

An aerial photograph of a person in a white shirt and blue cap watering a large green lawn. A long green hose is coiled on the grass. The person is in the lower right quadrant, spraying water. The rest of the image is a vast, uniform green lawn.

The Slums of Aspen

IMMIGRANTS VS. THE
ENVIRONMENT IN
AMERICA'S
EDEN

LISA SUN-HEE PARK and DAVID NAGUIB PELLOW

The Slums of Aspen

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the Environment in
America's Eden



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ABBREVIATIONS

Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE)
American Indian Movement (AIM)
American Smelting and Refining Company (later renamed ASARCO)
Asistencia Para Latinos (Assistance for Latinos/APL)
Aspen Valley Community Foundation (AVCF)
Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS)
Carbondale Council on Arts and Humanities (CCAH)
Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform (CAIR)
Committee on Women, Population and the Environment (CWPE)
Conservation International (CI)
Criminal Alien Program (CAP)
Earth Liberation Front (ELF)
Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR)
Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)
Immigration and Nationalization Service (INS)
International Monetary Fund (IMF)
Locally Unwanted Land Uses (LULU)
National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (NAPALC)
North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)
Political Ecology Group (PEG)
Roaring Fork Area Adult Literacy Program (RFAALP)
Roaring Fork Legal Services (RFLS)
Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization (SUSPS)
Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)
Zero Population Growth (ZPG)

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Introduction

Environmental Privilege in the Rocky Mountains

On December 13, 1999, the City Council of Aspen, Colorado—one of the country’s most exclusive recreational sites for some of the world’s wealthiest people—unanimously passed a resolution petitioning the U.S. Congress and the president to restrict the number of immigrants entering the United States. The language of the resolution suggests that this goal could be achieved by enforcing laws regulating undocumented immigration and reducing authorized immigration to 175,000 persons per year, down from the current annual level of between 700,000 and one million.¹ One of their primary reasons for encouraging tougher immigration laws was the purported negative impact of immigrants on the nation’s ecosystems.

Concerns about immigration’s environmental impacts generally include such broad issues as urban/suburban sprawl, the loss of urban green space, and overdevelopment of wilderness and agricultural lands. In Aspen, more specific complaints include everything from car exhaust pollution associated with older model vehicles many immigrants drive (since workers drive anywhere from thirty to one hundred miles to labor in Aspen’s tourist industry), littering in mountain caves where some homeless immigrant workers sleep since affordable housing is nonexistent (the average sale price of a single family home in Aspen in 2000 was \$3.8 million²), to having too many babies (i.e., overpopulation), which some fear will contaminate the pristine culture that accompanies the stunning ecology of the Rocky Mountains. With an unemployment rate of 1.5 percent (in

2000), Aspen experienced severe labor shortages, and Latinos and other immigrants filled the many low-paying, seasonal jobs within the service industry. And, while there are a wide number of nationalities represented in the immigrant service economy of the Roaring Fork Valley, we focus on Latinos who comprise the majority of immigrants in the area.

The narratives that define immigration (particularly from Latin America) as a leading ecological threat also expose a profound irony: the everyday reality of this playground for the rich depends enormously upon low-wage immigrant labor. The luxury goods and services that distinguish Aspen, that make it a “world-class” resort town, are possible in large part because of the workers from all over the world who clean the goods and deliver the services and care for the people who buy them. In some respects, this is a bizarre story of a town that prides itself on being environmentally conscious, whose city council can approve the construction of yet another 10,000-square-foot vacation home with a heated outdoor driveway, and simultaneously decry as an eyesore the “ugly” trailer homes where low-income immigrants live. In other respects, this is a familiar story of America’s continuing clash between people of different races and classes, who rely on each other and yet cannot figure out how to live with each other. In still other respects, this is a story of the future, about the increasingly brutal inequality that will only become more pronounced as we negotiate the fast-paced global economy and its flows of money, ideas, and people.³

From 2000 to 2004, we traveled up and down Aspen’s social pecking order. We conducted extensive archival and interview-based research to understand how people experience these contentious social issues. Our goal was to better understand the growing economic and racial inequalities from new vantage points, specifically from the perspective of environmentalists and immigrants. Our mission is to shed new light on these controversies, and to raise what we hope will be innovative, constructive questions that point to productive solutions.

