

## Slow Violence: Industrialized Recreation and Racial Exclusion in the Colorado Rockies

Eric Busch

*I owned the land as far as the eye  
could see under the crown of Spain,  
and I toiled on my earth  
and gave my Indian sweat and blood  
for the Spanish master,  
Who ruled with tyranny over man and  
beast and all that he could trample  
But. . .THE GROUND WAS MINE.*

-- Rodolfo Corky Gonzales, *I Am Joaquin*

In 1963, journalist Neil Morgan groped for an explanation behind the booming growth of the urban American West. In this new, postwar America, Morgan mused with evident wonder, people were “so prosperous and mobile” that they were moving to the so-called Sunbelt not for jobs, but for pleasure.<sup>1</sup> The notion that people could resettle somewhere simply because they liked it seemed unprecedented. It also presented fine business opportunities. At the northernmost edge of the Sunbelt, Denver witnessed the emergence of a new kind of industrial synergy in the early postwar decades—no longer between mining and railroads as in years past—but between homebuilding and tourism. Both industries relied on bringing new people into the region. The natural blending of

---

<sup>1</sup> Neil Morgan, *Westward Tilt; the American West Today* (New York, NY: Random House, 1963), 5.

their advertising pitches was visible the promotional materials for many of Denver's new postwar suburbs, which sold prospective residents on the idea of a vacationized lifestyle, oriented toward the ski slopes, hiking trails and fishing streams just west of the city.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, this marriage of tourism and urban growth transformed the geography of both Denver and its Rocky Mountain hinterland just as profoundly as mining had once done. It remade the cityscape by helping to drive the break-neck pace of suburban sprawl in and around Denver. Of the nearly 420,000 whites to move to the Denver metropolitan area between 1940 and 1960, 65 percent took up residence along the city's suburban fringes.<sup>3</sup> And finally, the fusion of tourism and suburban growth redefined mountain tourist and leisure spots as cultural and economic annexes of the suburbs—suburban parks, essentially—as well as a fundamental element of place-identity for affluent white newcomers to the region.<sup>4</sup>

This history of Denver-as-place—a narrative of rapid and spectacular postwar growth and change—is a familiar one shared by many other Sunbelt and Western cities. But Denver has other histories as well—less visible, and characterized by continuity rather than disruption. By the end of World War II, racial segregation and environmental injustice had long been deeply woven into Denver's physical and cultural geography. Hispanic Denverites were hemmed into the city's most polluted and vulnerable neighborhoods. Many Hispanic families lived in improvised and unregulated shantytowns clustered along the bottomlands of the South Platte River in the industrial heart of the

---

<sup>2</sup> William Philpott and William Cronon, *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country*, Reprint edition (University of Washington Press, 2014), 166.

<sup>3</sup> Note that it is difficult to isolate the number of "Anglos" from the number of Latinos in Denver at this time, as both were counted as "white" by the U.S. Census. U.S. Census Bureau. *Census 1940, Census 1960*. Social Explorer, Inc., Department of Sociology, Queens College and Graduate Center, CUNY. Accessed September 11, 2009. [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com).

<sup>4</sup> David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007).

city. Unlike the Anglos streaming into the city from points east, they were generally not in Denver by choice, but rather by economic and historical circumstance. Black Denver neighborhoods, by some contrast, sustained thriving middle and professional classes. But Black Denverites were also confined by redlining and racial covenants to a handful of neatly kept neighborhoods just east of the city center. These homes and neighborhoods had been gradually losing value since the 1920s, as affluent Anglo Denverites decamped for Denver's isolated and racially restrictive suburban frontiers.<sup>5</sup> This trend would only accelerate in the decades to come. Additionally, the Denver Police Department had already earned a fearsome reputation for corruption and brutality, and was well practiced at patrolling the city's racial borders with violence and intimidation.

And finally, a long-emerging American policy consensus around automobile transportation had prevented meaningful investment in the expansion and upkeep of Denver's once-extensive "interurban" rail system—the only conveyance by which carless Denverites had been able to access the city's mountain leisure spots. By 1950, Denver's public rail network had been entirely replaced by city-only busses; its trackage ripped up and scrapped. Not coincidentally, mountain resort destinations like Lincoln Hills, which in the 1920s and 30s had catered to Denver's Black middle class and drawn comparisons to Idlewild, Michigan, quickly faded into obscurity after World War II, cut off from Denver by the death of the railroad. Destruction of neighborhoods to build new superhighways, along with the increased traffic and smog that accompanied automobility also posed serious problems for Denver residents. For Black and Hispanic Denverites,

---

<sup>5</sup> In 1922, the tony Denver enclave of Cherry Hills became Denver's first automobile-only suburb, designed and located expressly to distance and insulate its well-heeled residents from what they considered to be Denver's undesirable urban elements. Cherry Hills set the precedent that would become the rule after World War II. Phil Goodstein, *From Soup Lines to the Front Lines: Denver During the Depression and World War II, 1927-1947* (Denver: New Social Publications, 2007), 341.

