantly redefined” (p. 135). The persistent influx of like-minded people results in a distinctive cultural island. Thus the element of change, brought on by consistent immigration, over a short period of time distinguishes voluntary regions from traditional regions, which Zelinsky noted were more stable over a longer period of time and were “determined by ... circumstance of birth and social heredity” (135). At the time of his writing, examples were Southern California and south Florida, areas attracting Americans from all over for business and industry opportunity or climate, retirement, and recreation. He also suggested several specific categories and subcategories of voluntary regions, including military subregions; educational subregions (i.e. college towns); six types of pleasuring places (amphibious, heliotropic, retirement, montane, equine, and forbidden fruitland regions); and latter-day bohemia and utopias (i.e. communal colonies).

Zelinsky confessed that his proposal was speculative, but time has proved him prescient. Casual observation reveals the fact that beach communities along the Southern California coast have a different population and character than inland retirement communities like Palm Springs. Ski towns, such as Park City, Utah, or Aspen, Colorado, have a flavor of their own, attracting particular people and fostering unique cultural activities. Furthermore, a visit to Norfolk, Virginia, or Manhattan, Kansas, will reveal not only distinctly military or university populations, but cultural landscapes that represent and reflect the primary focus of a place set apart from the respective surrounding traditional region.

Still, this concept, revolutionary in its implications and recognizable today, has received only modest attention by geographers. I found only a handful of scholars who embraced his concept in any depth, each invoking Zelinsky and

placing their respective study areas within the voluntary region framework (Brino 1978, Hecht 1978, Lamme and Meindl 2002, Fertig 2008). Beyond these examples, interest in and awareness of Zelinsky's alternative regional form has been limited to peripheral references to the idea in literature reviews of related phenomena (Reed 1982, Mondale 1989, Wyckoff 1989, Kirby and Hay 1997, Gladstone 1998, Blake 1999, Gumprecht 2003, Janelle 2004, Lang and Nicholas 2012) or discussions of broader research implications of the idea (Muller 1976, Reed 1976, Weightman 1981, Mondale 1992, Adams 1995, Kretzschmar 2011, Kretzschmar 2015). Interestingly, the only published work (Fertig's work is currently an unpublished thesis) in the last decade citing the concept has come, not from geographers, but linguists (Kretzschmar) and sociologists (Lang and Nicholas). Even Zelinsky, in his own work subsequent to introducing the idea, merely pointed to examples of how voluntary regions are occurring, without going into any more detail than in his original treatise (1974a, 1974b, 1975, 1980, 1993).

In his final published work before his death, however, Zelinsky revisited the core tenets of the voluntary region in greater depth. In *Not yet a placeless land: tracking an evolving American geography* (2011), he once again grappled with mobility, transience, and the homogenization of the American culture region map. Even though he did not specifically name the voluntary region idea in this volume, he makes significant statements regarding like-minded individuals moving to or visiting locales, who contribute to the establishment of unique places as a result. He discussed the "pursuit of pleasure" for an increasingly mobile population leading to "a reordering of places and greater distinctions among them" (14). He noted the mega-ranches owned by the rich that were "perhaps initiating an unprecedented new cultural region in the West" (53). He addressed advances in technology, communication, and mass media that have, while bringing uniformity to American culture, allowed people to select "localities that are pleasant or exciting ... or where we can hobnob with soulmates" (pp. 59–60). He pointed to the work of Richard Florida (2005) and Bill Bishop (2008) and the spatial clustering of like-minded Americans based on a host of measures, from age, to race, to leisure pursuits, and other cultural preferences (79). He noted the movement of retirees from all over the United States who coalesced in Sunbelt communities for comfort, leisure, and community (265). And, finally, he identified 17 major U.S. cities – some on his list of voluntary regions in 1973 and some not – whose perceived or marketed uniquenesses have yielded "genuine culture areas in and of themselves, with or without close kinship to their hinterlands" (218). He included Las Vegas in this category, identifying it as a unique specimen among the 17 cities and describing it as "becoming more Las Vegas by the day" (220). Indeed, echoes of voluntary regions – in nomenclature and description – abound in *Not Yet a Placeless Land*. The patterns

Zelinsky proposed decades earlier remain evident and are ripe for in-depth and critical empirical and theoretical research.

An approach to understanding voluntary regions

Implicit in Zelinsky's original conception of the voluntary region is the idea of place. In his more recent exploration of "special metropolises", wherein he seemed to readdress the idea of a voluntary region, Zelinsky's focus was certainly on places and their experiential qualities. As such, I look to the work of place scholars, who follow the phenomenological perspective, which seeks to make sense of a piece of the world through uncovering, describing, and interpreting meanings through human experience and perception of place (Buttimer 1976, Relph 1976, Tuan 1977). Such a perspective is especially important in the study of voluntary regions, as it can help illuminate a unique sense of place-based identity that comes as a result of the complex set of interactions between a place and the ideals and experiences of a diverse set of individuals it attracts. An allied methodological approach should produce insights into peoples' actions, thoughts, and emotions, which naturally leads to the realm of ethnography. This method, long embraced by anthropologists, has been especially helpful to those ethnographer/anthropologists with a bent for place-study (Feld and Basso 1996). It has also been widely embraced by geographers with a similar focus (Cloke *et al.* 2004). A place-based ethnographer hopes to observe and analyze a place from the perspective of an insider to help them uncover elements of place-based identity, but to also yield generalizable lessons beyond its borders (Herbert 2000, Jackson 2000, Cloke *et al.* 2004).