Scholars and activists have, for four decades, presented evidence that people of color, as well as poor, working class, and indigenous communities face greater threats from pollution and industrial hazards than other groups. Environmental threats include municipal and hazardous waste incinerators, garbage dumps, coal-fired power plants, polluting manufacturing facilities, toxic schools, occupationally hazardous workplaces,

substandard housing, uneven impacts of climate change, and the absence of healthy food sources. Marginalized communities tend to confront a disproportionate volume of these threats, what researchers and advocates have labeled *environmental injustice* and *environmental racism*.⁴ These communities are also more likely to be impacted by extractive industrial operations such as mining, large dams, and timber harvesting, as well as “natural” disasters like flooding, earthquakes, and hurricanes.⁵ We observe these patterns at the local, regional, national, and global scale, and the damage to public health, cultures, economies, and ecosystems from such activities is well documented.⁶ For example, immigrants and people of color in California’s Silicon Valley live in communities with disproportionately high concentrations of toxic superfund sites and water contamination, and work in jobs that expose them to disproportionately high volumes of hazardous chemicals.⁷ In Chicago, African Americans and Latinos live in neighborhoods with disproportionately high numbers of garbage dumps and other environmental hazards,⁸ and we see this pattern holding true for Asian Americans, Native Americans, and working-class whites nationally.⁹ The field of environmental justice studies has emerged as a means to consider the historical and contemporary drivers of environmental inequalities, its many manifestations, and as a vehicle to address this problem through research, action, and policy. Environmental justice studies span the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, law, communication, economics, literature, ethnic studies, public health, architecture, medicine, and many others. Activists and policymakers have also produced a great deal of research on environmental justice issues and have drawn on the work of scholars to pass laws and introduce state and corporate policies, which would confront some of the most glaring aspects of environmental injustice in the United States and globally.

Scholars have also demonstrated how communities have responded to such ecological violence creatively through protest, art, science, and sustainable development projects. Such work underscores how environmental injustices shape the politics of race, class, indigeneity, citizenship, gender, sexuality, and culture.¹⁰ While these studies reveal the hardships and suffering associated with environmental inequality and environmental racism, fewer studies consider the flipside, or source, of that reality: *environmental privilege*. Over the last several years we have been developing this concept, inspired by the work of scholars like William Freudenburg, Kenneth Gould,

George Lipsitz, and Laura Pulido.¹¹ We argue that environmental privilege results from the exercise of economic, political, and cultural power that some groups enjoy, which enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities such as forests, parks, mountains, rivers, coastal property, open lands, and elite neighborhoods. Environmental privilege is embodied in the fact that some groups can access spaces and resources, which are protected from the kinds of ecological harm that other groups are forced to contend with everyday. These advantages include organic and pesticide-free foods, neighborhoods with healthier air quality, and energy and other products siphoned from the living environments of other peoples. In our study, we show how environmental privileges accrue to the few while environmental burdens confront the many, including lack of access to clean air, land, water, and open spaces.

If environmental racism and injustice are abundant and we can readily observe them around the world, then surely the same can be said for environmental privilege. We cannot have one without the other; they are two sides of the same coin. The authors of the groundbreaking United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment articulate the relationship between environmental injustice and environmental privilege quite powerfully:

In numerous cases, it is the poor who suffer from the loss of environmental services due to the pressure exerted on natural systems for the benefit of other communities, often in other parts of the world. . . . The impact of climate change will be felt above all in the poorest parts of the world—for example, as it exacerbates drought and reduces agricultural production of the driest regions—while greenhouse gas emissions essentially come from rich populations.¹²

Where there is pesticide poisoning of agricultural workers and ecosystems as a result of multinational chemical companies producing and forcing these toxins onto laborers and global South communities (via aid packages from international financial institutions), somewhere those who profit from these actions may be living and working in pesticide-free spaces, eating organic foods (the term “global South” is a mainly a social—rather than strictly geographic—designation meant to encompass politically and economically vulnerable communities). While some people are forced to live next door to a paint factory, a landfill, or an

incinerator and breathe air that contributes to asthma and various respiratory diseases, others have the luxury of spending time in second homes in secluded semirural environs and can marvel at the fresh air they take in during a morning walk. Deforestation in the Amazon and Indonesia produces wood and paper products for people in far away places who live in far more comfortable surroundings, while the indigenous peoples whose land produces such goods confront genocide. Environmental privilege not only feeds off of environmental injustice, it *is* environmental injustice. The French journalist Hervé Kempf puts it this way: “We must . . . understand that the ecological crisis and the social crisis are two faces of the same disaster. And this disaster is implemented by a system of power that has no other objective than to maintain the privileges of the ruling classes.”¹³

