

# LEFT AT HOME: INDUSTRIALIZED RECREATION, RACIAL EXCLUSION AND URBAN HISTORY IN THE COLORADO ROCKIES

## DISRUPTIONS AND CONTINUITIES

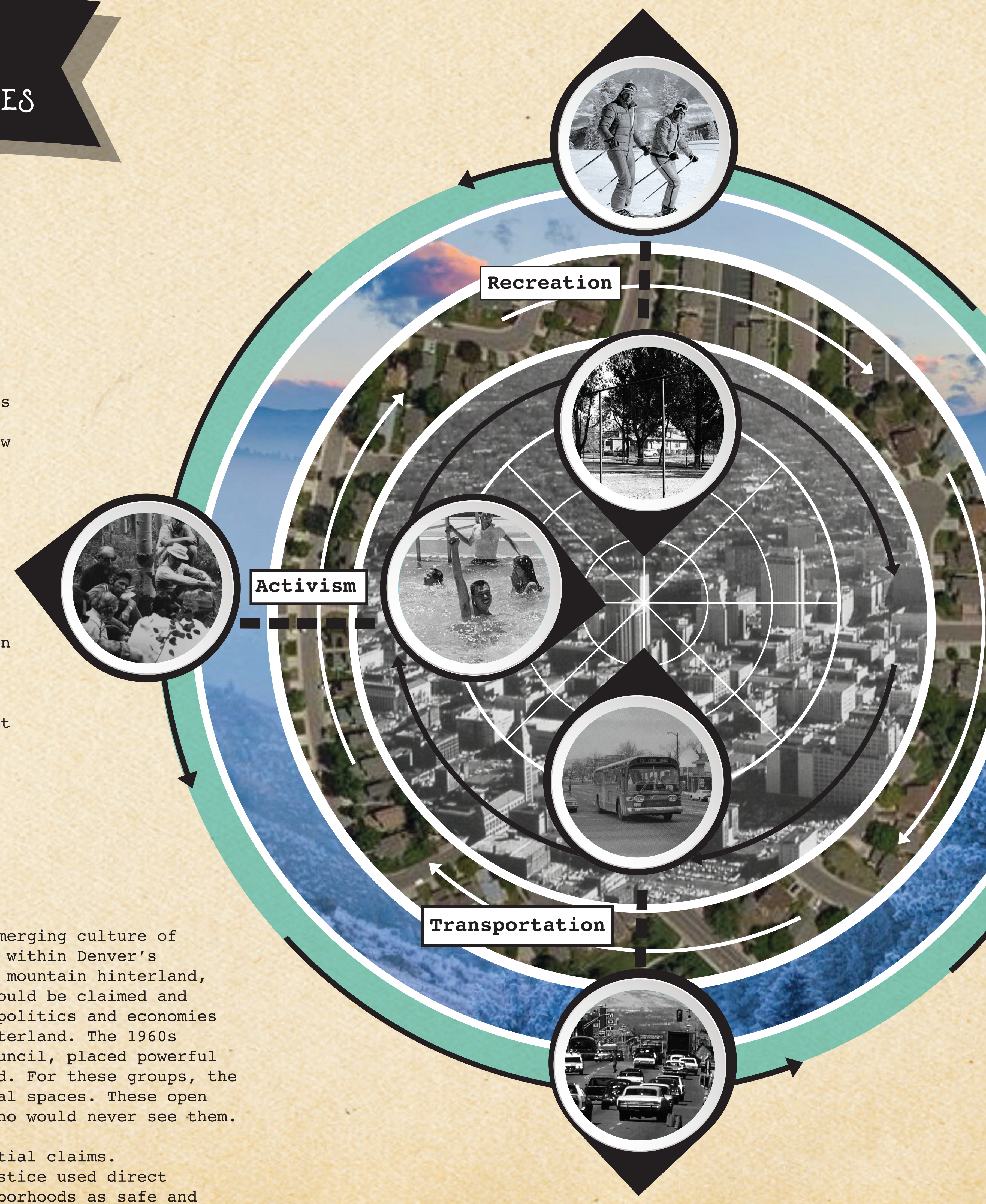
Like most American cities, Denver's environmental and urban history is deeply entwined with its history of racial formation. Particularly after World War II, access to Denver's mountain hinterland became an important resource and cultural marker for the city's expanding middle class. Mountain recreation became a primary vector of Denver's evolving urban imperialism, as middle and upper class Denverites made expansive new claims on the nearby mountain landscape. Ski slopes and hiking trails became weekend destinations for upwardly mobile professionals and their families. Markets for condos and vacation homes flourished in brand new mountain resort communities. In the early 1960s, Denver-based mountain sports clubs gave rise to a powerful local environmental movement, which fought successfully to establish recreation and ecology as legitimate land uses in Denver's expanding mountain hinterland.

At the same time, Denverites of color, concentrated by various forms of housing segregation into failing neighborhoods in the city's core, found themselves written out that mountain landscape. Highways replaced the trams that had once conveyed Denverites of all classes and racial backgrounds to the city's foothills. Postwar urban planning prioritized automobile transit to the exclusion of other modes of travel, and gave no thought to preserving the access of core neighborhood residents to the mountains. As a result, over a relatively short period, Denver's mountains became almost wholly defined as white suburban space; forbidding and distant enough from Denverites of color to prevent any significant incursion. Meanwhile, the lived habitats of Hispanic and Black Denverites remained largely geographically static, while Denver's police department patrolled neighborhood color lines using violence and intimidation.