In my Las Vegas research, I employ an ethnographic approach incorporating a mix of methods employed by place scholars. Such methods include collecting the stories of residents through interviews and participant observations (Western 1992, Ryden 1993, Casey 1996, de Wit 2001, Schnell 2003, Garrett 2013, Rowley 2013a), analysis of the cultural landscape (Schein 1997, Weber 2004, Wyckoff 2014, Rowley *in press*), and newspaper archival research (Gumprecht 2001, Lewis 2003). Such an encompassing approach follows the suggestions given by the geographer de Wit (2001, 2013) for sense of place research. I spent an extended period of time in the city, which included a summer in 2005, eight months in 2007, and additional follow-up visits during 2011, 2012, and 2015. During these field sessions, I participated in daily life and attended local events. I also have kept my finger on the pulse of community happenings through local news sources. I have tried to reflexively employ my own perspective, having spent 10 years living in the city during my youth. Finally, I performed more than 100 semi-structured interviews with residents. My initial interviews came through civic leaders, clergy, school teachers, and new and old acquaintances I made as I participated in everyday life in the city. I then gained referrals and,

using a multiple-snowball technique, broadened my interviews beyond this initial set to include perspectives from residents with various backgrounds living and working in areas throughout the city. In addition, I analyzed anecdotes gleaned from 75 other informal conversations. As I recorded observations and transcribed each interview, I noted themes related to the place-based identity and everyday experience of living in Las Vegas that came up time and again. I then formally extrapolated elements related to these recurring themes in interview transcripts, observation notes, and newspaper clippings, coding content related to each theme. Several such themes relate directly to the characteristics of voluntary regions as defined by Zelinsky.

The following profile of life in this city serves as a real-place example of the concept and qualities of the voluntary region. It is a synthesis of my research there, and includes findings from a number of individual research questions I have addressed elsewhere. Further, it is descriptive in nature and each theme here equates with one or more of the key characteristics of Zelinsky's voluntary region, including necessary departures from his initial conception given the realities on the ground (e.g. some people do not come to this city voluntarily, but out of personal or economic necessity). This overview can serve as one model for how the voluntary region areal designation can be researched and understood, and the value it can have in cultural geography scholarship.

A representative voluntary region

I suggest Las Vegas as a paradigmatic example of a voluntary region. In his initial treatise, Zelinsky identified the city as one example of a "forbidden fruitland", a particular subtype in his "pleasuring places" category. Today's Las Vegas, however, is significantly more complex. The view of the city (in 1973 and somewhat less so today) as a gambling mecca and sin city relies only on a tourist representation of place centered on the Las Vegas Strip, a four-mile section of Las Vegas Boulevard of casino-resorts that is the core of the city's tourist industry. In 1973, however, the city had not yet experienced the population boom of the late 1980s and 1990s that would increase awareness among Americans to the fact that people actually *do* live in a Las Vegas beyond the Strip (Rothman 2002). Between 1970 and 2015, Las Vegas expanded from just over 270,000 people to more than 2.1 million (USCB 2015). As in other Sunbelt boomtowns, what drove the meteoric growth of the city was a huge influx of migrants searching for a place to start over in a tax-friendly environment with good weather and plenty of opportunity to make money with little requirement for extensive education (Rothman 2002, Rowley 2013a). In short, today's Las Vegas, the place experienced by locals² and not tourists, displays elements found in many of the

subtypes Zelinsky presented, making it a good case study for examining the voluntary region concept.

At their core, voluntary regions are *places to which people relocate*. Beyond the raw population growth statistics, according to other census numbers, 23.4 percent of Las Vegas were born in Nevada, compared to a national measure of 58.7 percent who were born in their state of residence (USCB 2014). That the question “Where are you from?” comes up frequently in conversations with locals underscores this trait. Another evidence includes a local quirk identified by Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens: “Bank and casino employees wear nametags that read: ‘Mary, Boston.’ First name and city of origin are often ... important defining factors in a community where it seems that everyone is from somewhere else” (1999, p. 216). Such a characteristic is likely found in other voluntary regions, tourist and nontourist alike.

Transplants to voluntary regions choose to *move there for an opportunity they may not have elsewhere*. Since its beginning, Las Vegas has attracted individuals from other areas throughout the country and the world. The earliest Mormon settlers came out of Utah in 1856 for lead mining possibilities in the nearby mountains and for missionary activity among Paiutes living in the area. Later, ranchers arrived to take advantage of the oasis fed by then-free-flowing springs in the Las Vegas Valley. A new railroad, built by Montana mining magnate William Andrew Clark, brought a formal town settlement in 1905, which attracted businesspeople from Southern California and Utah. The “Wild West” atmosphere in those early days brought gamblers, tourists, and new residents (Paher 1971, Roske 1986).