Environmental privilege exists whenever environmental injustice occurs. In Minnesota, residents receive much of their heating and cooling from the Xcel Energy Corporation and Manitoba Hydro, both of which supply that energy from hydroelectric dams built on the lands of the Métis and Cree First Nations in Canada. As their hunting grounds and sources of fishing were disrupted in the wake of dam construction and flooding, these indigenous communities have faced economic, social, psychological, cultural, and ecological devastation. Dawn Mikkelsen’s film *Green Green Water* explores this story in depth and urges Minnesota residents who enjoy the benefits of hydro-powered electricity to reflect upon the price that Canadian indigenous nations pay for their southern neighbors’ creature comforts. Environmental privileges like this are difficult to witness, but they are rarely questioned because of the social distance between those who receive them and those who suffer the consequences. In fact, few Minnesotans have any idea where their energy comes from.

The international trade in hazardous waste reveals environmental privilege and racism on a global scale. As the volume of industrial chemical pollutants expanded during the post–World War II economic boom in the global North, environmental movements in Europe and the United States pushed for greater regulation of these materials through legislative mechanisms like the Clean Air and Clean Water Act, and the founding of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In response, rather than fundamentally changing the way they functioned, many transnational firms instead shifted their dirtiest operations and most hazardous products to lands

and markets in the global South. Other firms simply began dumping their chemical wastes in these communities. For example, as activists and industries in the United States and Europe came to realize how intensely toxic electronic wastes like old computers are, these parts have been shipped overseas to Ghana, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, China, Brazil, and the Philippines, where they are used for manufacturing new products under highly hazardous conditions, or just dumped: meadows, farmland, market places, neighborhoods, and bodies of water in these nations are now filled with the polluting carcasses of electronic garbage from rich communities, presenting significant threats to public health and ecosystems. Many observers have called this practice “toxic colonialism” or global environmental racism. While we agree with this characterization, it only focuses on one end of the process. The problem began in the global North, where the flipside of environmental racism—environmental privilege—drives this practice from within some of the wealthiest and most elite communities on earth.

Environmental privilege is readily observable in many contexts nationally and globally. Therefore, what we witnessed in Aspen is not unique to that particular city. The discourse, cultural politics, and policymaking in Aspen and the surrounding Roaring Fork Valley are familiar to those that can be found in various historical moments and across geographic spaces.

While racially and economically marginalized people living in poor rural towns, inner cities, inner ring suburbs, and on reservations do battle with polluting industries and intransigent governments, those living in wealthy enclaves enjoy relatively cleaner air, land, and water—and as important, often believe they have *earned the right* to these privileges. Aspen, Colorado, and many other places in the United States are classic examples of environmental privilege and deserve closer consideration as sites for understanding the roots of environmental justice struggles. The case of Aspen illustrates the importance of understanding poverty and environmental inequality by getting out of the ghetto and into places where racial and economic privilege are enjoyed. That certain communities face greater environmental harm is indeed a social problem, but the accompanying social problem is that others benefit from this harm through environmental privilege. We must examine the other side of environmental degradation and understand the communities that have come to expect a pristine world (and the army of workers who make such a world possible), in order to expose the source and persistence of environmental injustice.

Aspen and the Roaring Fork Valley is just one of the planet's many sites built as a refuge from undesirable people and as a place where nature can be manipulated for the convenience and enjoyment of a handful of elites. Aspen is environmental privilege at work.¹⁴

Saving the Environment, Aspen Style

Terry Paulson, an Aspen City Council member and also a longtime immigration critic and self-avowed environmentalist, hailed the 1999 resolution as an important milestone for Aspen. He received support and guidance from nationally prominent nativist organizations, which seek to control immigration in various ways, using public protest and legislation. These organizations include the Carrying Capacity Network and the Center for Immigration Studies, whose staff reportedly told Paulson "other communities haven't had the courage to do so. . . . Because many current immigrants are members of minority groups in the U.S., attempts to limit immigration may be seen as racist."¹⁵ Paulson wasted no time in calling for an expansion of the resolution beyond the city of Aspen. He announced his intention to launch a statewide campaign to "promote overpopulation awareness" and declared, "If we address population and do something about it, everything else will fall in line."¹⁶