## CLAIMING THE LANDSCAPE

The relative inability of poor people of color to participate in the region's emerging culture of mountain leisure implied not only loss of physical access, but also of prestige within Denver's urban hierarchy. Unable to project affluence and power through their use of the mountain hinterland, Denverites of color were left out of the decision-making about how that space would be claimed and utilized. By the late 1950s, city and suburb had developed diverging cultures, politics and economies of space. Denver's suburbs became increasingly oriented toward the mountain hinterland. The 1960s conservation movement, led by new organizations like the Colorado Open Space Council, placed powerful cultural claims on what had become an effectively segregated mountain hinterland. For these groups, the mountain hinterlands were to be preserved either as wilderness or as recreational spaces. These open spaces, they argued, were the birthright of every American citizen—even those who would never see them.

Meanwhile, civil rights activists within Denver's urban core made their own spatial claims. Organizations like the Denver Black Panthers and Corky Gonzales' Crusade for Justice used direct action—including the "splash-ins" picture to the right—to claim their own neighborhoods as safe and usable spaces of life and leisure. These actions included the "takeover" of Columbus Park (or la Raza Park) throughout the 1970s by Chicano activists."



Pictured above: The "inward/outward" Denver dynamic is defined by unequal access to the mountain hinterland and contrasting movements of spatial reform.

## TRANSPORTATION IN THE MOUNTAIN HINTERLAND

Before its demise in 1950, Denver's Interurban Railway regularly ferried passengers from central Denver to the foothill towns of Golden and Leyden. The "Wishbone" route, leaving every day from the steps of the Brown Palace Hotel, offered passengers affordable foothill tours with "luxury, ease, comfort and speed." In the early days of the 20th century, the Interurban seemed a much easier proposition for getting to the mountains than a car (for those wealthy enough to own one). The converted carriage roads that wended their way up the foothill canyons usually taxed car and driver alike.

In 1910, at the urging of the Denver Motor Club, the city hired landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. to plan a system of mountain parks, serviced by a network of modern, paved roads. The Denver Mountain Park system began to transform the city's mountain hinterland from a landscape of extractive industry to a landscape of industrialized leisure, accessible only by car. The privatization of transportation to Denver's mountain hinterland in the early to mid 20th century excluded those without access to automobiles. The practical effect was to imprint the mountains, culturally and socially, as "white space."

The contemporary topography of Denver's Rocky Mountain hinterland is deeply inscribed, both physically and culturally, by the roads that bring people to it. One of the most famous and oft-used photos of Denver and the Rockies is the one seen at left, looking west from Interstate 70 near Genesee Park. Ironically, Denver's new light rail system, built decades later, very closely retraces the old Interurban's route to Golden. The map to the left contrasts the modern route (in black) to the that of the old Interurban (in blue).

## CONSERVATION AND CIVIL RIGHTS: CONTRASTS IN SPATIAL ACTIVISM

There were sharp strategic and tactical contrasts in the postwar spatial activism of suburban conservationists and civil rights groups in Denver. Those contrasts are made visible in the pairing of photographs to the right. The top photo depicts an immersive ecology lesson led by a member of the Boulder-based Thorne Institute in 1969. Ecological education was a popular form of activism for the technocratically-inclined "Second Wave" conservation movement, meant to influence and motivate policymakers to protect "open space" from industrial or residential development.

The 1970s "takeover" of La Raza/Columbus Park transformed it into a zócalo—a central square and gathering place for the Northside barrios. Many residents considered the park and the Northside to be part of Aztlán—physical manifestations of the ancient Chicano homeland. Sporadic police efforts to forcibly remove local residents only deepened their resolve. The lower photo is a still from a television news story on the La Raza Park riot of 1981, when Denver police used tear gas to disrupt a peaceful cultural festival and clear the park. The following year, damage caused by the clash forced the closure of the park's pool.

Although gentrification has changed the neighborhood considerably, many residents still refer to the park as La Raza Park. But the takeover of the park remained a moment of triumph for Northsiders long afterward. And while gentrification has since changed the racial makeup of the neighborhood considerable, many longtime residents still know Columbus Park only as La Raza Park."

## TOWARD A MORE UNIFIED HISTORY OF PLACE IN THE URBAN WEST

The racialization of open space in and around Denver, along with its causes and effects, point to an important and understudied strand in the larger history of the modern urban American West. Segregation in Denver's suburbs is closely linked to the segregation of its tourism and leisure-oriented mountain hinterland. But how did these two forms of segregation combine to harm racial minorities in Denver? How do we measure that harm? And how did Denverites of color fight back?

Finally, how does this history change our understanding of Denver and the Front Range as a place? How did the contrasting spatial activism of the civil rights and second-wave conservation relate to each other, and help to shape the city and region? What can their disparate but interrelated histories tell us about the claiming of space, and the making of place, in the urban American West?

