Feeling Senti-metal: Frontier Nostalgia, Mining Masculinity & Corporate Landscapes in the U.S. American Reality TV Series *Gold Rush*

Brian James Leech

When it comes to mining, U.S. American popular culture remains stuck in the past. Video games showcase low-tech mining with picks and axes. Country songs mourn tough times in company towns. Western films tell stories about 19th century gold rushes. YouTube videos examine abandoned mines. Environmental historian Jessica DeWitt argues that one reason for this tendency can be found in Dean MacCannell's 1976 book *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. In that book, MacCannell argues that tourist destinations and historic sites enact a "museumization" of pre-modern jobs and their workers for the benefit of tourists. Doing so ensures that the popular image of industrial work remains stuck in the past because it is more comfortable for tourists to consume it that way (1). Historian Steven High agrees that North Americans still love to "museumify" former industrial landscapes despite worries that this act can "sanitize and romanticize" an often-uncomfortable past (423; High/Lewis 8).

Despite its present-day setting, reality television similarly sanitizes and romanticizes industrial work—although they do so for the sake of couch-bound, not wandering, tourists. Just like those tourist sites, they often rely on reenactments of the past. This approach figures prominently in the popular U.S. series *Gold Rush*, which, since it began in 2010, has often served as the U.S. Discovery Channel's top-rated show. Its multiplying spin-offs, like *Gold Rush: South America*, *Gold Rush: Whitewater*, and *Gold Rush: Winter's Fortune* have proven similarly lucrative for the network. In March 2020, the *Gold Rush* franchise featured four of the top five cable series amongst all American viewers ages 25 to 54, with men in particular driving its ratings up (Rumer). The show ostensibly provides

viewers with a window into modern-day mining; yet, *Gold Rush* relies on long-standing, nostalgic tropes about resource extraction and settler colonialism.

Gold Rush is part of the reality genre described as "Macho TV," "Real Men at Work," or "Tough Guy TV" (Soviak 3). Among the most popular of these shows are *Ax Men*, *Bering Sea Gold*, and *Deadliest Catch*, all of which, just like *Gold Rush*, feature mostly hetersexual white men, joining in small bands, braving extreme conditions, and practicing the tough work of natural resource extraction. The long-running *Gold Rush* franchise has perhaps received the most scholarly attention. For Diane Negra, *Gold Rush* represents a peculiarly masculine reaction to the Great Recession in the U.S. because the original series featured a number of men who lost jobs in the Great Recession from 2007–2009 and hence sought new fortune in the Alaskan gold fields (123–9). Susan Alexander and Katie Woods, on the other hand, focus on the show's hypermasculinity, claiming that shows like this convince men to enact a somewhat anachronistic hegemonic masculinity in the present. For the authors, the show is about men being able to succeed today (149–68).

Most others, however, emphasize the show's depiction of a "rugged frontier" as the key to its continued success. For these scholars, *Gold Rush* provokes a romantic nostalgia for North America's "frontier"—a fraught term that wrongly implies adventure and exploration when, in North America's case, white settlement during the 18th and 19th centuries too often meant a violent conquest of the land from its original inhabitants (Limerick). For Shannon Eileen Marie O'Sullivan, *Gold Rush* hides the working class status of its main characters by instead validating them as ideal, authentic examples of a white masculinity undergoing crisis. Facing women's emancipation and calls for racial equality, white men responded positively to a show that offered an escape to the past—a frontier for white men to conquer (129–45). For William Trapani and Laura Winn, the show provides a masculine frontier in which all others, whether they be the protagonists' families, indigenous peoples, or modern society itself, disappear, leaving only white men's freedom and mastery (183–200).

This article will emphasize another function of *Gold Rush*'s frontier nostalgia: It obscures the modern mining industry while simultaneously justifying its continued extractivism. As a concept, nostalgia describes the common feeling of a longing (an *algia*) to return home (the *nostos*). Typically, this home no longer exists because of the passage of time, or it exists only as a myth; hence, a person experiencing nostalgia cannot truly return to this home despite their emotional attachment to it (Boym 543). Robert Solomon argues that nostalgia

is a "form of sentimentality"—one that edits out "unpleasantness" to present a warm narrative about the past (19). Solomon defends this kind of editing, and it may contain virtues. As David Lowenthal suggests, nostalgia may "shore-up self-esteem," enable "enduring association," and "buffer social upheaval" (8–13); and yet, on a collective level, Lowenthal argues that pervasive nostalgia can also be harmful, hiding the truth about the past and present. *Gold Rush* practices its sentimental nostalgia by embracing an imagined American mining past—a time when life was supposedly simpler, risk-taking was celebrated, and white men primarily performed tough work in nature, not behind a desk. *Gold Rush* does so by replaying old colonial gold rushes as contemporary adventures in which white men conquer exoticized—and often quite cold—places. The show's stories focus on small-scale prospecting and mining, suggesting they are a gamble that small groups of tightly-bonded, enterprising men can successfully undertake, just like their forebears supposedly did during the 19th century. For the prospectors in *Gold Rush*, white men's resourceful toughness and the location of small specks of gold are the true pathway towards mining success. *Gold Rush* portrays its mostly frozen landscapes as a challenging backcountry, ready to be conquered, and not what they, in fact, are: long-inhabited places of modern industrial development.