The attraction to this largely unknown place in the desert became exponentially stronger during the Great Depression. Las Vegas was considered one of the only places in the country where good jobs were available due to the construction of Boulder Dam on the Colorado River, just a few miles from the city. This brought an influx of new residents from all over the United States and established a persistent pattern for Las Vegas: the feeling that it is a place to go for unique opportunities for employment (Rowley 2012b). That pattern continued as the United States military developed what would become Nellis Air Force Base. Another federally funded wartime development, Basic Magnesium, Inc. (BMI) brought in thousands of workers and their families, including a sizable African-American population from Fordyce, Arkansas, and Tallulah, Louisiana. Then, a post-war boom in gambling-related tourism attracted a colorful group of transplants who came to the city to do legally what they were doing illegally in Southern California, the Midwest, and the Northeast (Roske 1986, Moehring and Green 2005).

Although in recent years pull factors have been more about opportunity than legality, the source regions for the influx have remained diverse and wide-ranging. The largest influx in recent history has been the massive migration of Latino/a residents to the city. Between 1990 and 2000, the

Latino population in Clark County exploded from 85,000 to 300,000. By 2014, nearly 600,000 Latinos lived in the city, which was almost 30 percent of the total population (USCB 2014). In November 2006, Latino students enrolled in the Clark County School District outnumbered white students for the first time (Planas 2006). The northeastern quadrant of the city (directly east of downtown) now resembles South Phoenix and East Los Angeles in signage and retail offerings. But, as Rothman has pointed out, Las Vegas “tweaks” the typical prospect for Latinos in the region. Given its strong and wide-ranging employment offerings for blue-collar workers in the service sector, the city, he argued, gives immigrants more of an opportunity to “make it”, earning a wage and benefits comparable to many typical middle-class Americans (2002, pp. 176–177).

Interviews confirm this characteristic of Las Vegas (and other voluntary regions) as places that offer an “opportunity to prosper”. As local columnist and author John L. Smith told me, “Here’s where Las Vegas warps the model. People don’t come here for the place. They come for an opportunity. They come for the scent of something. ... It’s a mania”. Hundreds of thousands see Las Vegas as a place for a second chance, a middle-class income on little or no education, or an opportunity to make it big at the tables of chance or entrepreneurship.

This pattern is epitomized by the oft-repeated argument that Las Vegas is a “can-do town”. Former Las Vegas mayor, Oscar Goodman, told me: “People think they can go anywhere and make it. You can’t. You can do it in Las Vegas, though. Nowhere has the opportunity like Las Vegas”. He recalled his choice to come here after law school on the East Coast, seeing Las Vegas as “a tabula-rasa”. He continued, unwittingly contrasting a voluntary region and a traditional one

I don’t know what it was, it was the aura the place had. It is where people come to realize the American dream. ... Back East people don’t move more than a couple blocks from home. Here people come to stake a claim to their future. ... If you’re willing to work hard and have a half a brain, you can do whatever you want.

Darren Sedillo’s story echoes Mayor Goodman’s experience.³ Early on in their marriage, Darren and his wife made a conscious effort and plan in their choice to relocate to Las Vegas. They came for a cost-of-living advantage over their native Southern California and for the chance to build Darren’s own business from the ground up. He had realized both goals when I met him. Darren, like so many others, saw an opportunity to do more with his life and career in Las Vegas. He repeated a refrain I heard often from interviewees: “If you can’t find a job here, you’re either lazy or addicted to something”.

Some people come to Las Vegas for its entertainment and gambling amenities. Lorena, a Cuban-American most recently from Florida, was one such

interview. She said: “I like the Strip. I like everything!” Then, she offered a more specific reason. As a tourist, she had attended a show and saw Elizabeth Taylor in the audience and became enthralled by the prospect of living permanently near the movie stars. Others, like Craig Brookings and Ben Murrell, originally migrated to the city in the 1970s to be professional poker players. Craig tried (unsuccessfully) multiple times to make it in the green-felt jungle, taking part-time jobs along the way. Ben was more successful, living off of strong earnings at the tables for several years. Both still play poker in smaller tournaments, more as a hobby than a money-making venture, while working full-time as small retail business owners. Carlin’s story is more typical. He had visited Vegas every March to party with friends from college starting their senior year. He likes to bet on sports and appreciates the mild weather here. He described his first visit. “It was 70 degrees and beautiful that afternoon”, he asserted, “and I knew I would like it here”. Five years later he moved to the city, taking his first job at a casino sportsbook, which, he said, was a good fit given his love of sports. A higher paycheck motivated him to become a card dealer, a career track common to many Vegas transplants. He started out at one of the downtown casinos and then moved with his floor manager to a larger, luxury property on the Strip where he can make a nearly six-figure income.

Climate, as mentioned by Carlin, is another draw for many new Las Vegas seeking a more prosperous life. This, along with the high-amenity, low-tax culture in Las Vegas is what attracts thousands of retired Americans who create their own miniature voluntary regions in quarters of the valley such as Sun City Summerlin or Sun City Aliante (Rothman 2002). Matthew Dodson, was blunt in his reasons for coming to the city following his retirement from a technology firm in the Midwest: “Because there was no income tax [here]”. When I met him, he was filling his time operating an art studio in the growing arts district near downtown Las Vegas. I met other retirees from Minnesota, Boston, and New York City, who cited taxes, quality of life, proximity to natural landscapes of the West, and the absence of wintertime snow as being incentives for their choice to retire here.

