Published by University Press of Colorado
1580 North Logan Street, Suite 660
PMB 39883
Denver, Colorado 80203-1942

Printed in the United States of America

The University Press of Colorado is a proud member of
Association of University Presses.

The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, by Adams State University, Colorado School of Mines, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Metropolitan State University of Denver, University of Alaska Fairbanks, University of Colorado, University of Denver, University of Northern Colorado, University of Wyoming, Utah State University, and Western Colorado University.

∞ This paper meets the requirements of the ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

ISBN: 978-1-64642-725-3 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-1-64642-726-0 (ebook)
https://doi.org/10.5876/9781646427260

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sagás, Ernesto author
Title: Latino Colorado : the struggle for equality in the Centennial State / Ernesto Sagás.
Other titles: Struggle for equality in the Centennial State
Description: Denver : University Press of Colorado, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024056845 (print) | LCCN 2024056846 (ebook) | ISBN 9781646427253 hardcover | ISBN 9781646427260 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: Hispanic Americans—Colorado—History | Hispanic Americans—Colorado—Politics and government | Hispanic Americans—Colorado—Social conditions | Immigrants—Colorado—History | Colorado—Ethnic relations—History
Classification: LCC F785.S75 S35 2025 (print) | LCC F785.S75 (ebook) | DDC 305.868/0730788—dc23/eng/20250424
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024056845
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024056846

Cover art: “Sierras y Colores” (Mountains and Colors), Mural, San Luis, Colorado, by Carlos Sandoval (Hispanic/Cherokee/Apache), represented by FaraHNHeight Fine Art Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Courtesy of the artist and the Town of San Luis, Colorado. Photograph by Augustine Romero.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Latino Colorado

They are hard to miss. The "Welcome to Colorful Colorado" iconic road signs are one of the first things that visitors driving into Colorado get to see as they catch their first glimpse of the mountains. These signs are found on every major road that enters the state from neighboring Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Yet, despite their bold claim, the signs themselves are not very colorful—just plain wooden rectangles with white lettering (see figure 0.1). But one may argue that they are a good metaphor for Colorado's colorfulness: It is there, but you have to go find it. A similar argument can be made for the state's racial landscape. At first glance, Colorado may seem plain and lacking "color"—another Anglo-majority Western state. Upon closer inspection, though, the visitor soon realizes that the state is more "colorful" and racially diverse than it seems (Aldama et al. 2011). Colorado may not be a majority-minority state like New Mexico, but neither is it a Western Anglo enclave like Montana nor Wyoming. Just like the driver who crosses the state line into Colorado beckoned by the promise inscribed on the welcoming road sign, one must

https://doi.org/10.5876/9781646427260c000

travel a bit further (and do some inquiring) in order to gauge how truly "colorful" Colorado really is—a development mostly driven by the state's rapidly growing and increasingly influential Latinx population.

At least one out of five Coloradans is Latinx.[1] Dozens of names for counties, rivers, cities, and towns in the state are Spanish in origin. Even the name *Colorado* comes from the Spanish word for the color red, a reference to the silty Colorado River (Colorado State Archives 2023). Yet relatively little has been written about Colorado's Latinx population.[2] Unlike the case of New Mexico, where Hispanics have always been a large segment of the population and with countless books written about (and by) them, a cursory review of the literature shows that comparatively very few books have been written about Colorado's Latinxs, and most of them are dated and out of print. Colorado's Indigenous cultures and archeological ruins, the state's mining history, and even the expansion of the railroad have generated far more works. Also, many of these manuscripts on Colorado's Latinxs deal with Hispanic culture, while topics such as Colorado's Latinx politics, labor force participation, or Latinxs' demographic characteristics have not been covered adequately. It is not that Colorado's Latinxs lack importance; rather, mainstream historians seem to take them for granted, as a mere folkloric footnote in a state with deep roots into its Spanish and Mexican past. Another reason for this academic neglect lies in the still subordinate position that Latinxs occupy in the state's politics and economy. Very few of Colorado's Latinxs have been empowered to tell their own history, while non-Latinx academics have focused their efforts elsewhere. Finally, the lack of coverage also has to do with the fact that most Coloradans are recent transplants to the state, or that their family history in Colorado does not go beyond a generation or two. It still bemuses me to see "Colorado Native" bumper stickers all over the Front Range, plastered on the cars of folks that most Native Americans would see as newcomers. These non-Hispanic residents often see Colorado's Latinxs as part of larger, recent national immigration trends (i.e., as aliens) or as a folkloric remnant reminiscent of times past (i.e., as historic relics). In the words of Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick (1987, 255):