The mining adventure stories told by shows like *Gold Rush* therefore continue to be used to justify extraction *in* and the exoticization *of* far-away lands. Indeed, reality television seems to have made older colonial narratives more palatable to some segments of the contemporary audience even as they might make other viewers uncomfortable with the colonialist heritage of mining. The show's sentimental portrayal of small groups of men obscures the fact that mining today is actually a highly-capitalized industrial affair, run by massive global corporations, all of whom have a larger impact on the environment than the tiny operations celebrated by *Gold Rush*. *Gold Rush* instead provides viewers with a landscape unburdened by supposedly modern trappings like global capital, a diverse workforce, industrial unions, or environmental concerns. Viewers come to believe that modern-day miners are simply continuing the nostalgic practices of the past, not enacting an extractive present.

Stories from North America's 19th Century Gold Rushes

The *Gold Rush* franchise draws upon a plethora of old colonial stories about the role of mineral wealth in driving white colonization. In particular, *Gold Rush*

harks back to the global era of 19th century gold rushes. That era began with California in the United States in 1848, but people struck with "gold fever" also traveled to new mining sites across the Pacific Rim, particularly Australia and New Zealand, and then continued their search across parts of Africa. In North America, the U.S. West and both western and northern Canada became targets for gold seekers, with each new discovery triggering a new rush. Gold brought people from around the world to North America's mining areas, but Anglo, white settlers came to dominate the social, political, and legal systems (Mountford/Tuffnell 3–41; S. Johnson). Mining hence continued—and sometimes initiated—a process historians call "settler colonialism," a form of colonialism that demanded the permanent, often violent, replacement of the original inhabitants with a new society of settlers (Lahti).

Gold rush narratives in North America soon justified colonization in the name of gold. They often recounted miners' individual success in the face of arid lands and contentious natives. Historian Christopher Herbert explains that the mid-19th century conception of "white manliness" required itinerant miners to showcase their "bravery, emotional control, and self-reliance" (7). Facing great uncertainty in these unfamiliar lands, white men celebrated their supposed independence, juxtaposing this feature of their lives with the nonwhite peoples they encountered along the way. Whether done through letters home or newspaper stories back East, mining's "triumphalist stories," as literary scholar Janet Floyd calls them, came to emphasize American individualism and white men's triumph over a harsh environment (1–31).

These themes became especially prominent at the turn of the century. In Canada, just as in the United States, "the pursuit of mining riches" had long "played its part in fostering dreams of a transcontinental nation," as historians John Sandlos and Arn Keeling recently explained (38). Mineral exploration proved just as, if not more, central to Canadian colonization as it had in the United States (Zeller). The last rush of North America's Gilded Age happened in the Klondike region of Canada's Yukon Territory. A widespread depression coupled with an emerging mass media to turn this rush into a global phenomenon. Between 1896 and 1899, the Klondike "stampede" drew at least 100,000 prospectors, many from the United States, to a previously remote area in northern Canada.

The Klondike Gold Rush also became one of the most romanticized rushes in world history. Historian Ken Coates points out that it fit well with the era's fascination with adventure novels and rags to riches stories (21–35). Many also sensed that the Klondike would be "democratic"—anyone supposedly could

make their own fortune with a bit of luck—an appearance that contributed to the wide reach of Klondike culture (Coates 26–28). *The San Francisco Call*'s edition from January 23, 1898, provides a good example of the rhetoric surrounding the rush north. A large spread titled "Picking Up Millions in Alaska" featured tales from "successful Klondike gold hunters." Miner George Clancy, for instance, noted his "discouraging trials" and the "biting cold," but still celebrated his "luck when I picked up a fortune on the Klondike one day." Another miner, D. Barnes, played up his triumph over typhoid and a winter unlike anything he had ever experienced. Another writer claimed to have "scratched $10,000 out of the earth with a little stick." One of the wives interviewed believed Alaska and the Yukon "a hard country for a woman." She wrote that "[I] would not take responsibility of advising any of my sex to go to the Klondike" ("Picking Up Millions"). This kind of narrative omitted the very real presence of women in northern mining areas, including both indigenous women and migrants who worked their own claims (H. Green; Porslid; Zanjani; Spude; Nystrom).

Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* remains the most famous literary representation of the Klondike gold rush. In this tale, a dog named Buck is stolen from his idyllic southern California home and brought to the supposedly uncivilized Klondike. Buck becomes the best of the sled dogs through learning to physically dominate them. Experiencing the harsh environment leads Buck to become progressively feral. When the Native American Yeehats murder his owner, Buck kills several of them in vengeance. Hearing the "call of the wild," Buck joins a wolfpack at the end of the short novel, which was originally serialized for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1903 (London 2009). Here London presents the trope of a white hero—but in the form of a dog—who learns the ways of the unforgiving environment and then comes to dominate the indigenous dogs and peoples (Higginson 317–32). The book moved away from the "emotional control" idea that had been prominent in the original gold rushes, suggesting that men sometimes had to become violent to protect or revenge their families. In dismissing the indigenous people who lived in areas that European-Americans planned to conquer and extract from, this expansionist discourse supported empire-building projects in the North and justified the violence that made those projects possible. Although Jack London and the letter writers of *The San Francisco Call* had all traveled to the Klondike, the public rhetoric they shared romanticized the triumph of white manliness over the extreme environment. Little thought was given to the original inhabitants of the land, except as obstacles to overcome. For instance, the village of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in

was forcibly relocated away from the Klondike's new mining center, Dawson City, following the Gold strike (Sandlos/Keeling 69).