Whereas an opportunity to prosper underlies many of these reasons, “choice” and “voluntary” can be loaded terms in this context since some transplants to Las Vegas come because they feel they have no other choice. In other words, the opportunity offered by Las Vegas is seen by some as their only option, a last resort. Interestingly, journalist Marc Cooper called Las Vegas “a city of domestic refugees” (2004, p. 81). Of course, many involved in the gambling industry came to the city in the 1950s because Las Vegas was the only place to do legally what they had done illegally elsewhere. The same could be said for the migrants to Las Vegas who come not with the plan and goals of Darren Sedillo or Matthew Dodson, but because they see no other choice. For Al Zanelli, Las Vegas was a destination of necessity. Al explained that, after previous attempts to solve the

problem elsewhere, he came to the city to escape a stalking girlfriend. Successful in bringing closure to that situation, he has made a decent living in this city, jumping between jobs in casinos, air conditioning repair, and retail. In a similar pattern to others who came to Las Vegas as a place of escape, however, he is planning to leave due to his propensity to gamble away his earnings.

Still, underneath a migration-by-necessity are the other pull factors cited earlier that make Zanelli's (and others like him) relocation to Las Vegas a bit easier. Take, for example, the experience of Tina Lewis. She came from San Diego to make a new start following a divorce in 1982. But, resonant with many other transplant experiences, her choice of Las Vegas was also driven by a lower cost of living relative to Southern California. Tina explained that when she came, she dug in, got an apartment, eventually moved into a house, joined a church, and became part of a community. She commented that

People come here from all over the country and the world. There is a spirit of renewal here. You can do whatever you want. People come here who want a fresh start and a different perspective on life ... You can come here and reinvent yourself. It's affordable and you can renew who you are as a person.

The influx of people from various source regions highlights another hallmark of voluntary regions: they are *new and growing transient places that are constantly changing*. As noted earlier, given its explosive growth rates over a relatively short history (see [Figure 1](#)), Las Vegas is the youngest big city in America. As a result, it is a place where expansion is a near constant. Rare indeed is the conversation about the city when the topic of growth is not mentioned. The subject emerged nearly 60 different times in conversations with locals, and usually the interviewee addressed it without specific questions from me. Residents often comment on the new shopping centers and subdivisions and reminisce – and sometimes boast – about remembering when this or that road was dirt, even as recently as two years ago. As we talked at a coffee shop in suburban Summerlin, Darrell Torella put the growth in stark terms: “When I came here in 1958 there were 45,000 people in the valley. At that time you would need a horse or a helicopter to get to where we are sitting right now”.

Keeping up with the demands of growth is a monumental challenge that remains top-of-mind for locals. Indeed, the perpetual population growth and the need to provide new infrastructure is a common source of complaints for Las Vegans, especially when it comes to road construction ([Figure 2](#)). I asked 54 interviewees what they least liked about living in Las Vegas and 31 stated that it was either the high pace of growth or the traffic and congestion. Mayor Goodman, when asked him about challenges facing the city told me: “I think it's the rapid growth. We have problems of sustainability. ... It's



Figure 2. An expansion project on Craig Road, near Durango Drive) in the northwestern part of the Las Vegas metropolitan area. Road construction has been a common complaint for residents, especially during the population boom years. Photo by author, February 2007.

the roads, the traffic, the air, the mental health, the schools”. He added, comparing the Las Vegas experience to other Sunbelt towns that also have experienced high growth rates: “But [the problems of growth have] accelerated themselves here. It took a long time for Los Angeles to become congested. It happened overnight in Las Vegas”.

Evident in such comments are changes in the cultural landscape that are important indicators of growth and its impacts. Whether it is a shifting Strip skyline or the removal of an aging movie theater complex to make way for a new retail mall (Figure 3), residents in Las Vegas are often reminded that permanence and historical longevity are hard to find in their city. In fact, several interviewees commented that they appreciate the “newness” of the city. Jeremy Mont noted the growth of the city and then stated with pride and zeal, “Las Vegas is not at all afraid to change. We blow [something] up and build something new in its place”. Similarly, Russell Busch told me

That’s another thing ... everything is new here. People complain about that saying there’s not the tradition and culture of older stuff, but I don’t think that’s true. I like that they take this old building down to put up a new one. I’d rather go to a new Starbucks than an old one. I think hundred-year-old buildings are great, but for eighty years, it’s just kind of crummy.



Figure 3. Site of the once-popular Red Rock Theaters, December 2005. With a changing demographic and theater technology, movie houses like this one have all but disappeared in forward-looking Las Vegas. This site now houses one of many ubiquitous commercial strip malls along Charleston Avenue west of Las Vegas Boulevard. Photo by author.

And, when I asked Jonas and Cora Salvador what they saw as unique in the city, Jonas was quick to comment on the newness in the residential market.

There's not a lot of old stuff. In my business [as a salesman for kitchen and bathroom fixtures for high-end homes] you see a lot of new stuff. In other places there are a lot of remodels. Not here. There's very little of that.

They talked about the neighborhood they both grew up in on Eastern Avenue and Bonanza Road and other “old” neighborhoods that used to be in the nice parts of town, like the Huntridge Addition and Rancho Circle neighborhoods. What is interesting about comments by Busch and the Salvadors is that the “old” buildings and neighborhoods they discuss wouldn't be old in many other cities in the U.S. Both the Huntridge and Rancho Circle were built in the 1940s and are universally considered to be old neighborhoods in town. Indeed, the general rule (and joke) in Las Vegas is that something is old if it was built prior to 1950.