> contemporary attitudes make it difficult to put Hispanic history in its proper place at the center of Western American history. On the Anglo

> side, attitudes have over the last century developed a peculiar split: one attitude toward Spanish borderlands history—conquistadores, missions, and rancheros viewed from a safe distance in time; and another, often very different attitude toward actual Hispanic people, especially people working at the low-paid jobs that were and are a key support of the Southwestern economy.

While the old Spanish roots of Colorado are mythologized in the names of suburban developments and scenic roads (e.g., Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic & Historic Byway in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado), present-day Latinxs and their everyday contributions to the state remain largely ignored in the best of cases or denigrated by xenophobic nativists in the worst. One way or the other, Latinxs never play much of a role in official narratives or the popular imaginary. Cast as eternal outsiders, Colorado's Latinxs have never seemed to really "belong" in the state of which they are such an integral part. This study seeks to remedy this situation.

Latinxs have been an integral part of Colorado even before it became a state, contributing to its historical development and cultural makeup for close to two centuries. Latinxs make up a substantial percentage of the state's population, play a vital role in its main economic sectors, and are becoming a political force to be reckoned with. Colorado has become a hub of US Latinx life and a case study of the old and the new interacting to fashion a multitiered Latinx community in the Intermountain West. Some of Colorado's Latinxs can trace their roots in the US Southwestern region to Spanish colonial times. Others are arriving as you read this book. Some are rural workers and others are urban dwellers, while an emerging Latinx middle class is quietly expanding into the suburbs of the state's metro areas. This study examines the multifaceted experience of Latinxs in the state of Colorado, from the nineteenth century to the present, from the old Hispano families to the newly arrived immigrants, and from metro Denver to the Western Slope. Its focus is not on one particular region or subgroup but on a statewide phenomenon that is as complex and diverse as Colorado's geography. And it is written from the perspective of a Latinx transplant who has come to live, love, and enjoy the diversity inherent in the Centennial State.[3]

The main premise of this study is that Latinxs in Colorado have been a racialized group whose ethnic identity has been forged historically as a result of their cultural isolation from mainstream American society and reinforced by waves of immigration. Generations of Colorado's Latinxs faced the onslaught of a US military takeover and its aftermath in the nineteenth century, their political and cultural exclusion from Anglo society, and their incorporation into the state's economy as cheap labor—all the while contesting their sociopolitical and economic oppression through strategies of resistance and accommodation. Since the 1960s, however, the Chicano Movement, as well as the state's rapidly changing demographics and incorporation into the national mainstream, has opened spaces for Latinxs in Colorado to promote a vocal subaltern discourse that seeks to achieve equality for all, as well as a new—less local, more national—identity as Latinxs. In other words, we are witnessing a transition from Hispanos to Chicanxs to Latinxs, from outsiders to denizens. In turn, the emergence of Latinxs as a substantial ethnic group in the state has rekindled a debate about nativism, social citizenship, and identity. This study also seeks to examine the ways in which Latinxs—as a racialized, socially ostracized group—have historically interacted with Colorado's Anglo society, resisted their exclusion and subordination, and even helped define the latter, for as much as Anglo society has influenced Latinxs in Colorado, the opposite also rings true. I argue that this cultural gap has many unacknowledged crossovers, which this study will examine.

The long-standing struggle for equality by Latinxs in Colorado has also been characterized by periods of intense political activism (such as during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s–1970s) and by the intersectionality of factors such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, giving rise to fluid and changing identities that challenge mainstream representations. These overarching themes engender related research questions such as: How have Latinxs in Colorado identified themselves vis-à-vis Anglo society, other ethnic groups, and each other—particularly as other Latinxs migrate from neighboring states and foreign countries into the state? What role have Latinxs played in the state's economic development as a mostly subordinate labor force? How have Latinxs in Colorado struggled for political recognition and social equality? The answers to these questions serve to unravel the multiple layers of complexity

behind Latinx identity (or identities) in a state where Latinxs have such a long—but academically neglected—historical trajectory. Moreover, this study aims to shed light on a historically marginalized community that is increasingly becoming a major political and economic force in the state, while advancing our understanding of racial and ethnic minorities in the Old and New West.