This public discourse also omitted letters and journals from men and women who returned from the Klondike broke and sometimes broken. Examples include a letter from the Klondike trail by Anna J. Rickenback back to her home in California. Distraught, she explained that a snow slide had buried many of her traveling companions and a blizzard had almost killed the rest. Edward C. Sharpe also traveled to the Klondike gold region. Sharpe's first diary recounts an exciting adventure towards fortune—both in drama and comedy—of a trip up the Klondike. It was published in the Seattle *Argus* in 1897. Sharpe's second diary describes a painful, grueling trip back south, absent any wealth, all while suffering from a tuberculosis that would soon take his life. This second diary was not published, perhaps because it failed to fit the public romanticization of the Klondike rush. The lessons taught by this public rhetoric were simple: The cold North would be conquered by respectable white men willing to endure its hardships. The common experience of failure was typically omitted entirely from the discourse.

Why were stories about the Klondike gold rush so disconnected from reality? One reason is a long-standing association in both Canada and the U.S. between their less-populated areas and individual freedom. By the middle of the 19th century, the emerging idea of a "Wild West" had connected historical figures like Daniel Boone and mythical creations like the characters in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* to male "adventure and comradeship in the open air," as one classic analysis put it (Smith 52). Reliant on their own backcountry skills, male characters could make and re-make themselves because they lived far away from the centers of power.

Another reason is that these Klondike stories were created at the same time that many North Americans had become quite anxious about the loss of their "frontier." For historians like Frederick Jackson Turner, Americans' encounter with a supposedly unpopulated "frontier" as they moved West made them distinct from Europeans. Turner has labeled his ethno-centric frontier as the "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (38). As many critics have since pointed out, Turner pretended that indigenous people were part of a "savage" environment, while white people represent the coming "civilization." (Limerick 17–32). For Turner, white Americans' struggle to make a new life amidst an often-unforgiving environment shaped them into a "stalwart," "rugged," and "restless" folk who were truly paragons of resourceful "individualism" (37–62). He even claimed that the frontier experience had

similarly created American institutions, including democracy. Like many of his generation, Turner worried that white people now inhabited much of this former frontier—hence, America and its Americans might lose their distinctive qualities (Wrobel).

Once Americans became convinced that this imagined frontier had, indeed, closed, frontier anxiety soon became frontier nostalgia. Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, expressed the increasingly common belief that Americans needed to preserve elements of the frontier experience. Roosevelt celebrated his "strenuous life" out West in the Dakotas because it provided him with hardships. In overcoming the West's challenges, he had learned the value of hard work, gained physical prowess, and learned the importance of bold action. Many Americans agreed that the lack of a frontier would feminize American men. The saving of purportedly "wild" spaces through the conservation movement grew partly out of an attitude that saving the frontier backcountry would similarly save white people—especially men. At the same time, a new cultural emphasis on physical fitness, organizations like the Boy Scouts, and even increased American involvement in global affairs all intended to provide men with experiences that could test and hence renew their masculinity (Wrobel; Etulain 5–30; Slotkin 29–62).

Klondike stampeders in the 1890s had clearly imbibed this hinterland mythos. Their initial letters home, before so many of them experienced failure, often expressed a rejection of industrial, urban life and an embrace of adventure. Historian Kathryn Morse explains that Klondike miners wanted more than just gold out of their participation in the rush. They also "looked to gold mining for other things that they felt to be absent from industrial life: adventure, simplicity, freedom, independence, satisfaction, a connection between hard work and wealth, and an invigorating, physical engagement with the natural world" (Morse 117). In their accounts, the remote North represented a fresh start and a mythic adventure for many of the men and women who joined the trail.

By the early 20th century, this settler colonial view had become codified in the Western—an important genre in novels, film, and, by the middle of the century, TV shows. As historian Richard Etulain puts it, the Western's frontier myth portrayed underpopulated places as "in need of double doses of civilization," forcing its "strong masculine heroes" to "conquer the demanding landscapes and challenging natives of the New Country" (30). In an altered form, many of these same elements—including risky exploration, the challenges of the natural environment, nostalgia, and white masculinity—have shown up

in what Kristin Jacobson calls the "adrenaline narrative." This popular kind of writing (and filmmaking) presents its audience with adventurous journeys into nature and protagonists who experience heightened, extreme forms of risk. Among Jacobson's examples is a popular 1990s book about an attempt at summiting Mount Everest, *Into Thin Air* (Krakauer), but many other examples can be found in television, including spinoffs from the *Gold Rush* franchise.

The Hidden Corporate Landscapes of *Gold Rush*

The reality TV series, *Gold Rush: Alaska*, reiterates many of these "frontier" ideas about white men, suggesting that they can rejuvenate both their masculinity and their pocketbooks through hard mining work in harsh environments. It began its run in 2010 by portraying Oregon father and son Jack and Todd Hoffman as average, but now unemployed, men who want to better provide for their families. They decide to gamble on their future by venturing to Alaska to find gold. In true Fiedleresque fashion, Todd leaves behind the women in his family but takes along his sons, making this a multi-generational male challenge (*Gold Rush: Alaska*, S1E1). In season one, Alaska proves unforgiving for the inexperienced gold hunters. Their hard work is valorized, but the Hoffmans have underestimated how much work it will take to get a small gold mining operation off the ground. The end result? Not quite fifteen ounces of gold—certainly not enough to have funded their operation (*Gold Rush: Alaska*, S1E11). They also received money from the network to be on the show, which made the enterprise worth their time and energy. The Hoffmans therefore return in season two, more confident in their mine; yet they fail once again and hence head to the famous mining region of the Klondike (*Gold Rush*, S2E2).