Aspen, located in Pitkin County, Colorado, successfully persuaded the county to follow the city's lead, and in March 2000, the county commissioners voiced unanimous approval for a "population stabilization" resolution. The commissioners were largely inspired by a presentation Mr. Paulson gave, in which he screened *Immigration by the Numbers*, a film produced by the influential nativist organization NumbersUSA.¹⁷ The Aspen City Council document "A resolution of the city of Aspen, Colorado, supporting population stabilization in the United States" cleverly combines classic nativist language around immigration with ideas that most politically progressive persons could embrace. The resolution includes the following statements regarding environmental and labor conditions in the United States:

The population of the U.S. is six percent of the world's population, consuming up to 25 percent of the world's natural resources.

[The U.S. government should begin] requiring equitable wages and benefits for workers and community environmental protections to be part of all free trade agreements.

[T]he people of the United States and the City of Aspen, Colorado envision a country with . . . material and energy efficiency, a sustainable future, a healthy environment, clean air and water, ample open space, wilderness, abundant wildlife and social and civic cohesion in which the dignity of human life is enhanced and protected.

The council wanted Aspen to be a “city beautiful,” a beacon of sustainability and social responsibility, where the activities of the U.S. government and corporations would have positive impacts both locally and globally. But how do we get there? This is where nativism enters the picture:

Population growth generated by mass immigration to the United States causes increasing pressures on our environment and forces local governments and communities to spend taxpayers’ dollars for additional schools, health care facilities, water disposal plants, transportation systems, fire protection, water supplies, power generation plants and many other social and environmental costs.

Following this logic, immigration becomes the major cause of our ecological crises. The resolution goes on to state: “The ability of the United States to support a population within its carrying capacity is now strained because of population growth.”¹⁸

At the end of the resolution the city council called on the federal government to “immediately stabilize the population of the United States . . . by mandated enforcement of our immigration laws against illegal immigration, thereby promoting the future well being of all the citizens of this Nation and the City of Aspen.”¹⁹ The cultural and racial overtones are clear, as the resolution references Europe as the model for sustainability. Specifically, the text states that the United States has “the highest population growth rate of the developed countries of the world. Most European countries are at zero or negative population growth.”²⁰ Interestingly, many European nations and Japan now consider their low birthrates a social problem given the diminishing domestic labor pool and subsequent increased dependence on immigrants. Terry Paulson sponsored the resolution with the following opening statement:

Fellow Council Members. This resolution we will be considering for adoption tonight could be the most important consideration we will ever make as representatives of our constituents and their children. In October, I attended and participated in a conference at the Aspen Institute, called *The Myth of Sustainable Growth*. At that conference, I had the privilege of hearing a remarkable talk, "Population, Immigration and Global Ethics," by Jonette Christian, from Mainers for Immigration Reform. Jonette is a family therapist by profession, giving her a very special perspective on this matter before us. Here is some of what she said: "We have agitated, confused and deluded ourselves with the illusion that we are being overwhelmed by many, many problems—when in fact we have primarily only one. But it is the one that terrifies us the most, and we handle that terror by chattering endlessly about everything else. Denying . . . [ignoring] and minimizing population growth in the 1990s is a *hate crime against future generations*, and it must end." Please, join me . . . by passing this resolution as written, and thereby insuring a sustainable future for America and her children.²¹

Similar initiatives have been proposed in numerous states and cities across the West and Southwest. There are a number of common threads that are evident in these campaigns. First, the primacy of native-born or white children is invoked as part of a larger moral imperative, and population or immigration control is portrayed as a difficult but necessary mission to be carried out by a few brave souls. Second, immigrants are cast as the main source of our social and ecological ills, and doing nothing to stem the tide of immigration is characterized as a "hate crime" against future generations of Americans—again, the implication is that "Americans" comprise those identified as native-born and white. In this way, discriminatory anti-immigrant actions are not just recast as a patriotic duty; white Americans who oppose these measures are portrayed as perpetrating violence against their own race.