In conclusion, my study seeks to reexamine the role and perception of Latinxs in Colorado's history and present-day society—a state where Latinxs have always "been" but never "are." In other words, it aims to provide a more nuanced view of the vital, constant (yet often unacknowledged) presence of Latinxs in Colorado. Ramón Gutiérrez's (2000, 107) description of the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Americas sums up the path that lies ahead well: "It is a history of the complex web of interrelations between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, slave and free, Spaniard and Indian [Latinx and Anglo], all of whom fundamentally depended on the other for their own self-definition." Latinxs and Anglos have struggled against each other—and relied on each other—for centuries in Colorado, and out of these interactions a New West and new identities have emerged. The recent heated debate about the role of immigration in American society in general (and Latin American immigration in particular) has reignited this conversation about American identity, and it is bound to generate public conversations as the face of America undergoes rapid demographic changes. When Samuel P. Huntington (2004) rhetorically asked, "Who are we?" he should have preceded that question with "Who are they?" for "they" (i.e., racialized Others) define us as much as we define them. Thus, this project is more than simply about Latinxs in Colorado; it is about all of us in the American West and in the United States of America and how we continue to (re)define each other.

Racializing Latinxs in America

Race is a social construct, dating back to the early colonization of the Americas. More specifically, it dates to the first interactions between European colonists and Amerindians and the subsequent importation of enslaved Africans. In the case of the United States, the Virginia colony served as a laboratory where ideas of race, racial superiority, and

whiteness played out as European colonists laid down the foundations of capitalism in a plantation society. "White" meant "free," while "Black" was a synonym for "slave," in a caste-like society based on the exploitation of human beings held in bondage (Zinn 2010). A process of racialization thus began, defined as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group" (Omi and Winant 2015, 111). In the English colonies—as well as in the rest of the Americas and other colonized territories in Africa and Asia—race and class would go hand in hand, giving rise to societies where the color of your skin (one of the features—though not the sole one—of the social construct called "race") would determine not only your status as a free person or an equal under the law but also your economic privilege and social standing. Capitalist exploitation was determined at the time by a race-class nexus, in which whites owned property (including other human beings), whereas persons of color had few economic rights and no political rights. Indigenous persons, Black people—and eventually—Latinxs would become the cheap labor force that mostly white property owners needed, and their black and brown skins served as markers that kept them segregated, isolated, and powerless. The combined oppression of race and class (and gender too, in the case of women of color) meant that by the mid-nineteenth century people of color had few rights and little possessions. White males in the United States owned land and slaves and controlled the legal system that supported this race-based status quo.

The United States was the race-obsessed country that took over the territories of northern Mexico in a war of imperial conquest from 1846 to 1848. Before that, a similar coalition of interests, bent on acquiring land, expanding slavery, and fulfilling the Manifest Destiny of the United States, had declared the independence of Texas in 1836 and annexed the young republic to the United States in 1845.[4] Anglo Texans soon developed stereotypes about Mexicans, based on centuries of systematic exploitation of Indigenous persons and Black people, and refined by their own biased perceptions of the racial, cultural, and religious characteristics of Mexican Tejanos (De León 1983, 1–13). The Texas Revolution was more than just about seceding from Mexico; it was also a racial war that pitted Anglo settlers against the Mexican federal authorities, and it placed Mexican Tejanos supportive of the independence cause in an increasingly

awkward position (Horsman 1981, 213). Mexican Tejanos (simply known as "Mexicans" thereafter) came to occupy an interstitial place in Texan society: trapped as low-wage laborers between Anglos, who held political power and most of the land, and enslaved persons, who had nothing. The war with Mexico eventually brought the reach of the United States to the Pacific coast, and with it the nation's racial mores were imposed over new subjects. Just as Texas had been occupied and rendered productive by the Anglo-Saxon race, the same fate would await the new territories. For Hispanics in New Mexico, it would mean the loss of their lands to Anglo speculators and local Nuevomexicano elites, who formed an alliance and political machine known as the Santa Fe Ring. The Santa Fe Ring used its control of the territory's politics, courts, and bureaucracy to seize 80% of New Mexico's land grants in the two decades that followed the end of the Civil War (Acuña 2000, 90–94). This massive land grab left hundreds of Hispanic families dispossessed and fueled migration to the Colorado territory, where they helped settle the San Luis Valley and eventually would provide cheap labor to Anglo entrepreneurs.