In this second season, we meet new characters, most of whom continue to be white men seeking to exploit the northern landscape, just as in 19th century mining stories. One of the new cast members is Parker Schnabel, who, at age 16, takes over his grandfather John Schnabel's Big Nugget Mine (*Gold Rush*, season 2). The series soon splits into parts, following the Hoffmans in some sections, "Dakota" Fred Hurt and his crew in others, Tony Beets and his crew in yet others, and Parker Schnabel and his foreman Rick Ness in still others. In September 2021, the show kicked off its twelfth season, but at this point the Hoffmans had left the main show (doing so in 2018) (*Gold Rush*, S8E23). New miners have become important cast members, including Rick Ness, who has started his own mining operation. Likely because his family-owned good prop-

erty and he already had a background in mining, the aforementioned Parker Schnabel is among the most successful miners on this show. Starting in season three, Schnabel has typically made more money from mining than the other featured cast members.

As might be expected for a show titled *Gold Rush*, the show spends much of its time focusing on the actual gold mined in the show but the gains are often quite small, especially in the early seasons. In season two, we learn that if the Hoffmans do not make a hundred ounces this mining season, their investors will pull out (*Gold Rush*, S2E18). In that same season Parker Schnabel needs to make a "last ditch effort" to find gold at another property (*Gold Rush*, S2E17). These rhetorical elements play up the drama, even if it is unclear if anyone is truly in danger of complete failure—especially given the complementary income from the TV network. Indeed, the low amounts of gold mined help to increase the tension, as there are constant concerns that the miners will not hit their expectations.

The mined amounts are a pittance when compared to the large enterprises that make up the modern mining industry. For example, Alaska's Fort Knox Gold Mine, an open pit, run by the Toronto-based Kinross Gold company, is a massive operation that pays $80 million in annual wages to 650 employees. In 2018, Knox employees poured 255,000 ounces of gold (Lasley). The biggest gold mines in Canada create even more revenue. The Canadian Malartic Mine, for instance, fed its mill with 55,000 tonnes/day of ore, producing around 569,000 ounces of gold in the shortened 2020 season (Bosov). These totals dwarf the figures on *Gold Rush*. The largest amount of gold mined by any of the crews on *Gold Rush* so far came from Parker Schnabel's crew, which achieved 7,500 ounces of gold in season 11 (*Gold Rush*, S11E21). Other crews have been much less successful. In season seven, Todd Hoffman completely failed at a site in the state of Oregon, and then his crew barely reached break-even at a Colorado site (*Gold Rush*, S7E14 and E21). In other words, the crews practicing small-scale mining on *Gold Rush* are not representative of how most of the mining industry and its profit work today.

The small scale of each enterprise on *Gold Rush*, however, makes it possible to celebrate miners as resourceful entrepreneurs, just as earlier gold rush stories celebrated their own protagonists. Parker Schnabel, for instance, is treated as a gold mining prodigy because of his young age, despite the fact that he had been handed a successful mining operation by his grandfather. The show's narration continually tells viewers about the industriousness and resourcefulness of the crews as they try to manipulate old mill technology, build treach-

erous roads, and dig water-filled glory holes. In the view of the show, these small teams are successful due to their own skills, not due to their reliance on the knowledge and technological advances of a global extractive industry. The show therefore draws upon older ideas about the West and the North—as places where self-made men prove their worth without others' help.

Indeed, no one on the show is portrayed as working for anyone else. Rick Ness serves as the foreman for Parker Schnabel in many episodes, but his lower place on the totem pole barely received a mention. He is even allowed to disagree with his boss as a way to increase tension on the set. Having proven his masculinity and mining prowess, Ness obtains his own crew and sets off to run his own operation in later seasons (*Gold Rush*, S9E1). When we do meet other crew members, they appear as roughly equal members of a camaraderie, not as workers trying to earn a paycheck. When a crew member leaves, it is often in a dramatic way. Cast member Dave Turin, for instance, left the show after a fistfight with another crew member (Pruitt-Young). Viewers of *Gold Rush* are not supposed to think about employer-worker relations at a modern workplace but about "adventure and comradeship in the open air," just as in 19th century frontier narratives (Smith 52).

The small scale of the mining operation also hides any environmental damage produced by extractive industries. At worst, we see small "glory holes" or tiny mills in *Gold Rush* episodes. The massive scale of an operation like the Canadian Malartic never appears. We do not learn about the environmental agencies' concerns about mine cleanup, nor problems related to property ownership. One 2018 article discusses what happened in Park County, Colorado, where some members of the *Gold Rush* show operated a dredge near a rural area called Fairplay. The show's presence caused local consternation. There was a re-zoning of land favorable to mine development by the *Gold Rush* show, followed by major concerns about contamination when the dredge dug up old tailings that likely contained mercury (Queen). State regulators in Alaska similarly feared that the show gave the wrong impression of the state. As one article puts it, "some worry about the message that's being sent to roughly 3 million American viewers who've tuned in: The Last Frontier is a land where anything goes" in terms of extraction (A. Green).

This utilitarian view of natural resources stands out—the earth is only important because it might provide the protagonists with gold. Even though the show often relies on sweeping shots of beautiful, supposedly uninhabited landscapes, it also portrays the environment as simply being there to serve people. Because the mining sites are remote, the show implies that mining them

causes no real harm to society. In the show, miners and mining companies are portrayed as never having to think about their environmental impact, which is clearly not the case in an industry that, partly due to the demands of governmental regulators, employs specialists to plan for and manage environmental mitigations.