World War II was not the historical rupture of explosive growth that it was for well-to-do suburban whites. Their lived geography was, if anything, slowly contracting. And crucially, their absence from Denver's mountain backyard—at precisely the moment that it was becoming a vital cultural and economic part of the city—had the effect of naturalizing the “whiteness” of Denver's mountain space.

For Black Denverites in particular, who had once been part of Denver's emerging culture of mountain leisure, the new postwar isolation and alienation from the mountain hinterland represented not merely a loss of access to leisure and enjoyment, but also a profound loss of prestige within Denver's urban hierarchy. Along with other racialized communities in Denver, Black Denverites could no longer project their affluence and urban power as a community through the control and use of the mountain hinterland. No longer considered to be hinterland stakeholders, Black Denverites found themselves frozen out as a community from important urban decision-making processes regarding how mountain space should be claimed and utilized for urban purposes. They were left out of the booming growth and development of Colorado's ski resorts, which became a multimillion-dollar tourist industry beginning in the 1950s. In a growing city increasingly defined by its control over its hinterland region, the cultural geography controlled and influenced by Denver's Black community was, again, shrinking.

This contrast of spatial dynamics might be construed as an example of Rob Nixon's conception of “slow violence,” which he defines as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”<sup>6</sup> For those already struggling against the common disadvantages of race and class shared by

---

<sup>6</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

other cities, lack of access to the mountains was yet another vector of social marginalization. Yet, in keeping with Nixon's dictum that slow violence is largely invisible, this narrative of exclusion has been overlooked, not just in the historiography of Denver, but in almost all urban and environmental histories that attempt to tie urban, suburban and rural space into a single synthetic narrative.

There are likely a few reasons for this. Some might interpret racial exclusion from Denver's mountain hinterland as merely another among the constellation of consequences that followed from being frozen out of Denver's suburbs—a knock-on effect of residential segregation with little import or meaning on its own. And, even if one accepts that racialized exclusion from Denver's mountain playground *did* in fact impose separate and additional penalties on the excluded, how does one account for those penalties? Was the exclusion an example of *environmental* injustice, or something else? What data is required to assess the damage caused by that exclusion, and how does the researcher control for external variables? And finally, historians are, to a certain extent, bound by the limits of the sources they study. Generally, we are taught to avoid going beyond our sources—to write about what *did* happen, rather than what did not. There is an irremediable element of counter-factualism to any reckoning of the environmental and cultural costs of racialized geographic exclusion. Borrowing again from Nixon, the loss that this exclusion may have represented is further discounted by the somehow still widely held notion that Denverites of color simply had no interest in mountain recreation, and were thus the primary authors of their own segregation from their city's mountain backyard.

When I first began to look at this topic, I pored through the archives hoping to find evidence of explicit attempts by Black and Hispanic Denverites to reverse, or at least to decry, the trend toward their exclusion in the mountains. I haven't found much. The postwar concerns of these communities lay much closer to home, including access to city parks and other urban spaces, housing, delinquency, unfair policing, and lack of representation in city government. Hispanics in particular contended against massive environmental injustices in their own neighborhoods. Denver's two main interstates both ran right through the heart of Denver's Hispanic communities, and their construction forced the displacement of hundreds of homes and businesses. The Platte River Flood of 1965 killed 21 people, destroyed whole neighborhoods, and wiped out nearly every bridge and viaduct in town. The disaster highlighted the environmental costs of having used the river as a dumping ground for garbage, unsightly industry and unwanted people, and prompted the city to go on a flood control and urban renewal spree that would ultimately be even more damaging to minority neighborhoods than the flood had been.