What is interesting here is that these are privileged communities claiming victim status. A Roaring Fork Valley area progressive activist and educator told us: "Environmental racism is when people of color are dumped on. But here, especially in Aspen, we have rich white folks who are saying *we're* getting dumped on! So it's like the idea has been totally turned around and upside down." In other words, Aspenites are essentially crying

“reverse environmental racism” because they view immigrants not only as a cause of environmental harm, but as a kind of social contamination, a form of pollution harming whites.²²

Shortly thereafter, the city of Aspen experienced a momentary embarrassment when it was reported that its resolution was featured on the website of the American Patrol—a nativist organization whose founder, Glenn Spencer, is a nationally known ultraconservative activist who lobbied vigorously for the passage of California’s Proposition 187 (denying public benefits to undocumented immigrants) and who wrote an infamous letter to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1996 stating that “Chicanos and Mexicanos lie as a means of survival.”²³ The American Patrol website also contained a radio production titled “The Mexican Conquest of California,” claiming a conspiracy between Mexican Americans and the Mexican government to retake the U.S. Southwest and rename it “Aztlán.”²⁴ In response to this and other reports of concern about the resolution, the Aspen City Council took great pains to stress that the initiative “was not racially motivated.”²⁵

Four months later, the Pitkin County commissioners passed a nearly identical resolution. However, a number of additional statements stand out and reveal the tensions and affinities between nativism on one hand, and cynical notions of ecological sustainability and social responsibility on the other. The county resolution contained the following statements: “Immigration is the leading cause of population growth in the United States. Population is the leading cause of environmental degradation.”²⁶ Thus, by implication, immigration must be the primary driver of ecological degradation. The resolution continues with the declaration that “Legal and illegal immigration combined is too high for assimilation.”²⁷ This claim is followed by population statistics that paint a picture of an Anglo society overwhelmed by brown people from south of the border. The clear implication is a cultural fear that the Southwestern United States could be the target of a *reconquista* or a reconquering by Mexico. The resolution continues:

The Board of County Commissioners recognizes the value of diversity and the contributions of immigrants since the arrival of the first settlers many centuries ago. We also recognize and deplore the exploitation of immigrants through violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act, such as minimum wage and overtime. We specifically reject the notion that

immigrants (legal and not) are disproportionately criminal or bad people. Nonetheless, we believe immigration, both legal and illegal, should be restrained. The United States has a responsibility to promote family planning opportunities worldwide, to require our trade partners to treat their laborers humanely . . . to respect our shared environment . . . [and] provide financial support of programs designed to assist Third World nations with family planning utilizing all methods of education and contraceptives available. . . . Pitkin County accepts its responsibility to work to improve working and living conditions, both locally and throughout the world, through appropriate regulations that support multi-cultural education programs, that conserve natural resources worldwide, that move toward greater energy efficiency in production and use of goods and services, and that exhibit social responsibility.²⁸

Beneath Pitkin County's rhetoric lies a disturbing view of "social responsibility." The family-planning claims in particular are troubling considering the history of such efforts by U.S. government agencies and their links to sterilization campaigns among women of color in the United States and the global South.²⁹ But we believe that along with the rest of the text—and like the Aspen resolution—it underscores the long-standing link between nativism and environmentalism in the United States and elsewhere.

As Aspen councilmember Tom McCabe cautioned, "The planet's a finite resource. . . . We can't indefinitely welcome people and expect to maintain our quality of life."³⁰ And that is precisely the point: Aspenites and others in privileged places across the United States want to protect their "quality of life," which includes resources and wealth derived from the ecosystems that only they have access to and from the hard work of others. This is what makes environmental privilege work: the disconnection between the way of life in a place like Aspen, and the social and environmental relationships that make that lifestyle possible. It is no wonder that the U.S. environmental movement finds itself in a state of crisis, with many residents holding such organizations beneath contempt for elitist politics and righteous views of a world that they refuse to share with others.³¹

While we do not doubt that humans, including immigrants, contribute to strains on ecosystems, we find the intense focus on immigrants misplaced. This focus instead functions to benefit other actors and institutions who likely contribute a great deal more to environmental harm. We

should remember that European immigrants and internal European American migrants—along with the U.S. military, the federal government, and many extractive industries—produced inordinate damage to the American West long before contemporary battles began over preserving this fabled landscape. The story of the California Gold Rush and the later gold and silver rushes in the Rocky Mountains offer ample evidence.³² Urban theorist Mike Davis considers much of the intermountain West a “national sacrifice zone” as a result of U.S. military activities that have taken place in the region over the years; many scholars and scientists have ignored or underestimated this position. Uncovering this reality and challenging dominant images of the region, Davis considers the impacts of “militarism, urbanization, the Interstate highway, epidemic vandalism, mass tourism, and the extractive industries’ boom-and-bust cycles.”³³