Drastic changes were particularly evident in the economic collapse in 2008 and the resulting Great Recession, which dealt a huge blow to Las Vegas. Construction projects halted on the Strip and in the suburbs (Figure 4). People left the city for lack of work (Guerrero 2010). The population dipped and then stabilized (see Figure 1). And, Las Vegas became the “Foreclosure Capital



Figure 4. Halted construction projects were unheard of in pre-Great Recession Las Vegas. But, the pause in growth and development were visible in both the tourist core and the suburbs. (a) shows the shell of the first few floors of what was to be Echelon Place, a high-end casino-resort on the Strip's northern end. (b) is the abandoned frame of a suburban shopping mall at the Las Vegas Valley's western edge. Photos by author, January 2011.

of America”, casting a shadow on its more well-known monikers of “Entertainment Capital” and “Fastest Growing City”. Amid such unprecedented events in a city that was considered to be immune to economic downturn, Las Vegasans did what they always have done: they invoked the “can-do” mantra and adjusted to changing tastes and desires to survive.

In the past, adaptation might have focused only on modifying entertainment options to cater to changing tourist populations (that, of course, continues), but the recession brought renewed energy to diversifying the economic base and cultural offerings of the city more broadly. Community leaders and private local donors continued to support the redevelopment of Symphony Park, a reclaimed railroad brownfield that now boasts the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health and Las Vegas's first performing arts venue at the Smith Center, which emerged from the desert floor in the throes of the recession (Figure 5). The Smith Center – in its art deco architecture, and what it represented during this time – was even compared to Hoover Dam, which is credited for bringing Las Vegas through the Great Depression (Green 2011). In the nearby downtown corridor, Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh poured millions into a new corporate headquarters for his company and into additional retail, business, and cultural amenities to try to make the city's historic core livable and less reliant on gaming alone (Figure 6). Most recently, city leaders boast a bright future in industry with the coming of electric car company Faraday Future to the city's outskirts in North Las Vegas and often point to the imminent arrival of professional sports teams (KNPR 2016a, 2016b). And, add to this the fact that, notwithstanding the impacts



Figure 5. The Smith Center for the Performing Arts was built in an Art Deco style to evoke the era when Boulder Dam contributed to Las Vegas's growth as a tourist town. The structure is emblematic of city's diversified cultural offerings and reflects local hopes for emergence from the Great Recession. Photo by author, July 2012.



Figure 6. Downtown Las Vegas has seen enormous changes in the past decade, even amid economic recession. Private and public investment in has made it a more attractive destination for locals, with its mix of bars, restaurants, and retail. Photo by author, July 2012.

from the Great Recession, Las Vegas, has started to grow once again. In short, Las Vegas is, and has always been, a city in flux.

Despite the myth that people only *come* to Las Vegas, the city's population has actually always been transient. The mobility that brought them here to begin with does not evaporate once they arrive. Many arrivals leave the place after a time. According to recent address changes recorded by the Internal Revenue Service, for every two people who move to the Las Vegas metropolitan area, an average of 1.7 will depart the city within a year (IRS

2014). Educators I interviewed commented on students moving in then out then back into the school boundaries again, often within a single academic year. One first-grade teacher noted

This year I've been lucky to only have two [new students] come in during the year, but last year it was like a revolving door with kids coming and going all the time. Some kids would leave and come back. ... Phone numbers change and they don't tell what the new one is. ... It makes [my job] very difficult.

In addition, I found in my interviews and informal interactions with acquaintances that even those residents who stay in the city often move from one residence to another as suburban sprawl continues its march to the surrounding mountain walls of the Las Vegas Valley. I interviewed Shari Nakae, for example, in her fourth residence (only one was a rental) since moving to the city in the late 1970s to teach school, she having moved each time to the "new" edge of town as the city grew.

The landscape and culture of a voluntary region changes often in response to population flux. A new local population means new ideas, new needs, and new innovations. The changing landscape of casinos in Las Vegas is telling in this regard. In decades past, the playground for locals was the Strip (Frehner 2002, McMackin 2002). But, as the valley's population exploded and classic, intimate Vegas joints imploded, residents began to resent the growing tourist crowds at Las Vegas Boulevard casinos. Recognizing that Las Vegans still desired a place to gamble, local entrepreneurs in the 1970s invented locals-oriented hotel-casino-entertainment complexes, many of which now dot the valley's periphery (Figure 7). Such establishments represent a new and unique landscape constructed by and for local residents. Neighborhood casinos became places where the negotiation with the tourist element could be both ignored and enjoyed; they became a new symbolic landscape representing their city's local personality (Rowley 2013b).

Another important characteristic of such places is the *atomistic nature of its residents*. Las Vegans tend to keep to themselves. Hal Rothman has described Las Vegas as a city built on privacy (2002). Reporter Marshall Allen described this anomie in an experience familiar to most Las Vegans

You've seen it. We've all seen it, and probably given it. The Vegas Wave. You know, that neighborly wave to the couple across the street who you see all the time but never talk to. 'Hey.' *Wave*. Now duck into the car and drive away.