Another industry obscured by the filming techniques is the entertainment industry, from which most of the cast is making their money. The TV network pays stars like Schnabel a rumored $25,000 an episode. That amount becomes multiplied by at least 20 episodes in a season, plus episodes for a number of spin-offs. There is a good reason why Schnabel's net worth is in the millions, and it has less to do with his actual mining prowess than with his outspoken nature on a reality show (Hamilton; Mitra). Furthermore, these frontier-based shows never reveal the large camera crews who are obviously present behind the scenes. We never learn who the people on the crews are or what role they play. The goal is instead to emphasize the supposed independence and loneliness of the "rugged" miners. This franchise therefore acts much like other shows that play with frontier nostalgia and the adrenaline narrative. *Man vs. Wild*, with Bear Grylls, is a show that pretends the protagonist is completely alone when he is, in fact, operating with a large production crew. In *Gold Rush*'s portrayal, Alaska and the Yukon remain an empty wilderness bereft of "civilization," beyond the somewhat antiquated mining technology we see. The globalized entertainment machine that creates and promotes the show thus hides amongst images of trees, mountains, mines, and the protagonists' masculine posturing.

Replaying the Gold Rush through *Parker's Trail*

The frontier nostalgia and colonialist view practiced by *Gold Rush* goes to extremes in the spinoff series, *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*. Rebecca Weaver-Hightower and Janne Lahti have suggested that settler colonial films allow "descendants of settlers to relive the experiences of first-generation settler ancestors to better appreciate their 'sacrifice' and legacy" and, through repetition, to remind "viewers that settlement is far from accomplished" (3). This kind of portrayal "offers viewers a recreation of the historic events of settlement," then connects that celebrated past to the present (Weaver-Hightower/Lahti 3). *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail* fits this framework. Instead of showcasing modern mining, this spinoff spends even more of its time promoting a settler colonial view of

the North, as it repeatedly connects Euro-American colonizers of the 19th century to rugged white people in the present. The show presents a literal "recreation of the historic events of settlement" by re-playing the Klondike Gold Rush of the 1890s in the present-day (Weaver-Hightower/Lahti 3).

The 2017 season of *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail* involves Parker Schnabel, his foreman, Rick Ness, his filmmaker friend, James Lavelle, and a female wilderness guide, Karla Charlton. They all decide to honor Parker's grandfather, who recently passed away, by attempting the 600-mile Chilkoot trail from the Alaskan coast to Dawson City in the Yukon. They plan to follow the same trail that many of the 100,000 stampeders on the first rush followed to get to the Yukon Territory. It is not clear exactly how this trek will honor his grandfather, who, despite being labeled a "pioneer," did not arrive in the North until 40 years after the 1890s Klondike gold rush. Still, there is obvious emotion expressed by protagonist Parker Schnabel, who deeply mourns his role-model grandfather, the first miner in his family. In the show, Schnabel's sentimental attachment to his grandfather quickly funnels into nostalgia for a by-gone era of supposedly "rugged" miners and their conspicuous extraction.

The first episode begins by considering the difficulties facing the modern-day crew. Karla Charlton criticizes "these alpha males," who have not prepared for the trip properly, having done no real training for an expedition that will involve intense climbing and extensive canoeing. Nor are they doing the trip at an appropriate time—as the narrator emphasizes throughout, winter is closing in on the Klondike, and they are leaving a couple of months later than the "pioneers" before them. Now they have to face what the narrator calls "the cold hard reality of the frozen North." We learn that for much of the trip, they will be alone and so they have to actually "film themselves" this time. They are going to prospect along the way, the narrator tells us, picking up gold that the original rushers missed (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E1). Just like the older colonial stories about mining, *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail* drives home the idea that white people are meant to struggle through an uncomfortable environment on their path to riches and success. Although Charlton's early comments about "alpha males" pokes fun at the masculinity involved in this mythos, the two men's lack of physical fitness, in the narrator's portrayal, quickly becomes just another hurdle that they have to overcome in "the frozen North" rather than a full-fledged critique of the exaggerated masculine roles the men are playing.

Viewers soon learn that the four travelers are going out of their way to make the trip as hard as possible, largely because doing so emphasizes their sentimental kinship with 1890s travelers. As Lavelle puts it in episode 1, "[w]e want

it to be as authentic as possible. It should be as tough for us as it was for the old timers" who hit the trails in 1897 and 1898 (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E1). Authenticity therefore becomes their preferred measurement of success—partly because the nostalgia driving the trip makes the three men believe they can enact a return to a famous place. They don't recognize that the Klondike trail itself no longer exists as it did in the 1890s because it radically changed over time. For instance, later episodes feature our intrepid team having to move their canoes around modern dams. Hence, the men have to continually deny themselves the many advantages contemporary travelers would have. Self-inflicted suffering serves as the pathway to authenticity. When Parker Schnabel later remarks that early miners "were some damn tough guys," the viewer is clearly meant to connect "old timers" to the white men currently undertaking a perilous journey (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E3).