Making Sense of Aspen

What is the meaning of this conflict in Aspen, Pitkin County, and the surrounding towns of Colorado’s Roaring Fork Valley, and why does it matter? We see the turmoil in the Roaring Fork Valley as part of the larger, and less recognized, problem at the intersection of immigration and environmental politics in the United States. We like to think that our environmental movement is as pristine and unblemished as Mother Earth. But the reality is far closer to the state of our planet today: sullied by our ignorance, corrupted by our ideologies, threatened by our own self-interests. Environmental and nativist movements share a great deal of common ground, far more than most progressives and liberals would like to believe.

Examples abound of the links between efforts to “save” the earth and efforts to control certain groups of people. The more we look, the more we see that both of these practices intersect with discomfiting frequency. Environmental and nativist movements in the United States have been historically racist, classist, and patriarchal, and these efforts have been rooted in biological, natural, and social scientific ideas of how the world should be. Consider that the creation of many of this country’s national parks was made possible through the explicit removal or containment of Native American tribes.³⁴ The feminist scholar Betsy Hartmann calls this

“coercive conservation,” the violent expulsion of local people from what become wilderness preserves. The environmental group Conservation International (CI) is notorious for supporting such practices. Hartmann reports that CI works with the World Wildlife Fund and USAID (both groups are infamous for their focus on population control in the global South) and the Mexican government in Chiapas to remove people—often Zapatista communities of indigenous peoples—from “illegal” settlements to restore parts of the Lacandon Forest. This policy, paired with the Mexican government’s alleged forced sterilization of many women in the region, reinforces the simplistic contention of the region’s CI director, that deforestation is the direct result of population growth: “It’s obvious that the main problem is overpopulation.”³⁵

Thus, environmentalists and nativists have historically shared a preoccupation not only with population control but also with erecting and reinforcing borders to support conservation efforts. These preoccupations are some of the many reasons why mainstream environmentalism remains a largely culturally exclusive cause. The mainstream environmental movement has been incapable of building a mass following in this nation precisely because it refuses to embrace a broader agenda of social justice. In fact, the movement has more often supported policies that benefit and reflect the desires of privileged groups. The unfortunate ideological fixation on population control—one of the core aims of nativism—has crippled the environmental cause in this nation.

Drawing on the work of scholars studying immigration and race in the United States, we view nativism as part of a system of discourses and actions that seek to promote the interests of native-born peoples in opposition to other populations on the grounds of their foreignness.³⁶ “Foreignness” need not be strictly defined as non-native born, since people of color born in the United States have been defined throughout our history as foreign in cultural terms.³⁷ And while some forms of nativism may not be overtly racist, the justification for inclusion or exclusion of certain groups almost always comes down to race. Indeed, race cannot be separated from nativism because the meaning of legal and full social citizenship (i.e., belonging) in the United States has always been racialized.³⁸

Extending this concept to the realm of environmental politics, we use the term “nativist environmentalism,” which we define as a political movement that seeks racial exclusivity in places deemed to have special

ecological and racial or cultural significance. Nativist environmentalism is a form of racism rooted in a sense of entitlement to places imbued with particular socio-ecological importance. In other words, while traditional nativists defend “their” nation’s borders because they believe they are the truly rightful inhabitants, nativist environmentalists do the same when it concerns the confluence of environmental and cultural entitlements. It is environmentalism with a racial or cultural inflection, and nativism with an ecological inflection. Nativist environmentalism is the ideological force at the nexus of the nativist and environmental movements, a politics that threatens to damage both our social fabric and our planet.