Allen then asked the question: "We offer that meager, sheepish salute to nameless neighbors to show we are friendly. But are we?" (2006). Many interviewees expressed frustration with getting to know your neighbors when so many of them move in and out all the time. Tracy Snow, for example, said



Figure 7. Red Rock Casino and Resort, May 2008. This establishment, and others like it, dot the periphery of residential Las Vegas. These properties contain all the trappings of a Strip casino plus others geared directly to locals (a movie theater is housed in the building to the left of the hotel tower). Neighborhood casinos are emblematic of the way voluntary regions morph to meet the expectations of a constantly changing population. Photo by author.

I don't know anyone on my street, except for one guy. The only reason I know him is he is the crazy guy on the street. I couldn't tell you if people lived there for one month or for 2 years. I guess I don't pay attention to that anymore because I don't expect to form any relationship with them anyway.

Furthermore, the existence of dozens of gated communities throughout Las Vegas suburbs, and the even more ubiquitous cinder block walls in nearly every neighborhood in town promote an intensely private atmosphere (Figure 8).

Immigration from a diverse set of regions is partly to blame for this individualism and necessarily brings varied habits, ideas, and presumptions about the way life should be lived. Such a cultural clash in Las Vegas is evident in the perception among many interviewees that "Las Vegas has the worst drivers in the world". As Sandra Peters put it, "I think it's because of all the people who move here ... from different parts of the country with different driving habits ... and because of all the tourists in town". This "commuter multiculturalism" blends different driver attitudes making it impossible, the theory goes, for any uniform, mutually understood roadway behavior norms to emerge (Kiraly 2007).

The influence of a constant influx of disparate newcomers from all over (and the transience that accompanies it) is further manifest in the struggle



Figure 8. A typical suburban neighborhood in Henderson. Cinder block walls, ubiquitous in Las Vegas neighborhoods, contribute both to a lack of community and a preservation of privacy for the atomistic individuals who make Las Vegas home. Photo by author, May 2007.

to build and maintain a traditional sense of neighborhood community (Gott-diener *et al.* 1999, Rowley 2015a). Local author Geoff Schumacher, made this connection:

Las Vegas is a vibrant, exciting place, and the thousands of people who move here each month are testimony to that. But Las Vegas is also a place that has yet to become a genuine *community*. Las Vegas is still a congregation of capitalists and consumers in a geographic location, most of them holding tight to the belief that *home* is somewhere else. (2004, p. 260, emphasis in original)

Interviewee Shawn Newman wondered similarly: “Maybe [the lack of community] is because [people] feel that this is just another stop in the road”.

Finally, an overarching characteristic of voluntary regions is that they are *made up of like-minded individuals*. This may seem a contradiction, especially given the above description of atomistic individuals in a growing, transient, and constantly changing city. Interestingly, it is in that contradiction that we see the like-minded connection between people in this voluntary region. People come to voluntary regions for a number of reasons, but the draw to come, and the pull factors associated with their migration often share a common foundation. This is not to say that newcomers arrive in the city knowing that they share commonalities with many others who have also come for this or that opportunity. Rather,

they arrive having come for individual reasons, but with commonly held perceptions that this city can provide the opportunity they seek. The attraction to Las Vegas, for whatever specific reasons, has driven huge population growth over the last half century and is one commonality, one type of glue that connects a disparate group of individuals from various backgrounds and regions.

The draw of opportunity in voluntary regions is often represented by a particular landscape, which can serve as a symbol for what connects the people there. In a college town, the draw is, of course, the educational opportunities there and the symbol is likely the campus itself, or one of its buildings – a bell tower or architecturally distinct structure. In a beach town “amphibious region”, the beach is an obvious symbol of place. For Las Vegas, the symbolic landscape is the tourist core (Figure 9). Although this area includes the Strip along with the city’s historic gambling core in downtown Las Vegas, it is the Strip that represents, as an icon, the economic engine of the city and what makes a white-collar wage in blue-collar employment possible for so many people (Rothman 2002). One interviewee referred to it as the “center of mass” for the city. Indeed, with nearly 30 percent of the population employed in leisure and hospitality, Las Vegas relies more on service industry revenue than any other American city (LVCVA 2010). And, as noted earlier, some newcomers are directly attracted to the glitz and glamour, and entertainment possibilities of the Strip.

The Strip is a symbol of place even for the transplants who are employed in a supportive role. The dominant leisure and hospitality industry drives several other sectors of the economy. Doctors, lawyers, small business owners, and educators come to treat, advise, service, and teach people directly involved in the core industry. Likewise construction and its related industries support tourism expansion on the Strip and in suburban subdivisions. Other voluntary regions similarly require personnel in support of the military, university, or recreation complex that identifies the place. Furthermore, many



Figure 9. A view of the Las Vegas Strip at dusk from the western edge of the Las Vegas Valley, January 2011. Rare is the location within the valley where this symbolic landscape is not visible. Photo by author.

Las Vegans realize a less-direct connection to the tourist landscape based on the entertainment amenities afforded, and the lower taxes resulting from tourist-generated room and gambling tax revenues.

Several interviewees commented on such benefits. As we visited at a picnic table in a suburban city park, Sandra Peters said

The first thing I tell [outsiders about living in Las Vegas] is, ‘I don’t live on the Strip.’ I think that’s what they see. This is Vegas [she points around us]. That’s the place you work [she points to the Strip]. That’s the place you play, on occasion. And that’s where the tourists pay for it all.