Yet for many Denver Hispanics at least, the awareness of being part of a larger cultural landscape was never that far from the surface. In fact, while the cultural relationship of industrialized leisure between white suburbanites and the mountain hinterland was of recent vintage and at least somewhat manufactured, many Hispanic Denverites had a much deeper and long-standing cultural connection with a different hinterland—the high plains, basins and highlands of southern Colorado. Known as Hispanos, this subgroup was native to Northern New Mexico, having descended from Spanish settlers there before the land was annexed to the United States. Hispanos in Colorado had long lived and worked in step with the industries that dictated land use in

Southern Colorado's mountains and plains. From railroads to coalmines to sugar beet fields, Hispanos had contributed to the creation of an economic region, while establishing what historian Sarah Deutsche described as a rhythmic and relatively stable pattern of yearly migration among Hispanos back and forth between New Mexico and Southern Colorado.<sup>7</sup> At the very northern edge of this cyclical migration, Denver thus became the winter home for many Hispano farm workers and coal miners. Although they did not have a footprint in the mountains, they were able by their cyclical presence to assign place-meaning to Denver's southern hinterland.

In the 1960s, that sense of hinterland-as-place would become visible in the activism and rhetoric of Corky Gonzales, a leader in Denver's militant Chicano movement. Like Gonzales himself, Denver was something of an anomaly in the geography of the national Chicano movement. Unlike other Western hotbeds of Chicano activism in Texas and California, Denver's Hispanic population was comparatively small. While Chicano activists were able to gain and leverage considerable local political power in cities like San Antonio and Los Angeles, Denver's city government remained largely closed to the Chicano movement. Gonzales' frustration with Denver's municipal government was, in fact, a major factor in his gradual radicalization during the early 1960s.

Many have attributed Denver's prominence in the movement to the sheer force of Gonzales's example and charisma. But as the son of migrant workers himself, Gonzales's activism was shaped by the very specific experience of growing up Hispanic in Denver. And his organizational vehicle, the Crusade for Justice, was born out of a longstanding

---

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Latino Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 34-38.

set of grievances against Denver's city government, especially with respect to police brutality. In its most radical form, the CFJ focused in carving out literal spaces of Hispanic self-determination and self-government in Denver, free from the oppressive presence of the police and the public schools.

The Denver Chicano movement also linked into the pan-Western roots of Chicano nationalist movements in California, Texas and New Mexico—a broad strain of political and cultural activism that imagined both a real and symbolic Chicano homeland, called *Aztlán* after the mythical ancestral home of the Aztecs. Gonzales and other Denver Chicano leaders frequently traveled in support of activists in other states, and were involved in Reies Tijerina's armed raid on the Tierra Amarilla courthouse in New Mexico to reinstate Spanish colonial land grants. Access to, and use of land clearly played an important role in the symbolism, rhetoric, and activism of Denver's Chicano movement.

Is it possible that the Chicano movement in Denver was, in part, an indirect response to the postwar racial exclusion of the mountain hinterland—its own kind of indigenous resource rebellion? I want to be careful not to remove the Denver Chicano Movement from its important historical context within the national Chicano Movement. I think it is important, however, to integrate this history into the larger history of the city—to tell the story of Denver's Chicano movement with an eye to how it originated from, fit into, and impacted Denver's history itself.

But doing so raises a number of provocative questions: How did Denver's Chicano activists see their city and hinterland in the context of their nationalist geography? How did they propose to change and/or redefine the urban spaces around



them? Gonzales himself made almost no reference to the Rocky Mountains, but spoke passionately and consistently about a Chicano regional hinterland in the American Southwest. How did this space—both real and imaginary—function as a Chicano hinterland? Was the Denver Chicano movement motivated at least in part by environmental injustice?

In the end, the militancy of Chicano movement contributed to Denver's social and political fracture. Given its nationalist nature, the CFJ did not seek or develop alliances within Denver's existing power structure, and it had absolutely nothing to say to the white suburbs. While control of space loomed large in its rhetoric and political aims, that space was usually either defined practically, in terms of city blocks, or symbolically, in the terms of a mythical Chicano homeland. But as the rhetoric softened, and environmental justice issues began to figure more explicitly and prominently in the activism of Denver Latinos, tentative progressive alliances began to spring up across the urban-suburban line. In 1982, a progressive coalition that included the remnants of the Crusade for Justice and progressive Anglos elected Federico Pena as Denver's first Latino mayor.

Ultimately, Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence implies that we have to expand our notions of what constitutes resistance to environmental injustice. I have by no means cleared these conceptual hurdles in my own work. But I have found the notion of "slow violence" very helpful in framing this portion of my scholarship. I hope to have a fruitful discussion with the other members of the panel, as well as the audience, about how to conceive, measure, and write about the slow violence of racial exclusion from consumer landscapes using a historical framework.