Nativist environmentalism is a phenomenon that supports not only racial exclusion but also environmental privilege—the notion that one group should have near-exclusive enjoyment of precious ecological resources such as open space, national parks, ocean—and lakefront real estate, clean air, clean land, and clean water.³⁹ Environmental privilege is a key ecological dimension of social inequality that has gone largely unnoticed by social scientists, as we have almost entirely focused on the problem of disadvantage in studies of environmental inequality and environmental racism. Communities of color and working-class communities are more likely than others to suffer from an overburden of industrial pollution from factories, landfills, chemical plants, and the like, and are more likely to bear the brunt of ecosystem resource extraction activities and the impact of “natural” disasters. But if we are to fully understand inequality, then we must examine both disadvantage and advantage, misery and luxury, and poverty and wealth. Within our current economic system, environmental privilege cannot exist without environmental injustice.

Nativist environmentalism and environmental privilege are further linked and reinforced by a common view of environmental politics and social change we call “the Aspen Logic.” The Aspen Logic is a worldview that people across the mainstream political spectrum embrace, but one that is particularly prominent in liberal and Democratic political circles. The idea is that environmentalism and capitalism are entirely compatible and not in fundamental opposition. In fact, within the Aspen Logic, true capitalism is the kind of economic system that pays closer attention to nature’s limits and needs while never sacrificing profits. By extension, the only path to ecological sustainability is by embracing a kinder, greener capitalism. The Aspen Logic suggests that we can achieve ecological goals without

confronting the brutality and violence that capitalism necessarily imposes on people and ecosystems. We can attain sustainability without challenging racism, class hierarchies, patriarchy, and nativism. The Aspen Logic is the defining philosophy of the mainstream environmental movement and, we believe, a primary reason why so few real advances toward improving the health of our planet have been made.

The Aspen Logic is hard at work in the en vogue fixation with the so-called green economy. The fundamental problem with an idea like green capitalism is that it presumes that capitalism is, at root, a just system that only needs regulation and reform. We reject this premise for what should be obvious reasons: because capitalism is a hierarchical, violent system of production, consumption, commerce, and governance that inherently views people and ecosystems as variables to be manipulated for the benefit of a minority. The same can be said of many socialist nations whose leaders have committed the same folly. Therefore green capitalism does not result in a transformed society marked by ecological sustainability and social justice because (1) it is not possible and (2) because that is not the goal. The goal of green capitalism is to maintain the current social order and perhaps appease and co-opt some of its liberal critics. Many progressive and liberal individuals would probably recoil at the idea of green racism. But that is exactly what nativist environmentalism is: a political ideology that seeks to subvert ecosystems to the needs of certain people while punishing others. Capitalism, whether green or mean, is no different. Environmental privilege can be challenged only when larger systems of power are undone.

We speak of nativist environmentalism to make clear that we are not referring to all environmentalists—just those who (implicitly or explicitly) support nativist ideas. There *are* environmental groups whose members reject nativism, racism, environmental privilege, and the Aspen Logic. Unfortunately, they do not have the ear of the media, Congress, the White House, and other policymakers.

As we grapple with how to sustain both our planet and its many peoples, the story of Aspen becomes a disturbing window into what is happening every day all over our country. We believe that the planet's health can be improved only if we also take care of the people who live on it. In the sections below, we highlight four essential themes that underscore the importance of this conflict in the Roaring Fork Valley: (1) the paradox of

immigrant labor markets in a global economy; (2) national immigration politics in the United States; (3) the racist and nativist roots of U.S. environmentalism; and (4) the interlinked practices of inclusion and exclusion in environmental politics.

The Paradox of Immigrant Labor in a Global Economy

There is an important paradox that underlies the presence of immigrants in the United States: the simultaneous economic dependence upon and social contempt for low-income immigrant labor.⁴⁰ Social contempt frequently reinforces the invisibility of immigrant labor—the informal, “off the books,” and hidden nature of much of the work newcomers do in this country. Recent events in Aspen signal that this region is an important case study for illuminating the complexities of policies regarding immigrant labor, environmental protection, and poverty in our increasingly global society. Many low-income immigrant workers experience a double-edged sword: they enter the United States as a result of growing transnational markets, but at the same time they face anti-immigrant legislation that punishes their arrival and existence. The significant rise in the Latino population has fueled a nationwide political backlash against Latino immigrants and bilingual education.

As we spent time in Aspen, we found that many people use the environment as a way to promote a particular romantic image of the Roaring Fork Valley as a pristine, post-industrial refuge. Such romance, however, is built on the backs of “unskilled” immigrants. There is nothing romantic about a Mexican dishwasher or landscaper who makes just enough money to scrape by, or the trailer park in a flood zone on the outskirts of town where many of these workers live. These conditions are both essential and invisible to the production of Aspen. Immigrant labor makes Aspen, according to its wealthy residents, “heaven on earth,” but keeping immigrants in the back room, as it were, away from the public eye allows elites a chance to enjoy the natural surroundings without the distraction of undesirable social elements.

