**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 intertwined 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 of the mountain landscape. Highways replaced the trains 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 a 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 these spaces 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 conservations and organizations like the Colorado Open Space Council, planned powerful cultural claims on what had become an effectively segregated mountain hinterland. For these groups, the mountain landscapes 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 Cory Coryale’s Crusade for Justice used direct action—including the “apartheid” 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.

**TRANSPORTATION IN THE MOUNTAIN HINTERLAND**

Before its demise in 1959, Denver’s Interurban Railway regularly ferried passengers from central Denver to the foothills towns of Golden and Leyden. The “Wishbone” route, leaving everyday 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 was a much easier proposition for getting to the mountains than a car (for those wealthy enough to own one). The converted electric railway that wound its way up the foothill canyons usually taxied 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-photographed images of Denver and the Rockies is the one seen at left, looking west from Interstate 70 near Golden Gate Park. Ironically, Denver’s new light rail system, built long after the Wishbone, 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**

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The 1970s “takeover” of La Raza/Columbus Park transformed it into a park—a central square and gathering place for the northside barrio. Many residents considered the park and the Northside to be part of Antlán—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 boulder 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 Northside residents. And while gentrification has since changed the racial makeup of the neighborhood, many long-time 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 American West. Segregation in Denver’s suburbs is closely linked to the segregation of the city’s mountain and foothill landscapes. How did those 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 activities of the civil rights and second-wave conservation relate to each other, and help to shape the city and region? What can we do not disrupt but instead foster inter-racial collaborations about the meaning of space, and the making of place, in the urban American West?