Authenticity also becomes their measurement for success because being "authentic," in their view, allows them to imagine themselves as mining men who are individualistic, tough, and resourceful. During the first part of their trip, the crew climbs a mountain range, including a steep ascent called the "golden staircase" that the narrator tells us "broke" many original "pioneers." Yet today's crew learns to follow Schnabel's admonitions of "Yukon or bust" and "never give up," with one hiker yelling into the air that he will defeat nature. Finally, they reach the summit of "the toughest hike I've ever done," Schnabel tells us (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E1). By playing pioneer, the protagonists want to point out the "sacrifice" of people involved in the original colonial project. The end result is a sentimental justification of continued domination of mining in the area; it is supposedly part of these white people's hard-earned legacy.

By enacting an "adrenaline narrative," the show portrays nature as the main challenge the crew must overcome. Nature poses a heightened risk to every one of their actions. After their big hike in the first episode, Parker's crew faces tough winds on a lake they are supposed to canoe. After waiting for the winds to subside, some members of the crew want to take a train line around the lake. Schnabel, however, refuses to use "modern technology" like engines to pay ode to the original Klondike stampeders. Instead of "cheating," the crew finds a wagon on the rails, and then move their canoes on the train line by pushing it around the first lake (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E2). It is not clear why using rails without an engine somehow made their solution more true to the "authentic" trip they intend, but viewers are reassured that the crew has not broken any of the imagined rules Parker has set. They are still able to accurately play pioneer.

By episode two, the crew is running out of food. As with many adrenaline narratives, the show's narrator tries to exaggerate the danger, telling us our crew would otherwise starve. The four protagonists therefore have to go fishing and hunting, we are told, just like the "original pioneers" did. Yet both hunting and fishing prove tough to successfully complete in the November frost. Viewers also hear about bears and wolves seen along the trail, with the narrator noting what dangers this part of nature might pose (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E2). Each episode also reminds viewers of the great distance—600 miles total—for this trip, while cast members often explain that the crew is continually falling behind schedule if they are going to beat the icing over of the waterways. The heightened danger posed by nature thus provides viewers a reason to stay tuned and the protagonists with an ability to appear virtuous in facing off against the "wilderness" in each episode.

Despite this spin-off sharing the name *Gold Rush*, little actual mining happens. The small amount of prospecting the crew does mostly becomes another way for them to play pioneer. It is only in episode 3 that Schnabel decides to prospect for gold—changing the schedule in case they fail to make it all the way to the Klondike Region, where they had originally planned to prospect. With 362 miles still left to Dawson City, they find an old creek channel, dig out dirt, and use a pan to look for gold flakes. Seeing some promise, the crew crafts a make-shift rocker box out of a canoe paddle, a wool shirt, and some nearby trees, using it to help separate gold from gravel. They find a few flakes of gold and then decide to stake a claim for that spot—likely more for the sake of the show than as an actual prospect to later mine. The protagonists name their claim "Perseverance" in honor of the trawler boat that Rick Ness's grandfather operated, the grit shown by the Klondike's original rushers, and their own determination during the present-day journey (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E3). Just like the trip itself, which connected Schnabel's personal mourning to his nostalgia for the mining past, the name of their new claim connects Ness's personal mourning to this frontier myth. Viewers are meant to believe that members of the crew are therefore meant to mine the Yukon—their mourning justifies their mining. They are persevering in the same way as their ancestors.

During this episode, viewers only see old mining techniques, which the crew portrays as the "authentic" way to prospect. When Parker Schnabel finds a few flakes of gold in his pan, he tells viewers that "this isn't the motherlode but we found it just like the old timers did" (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E3). Hence, the show glorifies small-scale mining as exempt from the growing criticism the extractive industries face. It is a move akin to Clint Eastwood's Western

Pale Rider, which criticizes the environmental destruction caused by a massive mining enterprise. Yet, that 1985 movie sentimentally presents an alternative to corporate mining: a loving, cooperative community of small-scale tin-panners who are just trying to provide for their families, not trying to amass great wealth like the hydraulic corporation upstream (Murray/Heumann 57–8). *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail* similarly waxes nostalgia for miners living the "strenuous life." In doing so, it portrays small-scale mining as a long-standing part of the region, making mining and its practitioners seem like a natural feature of the landscape.

This representation of small-scale mining as the "authentic" form of mining also does not match the reality of the late 19th century Klondike. No matter how democratic shows like *Gold Rush* make the Klondike out to be, "as a mining phenomenon, the Klondike was also emblematic of the decisive shift away from individual and small-scale mining and toward highly-capitalized, technology-intensive extraction methods" (Sandlos/Keeling 67). During the initial stages of the rush (1897–1898), so many people took small claims in the Yukon that they completely denuded the landscape. By 1899, miners had already begun mechanizing their operations by steam thawing the tundra, which led to steam engines running hoists, steam shovels digging up creek beds, and some hydraulic mining systems, all of which employed wage labor, not truly independent producers (Sandlos/Keeling 74). In other words, even during the original Klondike rush, mining practices quickly became labor- and capital-intensive and miners rapidly became wage workers. That true story becomes yet another aspect of the rush obscured by the show's romanticization of small-scale mining in both the past and present.