Local policies, such as population-stabilization resolutions, are reflections of the paradox of immigrant labor and its uncomfortable reminders of invidious social inequalities. These actions by local governments are

important signposts of things to come and are worthy of serious public and scholarly consideration. Research on the future of immigrant labor requires that we examine the “new Latino immigration,” which includes understudied destinations such as the Rocky Mountain West.⁴¹ As many scholars and business leaders have noted, continued economic globalization (primarily the liberalization of barriers to trade and finance) fuels both the demand for cheap immigrant labor and maintains the pool of willing migrant workers.⁴² Following this trend, Aspen has experienced a growing number of immigrant workers. Our years of data gathering illustrated how the growing presence of low-income Latino immigrant workers challenged core social meanings that have constructed the image of Aspen as a pristine place of refuge away from the polluted, unsavory central cities. This image is essential to the continued economic prosperity of Aspen’s tourist industry. In response to the ideological disturbance created by the presence of poor ethnic migrants, various stakeholders in the region constructed a range of policies to address “the problem” and to reassert the importance of maintaining Aspen’s social, cultural, and ecological image. And, as business and government officials in tourist destinations know all too well, image is everything.

Increasing global capital expansion has had an accompanying effect of growing class inequalities, resulting in the contraction of the middle class in Aspen and the surrounding area. The exorbitant cost of living, accompanied by a depression of wages, has driven the native-born middle – and working-class populations out of the area. In this respect, this exclusive mountain resort is indicative of a growing number of towns and cities that find themselves increasingly dependent upon two economic extremes: a tourism-based economy of the wealthy, and those who serve them, many of whom are immigrants. The inequalities are stark and ever present. The visual images that gloss Aspen magazine covers feature stretch Range Rover limousines, black-tie fund-raisers, world-class ski slopes, and film celebrities who live part of the year in multimillion dollar, single-family homes. At the same time, Aspen is also a place where foreign-born workers drive thirty to one hundred miles round-trip daily to work in low-status jobs for low wages with few benefits. Many of these workers live in deplorable housing conditions, including cars, campers, and even caves. Our research focuses on Aspen and Colorado’s Roaring Fork Valley as an entree to a larger discussion of the place and persistence of the immigrant working poor in the global economy.

National Immigration Politics in the United States

Nativism in the United States has a long history. Benjamin Franklin was well known for his anxieties about German immigrants coming to Pennsylvania in the 1750s. He once wrote, “Unless the stream of their importation could be turned they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious.”⁴³ John Jay—one of the authors of the Federalist Papers and later a Supreme Court Justice—suggested in New York’s Constitution that the state erect “a wall of brass around the country for the exclusion of Catholics.”⁴⁴ Under the 1798 Alien Act, President John Adams was given the power to deport anyone he considered “dangerous” to national security. The list of anti-immigrant policies in the United States from its origins to the present is too lengthy to consider here, but it makes one thing clear: as much as this country may be a “nation of immigrants,” it has also always been a nation of nativists.⁴⁵

Nativism grew intensely in the 1990s due to a combination of factors. The nation experienced a growing sense of economic insecurity, an increasing rift between the rich and the poor, and an increase in immigration. Census predictions for the year 2000 and beyond continued to stress that whites would become the minority in several states (which did happen), feeding a growing anxiety among many European Americans. Moreover, economic globalization, free trade agreements, and the intensified privatization of public resources contributed to economic insecurity, declines in real wages, a continued disempowerment of the labor movement and unions, a major rise in the temporary employment sector, and significant cutbacks in the social safety net including welfare and health care funding.⁴⁶ Taken together, these dynamics fueled nativist movements and sentiment in the contemporary era.

Some of the principal fears among the U.S. citizenry include the idea that immigrants are “taking jobs” away from native-born persons; that immigrants place a strain on public services (such as welfare or general assistance); and that immigrants threaten the cultural fabric of the nation by introducing new languages, religions, and new racial/ethnic political power blocs. The associated anti-immigrant backlash has been virulent, punctuated at the policy level by the passage of California’s Proposition