The former citizens of Mexico were now occupied by Anglo America, facing a new sociopolitical reality, with US citizenship and other rights in theory but few rights in practice.[5] They would lose their land, their homelands, and in some cases (such as the Californios) they would end up disappearing as a people (Pitt 1998). "Mexicans" would become minorities in an Anglo-dominated world, and subject to the whims of US laws and politics, over which they had little control. Although some light-skinned Hispano elites sided with the Anglo invaders and retained some political power, by and large their reign was over. Eventually, even they would be lumped together with the working masses of Indigenous persons and mestizos and become "Mexicans" to the Anglos. Legal citizenship did not translate into social citizenship and equality for thousands of "Mexicans" throughout the US Southwest. This view of Hispanics in the US Southwest as peoples trying to survive in an occupied territory while pushing back against the Anglo establishment provides a lens through which to examine Anglo-Hispanic relations in the American West for well over a century (from 1848 to the 1960s), and in particular in Colorado (Acuña 2000). Isolated from the mainstream and trying to retain their culture in order to survive as a people, Hispanics were, however, under constant pressure

to assimilate, and their apparent "failure" to do so was seen by Anglos as proof evident of their incapacity to become part of the American nation, while serving as additional justification for the hostile takeover of the West. In the particular case of Colorado, Hispanics were politically segmented from their New Mexico homeland by the creation of the Colorado Territory and demographically overwhelmed by the arrival of thousands of Anglo miners, ranchers, pioneers, speculators, and all sorts of entrepreneurs (Gonzales and Sánchez 2018). Under this set of historical circumstances, Hispanics remained as outsiders (i.e., racialized Others) until the social upheaval of the 1960s radically reshaped their standing—and that of other Others—in American society.[6]

Becoming racialized Others meant that Hispanics had to rely on themselves. Mexican Americans formed self-help organizations (known as *mutualistas*), and, in some cases, they retaliated against the Anglo establishment with sporadic acts of violence (e.g., the raids carried out by Las Gorras Blancas in New Mexico). But mostly, they sought accommodation in the face of Anglo dominance. Hispanic organizations throughout the Southwest had an assimilationist orientation to them (e.g., the Order of Sons of America), or at least, a moderate stance (e.g., the League of United Latin American Citizens) (LeMay 2000, 252). As African Americans and other communities of color started mobilizing for civil rights in the 1960s, Mexican Americans followed suit. By then, Latinxs in the Southwest had been part of the United States for over 100 years, and as the country modernized, urbanized, and became more interconnected following World War II, new generations of Mexican Americans had become more familiar with mainstream America and had started challenging Anglo tropes about the "Mexican" presence in the American West (D. Gutiérrez 1993, 527). The community had become larger too, mainly as a result of the Bracero Program, which, beginning in 1942, brought thousands of Mexican workers (and their families) as contract workers into the United States. Thus, the Mexican Americans that came of age in the 1960s were more urban, educated, and connected to the outside world than their parents were. Many of them were the first ones in their families to graduate from high school and attend college. Others served in the Vietnam War and came back radicalized from the experience, while other Mexican Americans fought against deep-seated injustices at home. And as the country

was rocked by the antiwar movement and the civil rights struggle, Mexican Americans in the US Southwest began adopting more radical political postures under the Chicano label.[7] The Chicano Movement took the form of a militant ethos that rejected assimilation and emphasized cultural survival and self-help (I. García 1997, 34–35). Chicanxs mobilized for labor rights, land struggles, civil rights, and political power. As a mestizo people with deep roots in the Southwest, they claimed to be the rightful heirs of the land and challenged mainstream perceptions of them as "Mexican" Others. The Chicano Movement brought about an "awakening" of the community that led to major social, political, and economic gains. Chicanxs helped carve out spaces for themselves and others, and the Chicano Movement became a watershed event with repercussions that reach into the present. The radical nature of the Chicano Movement brought about a concerted effort by the authorities to confront it, and the establishment sought to defuse it by granting concessions to the Latinx community—ushering in a new era for Latinxs in the United States.