Despite proclamations of "Yukon or Bust," the crew's journey to the Klondike ends abruptly in the third episode. While attempting to disembark from his canoe, Parker Schnabel slips on ice and then falls into the freezing water. The crew quickly builds a fire and gives him dry clothes, thereby staving off the danger of hypothermia, but they all remain quite worried about the rivers icing up. They decide to abandon the trip with hundreds of miles yet to travel. Schnabel calls for a plane to take the group to Dawson City by air (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E3). We are told by the cast members and narrator that they have made a valiant effort on this true frontier mission. It is not a failure because they showed grit and determination. Parker Schnabel admits that nature's opposition to his trip is sadly out of his control and that his goal is probably not "worth dying for." Schnabel explains that "a lot of the old timers died," noting that only one in three "old timers" who set out for Dawson City

actually made it there (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E3). The narrator concludes, "Parker, Karla, Rick, and James have tested themselves against the old timers of 1897. The freezing river forced them to complete the journey by plane but otherwise they've achieved their ambition" (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E3).

Like *The Call of the Wild* and like many Westerns, *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail* thus treats nature as the enemy—an enemy that people should try to conquer and even exploit but an enemy that also sometimes wins. By personifying the "Cold North," the show suggests that nature might not be worth saving. It is something to fight—and perhaps mine—instead. By making it appear that nature has simply won the battle this time, the show also removes any blame for this failure from the crew itself. Despite the crew's lack of preparation, their late departure date, and their insistence on "authentic," ineffective methods, the show allows them to remain just inheritors of an imagined "pioneer" past. When the crew's plane pulls into Dawson City, Parker registers his Yukon claim in the same way, we are told, as people did in the 1890s.

Throughout the early sections of the Schnabel crew's trip, viewers seldom see any other people, giving the impression that Schnabel and his crew are on their own in the "wilderness." However, at one point in episode 1, we visit the cabin of a lady who lives on Bennett Lake and who gives them gear that they had shipped directly to her—a scene that certainly points out quite a lot of "civilization" is present in the form of mail delivery and inhabitants (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E1). The one time the crew encounters many people comes towards the end of episode two. At that point, the crew is supposed to carry their canoes and supplies around a modern hydroelectric dam at Whitehorse—a city of 25,000. The narrator insists that this spot is the only true sign of "civilization" along the trip (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E2). As historian Traci Brynne Voyles puts it, mining regions labeled as uncivilized often become "wastelanded," made to look even more marginal and hence worthy of exploitation. This series does the same for the Klondike and Yukon. As far as *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail* is concerned, the Yukon remains the foreboding "wilderness" that miners in the 1890s encountered.

This spinoff series also directly ties the past to the present—giving us a direct line between white people braving the elements in the 1890s to white people in the 2010s. The opening titles to each episode remind the viewer that the crew of four are following "in the footsteps of legends." We are told that this crew will recognize the sacrifices of the men who "pioneered" through northern North America by re-enacting their colonial mining adventure. When the crew heads into Miles Canyon, for instance, the narrator tells us that 150 boats

smashed into its walls during the original Klondike Rush (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E2). At another point, Rick Ness injures his foot. Viewers then hear a heartwarming story about perseverance as the crew member explains that his own relative once hurt a foot out in the backcountry but had to walk for miles so that he could get treated before going into shock. Hence, even a recent foot injury gains a sentimental connection to the frontier (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E2).

Because of Ness's injury, the crew is "forced" to make an unscheduled stop at an urgent care facility in the city of Whitehorse, which they follow up with stops at a bar and a hotel. Both the narrator and Schnabel tell us that this stop does not actually qualify as "cheating" because, during the original Klondike rush, men would often stop at Whitehorse to enjoy whisky, eateries, hotels, and perhaps even houses of prostitution. The narrator and Schnabel make sure to tell white male viewers of the show that "Donald Trump's pioneering grandfather" began the family's fortune by operating a restaurant, bar, and brothel in Whitehorse (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E2 and E4; Pearson). In other words, even when events skew far from what people would have encountered in the 1890s, viewers are told repeatedly that the men are still being "authentic" and honoring their ancestors by doing so.

Only one tough (and often frustrated) woman can come along, but only because she actually has the skills and training that her companions lack. In interviews after the main episodes, cast members suggest that Karla Charlton was clearly the reason the group made it as far as it did. Charlton consistently caught more fish than the men; however, viewers never see her fish in the main show—we see Schnabel and Ness catching fish. Viewers do briefly see Charlton setting up each campsite and cooking each meal, but her hard work often remains in the background (and unappreciated) so that viewers can focus on the men instead. In one case, viewers spend five minutes watching Schnabel and Lavelle bickering as they try to hunt in the dark while Charlton unassumingly fishes, cooks, and sets up the entire campsite (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E4). Hence, the show continually emphasizes the toughness of men overcoming nature, instead of the aptitude of a woman who understands the tasks at hand. At first glance, Charlton might seem like an equal partner to the others, but a deeper look shows that she serves largely as a nurturing presence, thereby affirming traditional gender roles. Charlton is often even seen "mothering" the men, scolding them for not properly training before the trip and worrying when they stay up late drinking in Whitehorse. She is always the calm one when the men become hotheaded. Women like Charlton therefore get to take

part in the extractivist enterprise but only on the traditional, domestic terms that the men are willing to accept (Kaplan 581–606).