Her last statement illustrates a reality for locals, that they have a great entertainment resource and a reduced personal tax burden because of gaming and room taxes paid by the forty million tourists who come to the city each year. Shirley Foster and Flint Salvador identified the same dual benefit of entertainment and revenue for the local economy. Shirley told me: “You know I like the convenience of Las Vegas. You can virtually buy anything you want. The convenience is the best there is in the world”. Then he added: “I’m not interested in gambling, but those casinos ... bring tourists in and it keeps the place growing”. Flint talked about how locals relate to the Vegas image, and what this represents for their everyday life:

Well in general, I don’t think the locals can be disconnected from it. Vegas is tourism and tourism is Vegas. Without it, there is no Vegas. ... I don’t think that anyone can say that people in Las Vegas can be separated from the tourism side ... everyone benefits from it. We have to face that it pays my paycheck too. [Flint is a fire fighter.]

Some locals, like Flint, choose to separate themselves from the gambling aspect of the tourist Las Vegas. But, most recognize that it is part of the engine that drives the city and the state economy.

The sense of connection to the Strip was further confirmed by interviewees who had left the city only to return, many of them without plans to do so. Each came to realize how much they enjoyed their life in this city, the convenience found here, a connection to roots in the community, and opportunities for career success – all strong attractions back to Las Vegas largely driven by the tourism industry. My own parents fit into this category – moving to the Midwest hoping to get away from the hustle of the growing city, but drawn back four years later to a job market that was much stronger than that in the Kansas City area. Trish Allison – who grew up in Las Vegas, moved away, and came back following a career change and a divorce – commented on the many people she knows, like herself, who “have left and come back and left and come back and they keep coming back because there is something they want and they can only find here”. Aric Walker, a native of the city, shared his experience:

I've left to live other places [and] for some reason, after you've lived here you can't live anywhere else. This place seems to draw you back. ... There's something about Vegas. There's so much to do [since it's] open 24 hours.

Chuck Ballard also pointed to the 24/7 convenience and other attractions drawing people to this city:

Las Vegas has its advantages. ... 90% of the people [who] live here more than 1 year and then move somewhere else ... will come back. It's the convenience. It's a three-shift town. Everything is open. There's a lot to do. It's a wonderful hub [for travel]. You can go anywhere in the world from here ... [It's] easy here.

Whether directly or indirectly involved in the primary industry of the voluntary region, residents will likely be required to negotiate with some aspects of this core, even if they do not fully embrace it. This landscape is always in the background for locals, for example, reminding them what it represents. Rare is the location within the Las Vegas Valley from which one cannot see the Strip (Rowley 2013a; Figure 10; see also Figures 3 and 9). Furthermore, as indicated by the quotations above, many Las Vegasans have an ambivalent attachment to and love-hate relationship with the Strip; they might enjoy what it offers in terms of entertainment or tax amenity, but dislike the accompanying crowds they must navigate (Rowley 2013a). I would also point to the tension and interplay between personal principles – religious or secular – that exists in a place where the lure and temptation presented by the gambling and adult industries is powerful (Rowley 2012a, 2015b). A parent, for example, may detest advertising imagery seen by their child as they travel near the tourist core and yet simultaneously feel gratitude for high-paying jobs (directly or indirectly) connected to tourism allowing them to finance that same child's education. Similarly, parents employed by the military might balance their jobs against the dangers of their daughters cavorting with sailors in a place like Norfolk, Virginia, or Annapolis,



Figure 10. Residential construction site in the northwestern part of the Las Vegas Valley, February 2007. This view shows the local resident's typical visibility of the Las Vegas Strip and the everyday nature of construction and change. Photo by author.

Maryland. Such was the experience of one Las Vegan, who compared negotiation between values and the surrounding military influence in San Diego, where she grew up, and her current home in Las Vegas. Regardless of their relationship to it, the Strip is an omnipresent and influential part of every Las Vegan's life and, as such, is a symbol of what connects (even atomistic) people in this city.

An encompassing framework

This overview of Las Vegas provides a detailed example of how the idea of the voluntary region is evident in and can be applied to real places today. More importantly, it illustrates how the framework of the voluntary region provides a more-complete view of Las Vegas than would be possible through a number of other single lenses. Some observers of the city, for example, might suggest that Las Vegas is simply another amenity region, a structure originally proposed by Ullman (1954). Zelinsky (1973, p. 155) seems to have been influenced by Ullman's work, which has had much broader exploration in the field than the voluntary region (see Walcott 2010). Attraction to something offered in a place that is not found (or may not be as accessible) elsewhere is certainly part of what brings people to Las Vegas. This, of course, extends to other voluntary regions, including those Zelinsky proposed, particularly those "pleasuring places" and "educational subregions". But, while amenity is part of the attraction to Las Vegas, it is not the only attraction. Amenity regions are a subset of voluntary regions.