The Chicano Movement started waning by the late 1970s, but by then, Latinxs were finally being recognized in American society. *Time* magazine featured Hispanics in its October 16, 1978, cover with the suggestive headline "It's Your Turn in the Sun," and politicians, businesses, and the media began trying to figure out what to make of them. By the 1980s, the ascendancy of Latinxs in politics and society continued, and the US Census Bureau officially adopted the term *Hispanic* to count them as separate category, starting with the 1980 decennial census. As US politics became less radical in the 1980s, Latinxs and their organizations paralleled those trends. In a way, Latinx politics in the United States—and in Colorado—has come full circle: from accommodation politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to radical politics in the 1960s–1970s, to a more moderate approach since the 1980s. These changes in political strategies have reflected the times but also the relative standing of Latinxs in US society. Currently, with Latinxs as the largest demographic minority in the nation and with their numbers rapidly increasing decade after decade, cooperation is preferred over confrontation. In Colorado, where Latinxs make up over a fifth of the population, they are rapidly increasing their share of the electorate. The radical politics of the 1960s–1970s got Latinxs a place at the table; now Latinxs are a force to be reckoned with.

In order to understand the sociopolitical spaces that Latinxs have occupied in Colorado since the war with Mexico, one must understand how they have been racialized in American society. Latinxs still remain a racialized Other—in Colorado as in the nation at large—but they have also made considerable political and economic gains. A solid Latinx middle class has developed; Latinxs have achieved high political office in the state,[8] and the nation; and equal opportunity laws and a culture of political correctness have eliminated most overt practices of racial discrimination. Though serious health disparities and income gaps remain, Latinxs have reached a political tipping point where the radical politics of the past lacks urgency, and working with the establishment seems like the most gainful political strategy. It remains to be seen, however, if the progress achieved by Latinxs in the last few decades will translate into gaining socioeconomic parity with the state's Anglo majority and the shedding of their label as racialized Others.

But being Latinx in Colorado is not only about the group's role vis-à-vis mainstream society. In Colorado, as in the rest of the American West, the setting where these interactions have taken place is a powerful force that shapes the history, meaning, and nuances of the Latinx experience in Colorado. Colorado is—in many ways—unique.

Crossing Borders in the American West

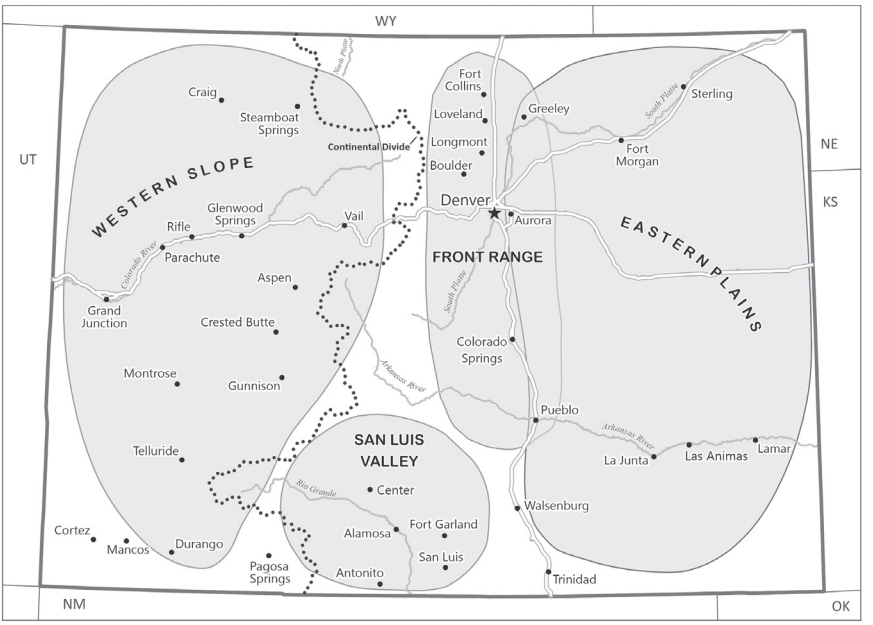
It may not look like it on the map, but it can be argued that Colorado is a "border" state. While not lying on the US-Mexico border itself, southern Colorado historically has been seen as part of the "borderlands," a geocultural area that stretches north from Mexico.[9] Originally on the northern fringes of a claimed (but not entirely settled) Spanish empire in the mainland, and later part of the northern territories of a newly independent Mexico, the borderlands finally emerged as such after the US-Mexican War and the conquest of the Southwest by US military forces from 1846 to 1848. The Colorado Territory (1861–1876) and, after 1876, the state of Colorado, marked the northernmost extension of the borderlands, a homeland for thousands of Hispanos who did not cross the border but who were crossed by the border. In Colorado, the borderlands mainly referred to the San Luis Valley, a natural entry into the territory from neighboring