Charlton also plays an important role in connecting their trip to a sentimental past. Although it is clear that she is a well-trained wilderness guide, it is just not her training but her connection to the past—what the show labels her "Yukon blood"—that makes her truly qualified for this trip. The series therefore naturalizes the presence of both Karla Charlton, whose great-grandfather came during the 1890s stampede of Klondike "pioneers," and Parker Schnabel, whose grandfather they also count amongst the region's "pioneers" (*Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, S1E1). In this way, the show erases indigenous people from the Yukon's past. White people like Schnabel and Charlton instead become imagined as the true "natives" to this region. This ethnocentric discourse mimics many colonial adventure stories, which often portrayed white "frontiersmen" like Daniel Boone and Natty Bumpo and even frontiers dogs like Buck as even better at tasks like hunting, fighting, and survival than the indigenous people around them—hence, portraying them as belonging to the land. Yet the show goes even further than this: Instead of suggesting that indigenous people are vanishing, as so many Westerns do, *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail* typically fails to mention them at all. In the show's telling, they have already disappeared. Even though Canada has undergone a recent movement to provide formal land acknowledgements that recognize the original inhabitants of the places where settlers live, *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail* largely fails to acknowledge that anyone lived in these areas before, during, or after enterprising white miners arrived. Yet, the name for the path Parker's team follows—the "Chilkoot Trail"—comes from the Tlingit Nation's name for it, the Tagish Khwáan lived further inland in the Yukon, and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in inhabited the area around Dawson City. We also get no mention of the fact that so many of the original white "pioneers" enjoyed many advantages, provided both by indigenous people and modern society. Many of these white people had indigenous guides who assisted them in the worst of circumstances. The original "pioneers" also made an aerial tramway to transport goods up the golden stairway and built the train line at Bennett Lake that Schnabel refuses to use. In other words, the nostalgia of Schnabel's crew blinds them to the fact that the Klondike trail had long featured many improvements and many assistants.

The *Gold Rush*'s crew attempting this new Klondike trip similarly received modern advantages hidden by the show's creators. Although the show pretends that only four people are on the trip, later interviews tell us about the "chase crew" that they meet with when they need to change camera batteries.

When Rick Ness injures his foot, it is this same "support crew" that intervenes. When Parker Schnabel ends the trip, he can pull out a radio to ask for a plane. In other words, the trip, at a longer glance, does not look like just four people versus the elements. The show's creators hide the elaborate staging, preparation, and backup systems that made such a long journey possible. This approach allows viewers to believe that our protagonists are truly re-enacting a nostalgic "frontier" adventure.

Gold Rush: Parker's Trail is therefore a mining adventure story that uses frontier nostalgia to justify both colonial projects in the past and resource extraction in the present.

Nostalgic Extraction

Most of the other mining shows on reality TV fit the *Gold Rush* model, whether it is *Yukon Gold*, *Bering Sea Gold*, *Fool's Gold*, *Curse of the Frozen Gold*, or *Ice Cold Gold*. Small teams of men explore new areas, extract resources, and justify their actions under the banner of the "frontier." One of the few outliers featuring a large working mine with many employees is Spike TV's *Coal*, which ran for one season in 2011. At first glance, it stands apart as an attempt to engage with a modern industrial workplace and yet it purposefully focuses on a smaller underground mine in Appalachia, not one of the massive, less labor-intensive, surface operations that now dominate the area's coal mining. As historian Bob Johnson points out, it also traffics in hyper-masculinity, emphasizing the dangers men face underground (111–38). Dramatic narration about methane, rock falls, and possible accidents highlights the risks of the enterprise, even as the show hides miners' actual reality, placing white veneers on all the miners' teeth and brand-new trucks on the set. As in other mining shows, the workforce is composed almost entirely of white men and each of them talks about his hard work as an impressive individual effort, not as part of a collective process. Despite some attention paid to the workforce, "the interests of the workers are identified with the interests of the owners without any hint of contradiction or antagonism—all aspects of work are understood purely in terms of productivity and profit," as literature scholar Tetiana Soviak explains (135). Instead, the manager of the operation is the show's hero. Although he spends most of his days safely ensconced in an office, the manager enjoys a portrayal as an entrepreneur fighting against mechanical breakdowns, federal regulations, and an unruly workforce (*Coal*, S1E1–7).

Therefore, *Coal* largely fits the *Gold Rush* model. It too focuses on a heroic entrepreneur conquering a challenging environment through older mining methods and the efforts of hardworking white men. It also reminds viewers of the long history of coal mining in Appalachia, justifying the mining present through its connections with a nostalgic, extractive past. Appalachia is the extractivist "backcountry," already sacrificed to mining. Meanwhile, some of the show's current miners were the progeny of retired miners; hence, viewers receive a suggestion that they are part of an unbroken line of miners. It is a move somewhat akin to *Gold Rush: Parker's Trail*, which repeatedly tells viewers about miner Parker Schnabel's grandfather, who is also a miner. Extractive work becomes seen as another form of family business—a long accepted tradition in North America. In doing so, U.S. shows continue to naturalize resource extraction in regions that are remote from large urban areas.

As the progenitor of shows like *Coal*, *Gold Rush* and its spin-offs therefore serve as good examples of the ways that North American reality television has hidden modern extraction behind a romanticized past. The effects of this portrayal have varied, but it is hard to see many of them as particularly positive. Instead of a complex present, we get a monochromatic past. The global nature of the industry disappears into a vague idea of frontier. Laborers are not seen as workers, but as "real men"—as embodiments of a supposedly "authentic" masculine lifestyle. Environmental issues do not exist in the frontier's supposedly pristine "wilderness." Whiteness and maleness are seen as mining's default, even as the mining industry itself searches for more women to be involved (Doku; Ellix et al.). Despite pretending that the show is "authentic," *Gold Rush* instead imbues its imagery and narration with frontier mythos, thus absolving viewers from their own complicity in colonial practices and modern-day environmental impacts. It is hard to know what a truly modern mining show would look like, but *Gold Rush* is not it.

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