Similarly, one might consider voluntary regions to be simply places that attract economic migrants making economic incentive-based migration another single lens through which we might view Las Vegas or other places Zelinsky put into this category. Certainly Zelinsky's military and educational subregions have economic incentives that attract enlistees and officers or professors and administrators to such places. I have noted a number of economic incentives that influence migration to Las Vegas. Included within this group would also be those transplants who do not necessarily "volunteer" to come, but feel they must, out of necessity (typically economic but also otherwise). Many military personnel choose, or volunteer, for service, but for some enlisted members such service may feel like less of a choice and more like their only option. Further, such personnel do not choose their assignment base, but are, rather, assigned there by superiors. Still, the military subregion that they help to create is unique based on the shared experience of the like-minded (and similarly trained) individuals who live and work there. One might also say that someone migrating to a Sunbelt city (heliotropic regions) or a tourist town may have less choice in coming, but may feel that their hand is forced; they may view a move to an area as their only option to gain access to employment. These characteristics certainly apply

to Las Vegas. As noted, several newcomers I interviewed pointed to the ability to “start over” in the Las Vegas tourist economy or that the city was a place of “last resort” affording them the ability to escape problems in their former place of residence. Whether a migrant relocates by choice or necessity we, again, see only one component of the attraction to Las Vegas and other voluntary regions. After all, Sunbelt towns are economic migration magnets that host businesses that lure workers to corporate or regional headquarters based on the knowledge that many of the employees and executives they seek to hire want to live in climatically attractive or amenity-rich places.

At the core of all the pull factors to voluntary regions, according to Zelinsky, is the desire to be near like-minded individuals. In my analysis of Las Vegas, this has been the most difficult element of the idea to reconcile. Transplants I interviewed did not identify a desire to be near others like themselves as part of their decision-making process before coming to this city. As noted, their reasons were individualistic and personal, whether they are drawn by amenity or economic incentive. That conflict between individualism and like-mindedness is inherent in Zelinsky’s definition, which includes “self-selected ... atomistic individuals” that are also “like-minded” (p. 135). He did not say that they were *coordinated*, like-minded, atomistic individuals, or that their conscious decision to come was necessarily based on the desire to be near people that thought like them, only that such like-minded clustering was the result of thousands of individual choices. In 1973, Zelinsky characterized the emergence of South Florida as a voluntary region, noting that “the many hundreds of thousands of persons pursuing the varied amenities of Florida and their own self-realization are building something far different from the culture areas of colonial America” (1973, p. 135).

Much the same could be said of Las Vegans, who have created something new by mixing together hundreds of thousands of transplants to the city coming for a variety of reasons explicitly or implicitly tied to the tourist economy and the symbol of the Strip. Such a pattern is particularly evident in the formation of a Las Vegas sense of community. I found that this shared identity for people living in the city does not stem from historical and long-lasting roots in a place as we might see in older American cities. Rather, it is centered on the symbol that represents a common draw for people that move there. As described, the pull factors of transplants, be they amenity or economically based, are rooted in the tourism economy. Similarly, an overall sense of community has subsequently developed around an understanding that the tourism engine, symbolized in the Strip, is the lifeline and lifeblood of the city that binds together strangers. Many residents, myself included, find a bond with other Las Vegans based on shared experience knowing what it is like to live in the unique place of Las Vegas (Rowley 2015a). The result has been a place whose residents share a local sense of

place-based identity rooted in a like-minded connection, even if they had not been conscious of that connection before coming. In other words, the creation of sense of place and place attachment occurs as residents realize their like-mindedness after they arrive.

Cultural geographers can find value in using the framework of the voluntary region to assist us in piecing together fuzzy and difficult place-based phenomena such as those that occur in Las Vegas. The encompassing nature of the voluntary region idea, as proposed by Zelinsky, accounts for the variety of pull factors evident in this city. The complexity inherent in the framework also allows for a deeper understanding of the complicated sense of place-based identity for locals and how it formed in the unique context of a tourist town. In sum, the voluntary region idea provides a lens through which we can, with greater clarity, analyze unique and emerging culture areas whose creations are a messy mixture of mobile people who cluster based on amenity or opportunity motivations, who do so on their own terms, and who, as a result, create a different kind of place.

Notes

1. Perhaps some of Zelinsky's ideas lay dormant because of the many criticisms leveled against Zelinsky's shortsighted embrace of superorganicism (Cosgrove 1978, Duncan 1980, Cosgrove 1983, Jackson 1989) or the resulting fear of approaching something associated with a major stir in our field (cf. Price and Lewis 1993a, Cosgrove 1993, Duncan 1993, Jackson 1993, Price and Lewis 1993b, Mitchell 1995, Shurmer-Smith *et al.* 1998). This is puzzling since some of the concepts Zelinsky proposed are valid in their own right as topics of critical geographic inquiry *or* are the antithesis of the oft criticized culture-as-agent perspective. It is as if a shroud has been placed over this book that admittedly has its weaknesses, blinding students and scholars of cultural geography to its many strengths.
2. The term "local" may seem somewhat pejorative, but its usage in Las Vegas is common as a term used by residents in reference to themselves, and connotes a difference between residents and tourists. I follow this same vernacular usage and meaning here.
3. This and other interview names, with the exception of prominent figures who gave their permission, are pseudonyms so as to protect the privacy of interviewees. Some only provided their first names, and I follow that pattern here with pseudonyms.

Acknowledgements

I thank Pete Shortridge for ideas and advice on this topic and for his encouragement regarding its relevance for geographers today. Thanks also to a fellowship at the Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, for supporting my extended research in Las Vegas. I thank Rachel Rowley for numerous readings

of this work as well as editors and anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions that have strengthened the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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