New Mexico, and the location of the first permanent settlements in the newly acquired US possession. As the territory and state was settled by Anglos coming from the East, Hispanos also moved in from the South, in search of jobs and opportunities, taking the borderlands with them and expanding the geocultural area to cities and towns, mainly on the Front Range. When the Chicano Movement took place in the 1960s–1970s, Chicanxs in Colorado played a significant role in the struggle and its definition. The concept of a Chicano Homeland in the US Southwest took shape in those years and now overlaps and reinforces the concept of the borderlands as a region where peoples and cultures rub edges in a shared landscape. Nowadays, the Colorado borderlands include large cities like Denver and small rural towns like Fort Morgan, both hundreds of miles from the US-Mexico border, but with deep Latinx roots. For these Latinxs, the American West is actually El Norte (The North).[10]

Colorado's borders are not only limited to the Hispanic/Chicano borderlands; Colorado is a border(ing) state in more ways than one. In Colorado, the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains meet, the Old West and the New West converge, and cowboys and yuppies mingle, creating a sui generis place that defies easy classification. According to William Wyckoff, the West is defined (among other things) by "the unique juxtaposition of peoples who came to live here" (1999, x). Colorado has drawn Native Americans, Latinxs, Europeans, African Americans, Asians, Midwesterners, New Englanders, Californians, and people from all over the world, attracted by its allure and the promise of a fresh start in a visually stunning landscape (Iber and De León 2006, 3–6). Colorado is a dream, a promise, and a state of mind. It has been hunting grounds for Native Americans, farmland for Hispano settlers, prospecting claims for Anglo miners, open prairies for ranchers, boom-and-bust oil and gas deposits for drillers, snowy slopes for the ski resort industry, a postcard-perfect destination for tourists, and home to millions of Baby Boomers (and their children) who have arrived since the 1970s. It is a prominent part of the American West, but it is also a place of its own, uniquely Coloradan in its vibe—and Latinxs have always been a part of it. From the first permanent settlement in the territory to today's ritzy tourism industry, Latinxs have been an inseparable—yet largely unacknowledged—part of the Colorado experience. When the Colorado territory was born, Latinxs were

here, and as Colorado has grown into what it is today, Latinxs have been part and parcel of that growth, more often than not providing the labor required to sustain the distinctive Colorado lifestyle. Unfortunately, the dominant narrative, popular mythology, and Colorado's traditional historiography have largely ignored the contributions of non-Anglo groups to the state (Aldama et al. 2011, 2). By and large, the dominant narrative tells a story that begins with Zebulon Pike's expedition, American conquest, and statehood; then salutes the perseverance of Anglo miners and railroad entrepreneurs; extols the virtues of pioneer families; and finally, fast-forwards to a glorious present and a promising future. This historical omission of racialized Others is part of a larger trend that characterized Western history since the US conquest of the territory and that only began to be challenged in the last decades of the twentieth century (Limerick 1987, "Introduction"; Milner 1996).

Its bordering regions and diverse landscapes also connect Colorado—and Latinx Coloradans—to neighboring states, cultural regions, the nation, and the world (see map 0.1). The plains of eastern Colorado (irrigated by the South Platte and Arkansas Rivers) connect Coloradans to the grasslands of the American Heartland (from Texas to the Dakotas) and to lifestyles based on ranching and agriculture. Southern Colorado (watered by the Rio Grande watershed) represents, as mentioned earlier, the northern edge of the borderlands and connects the state to the US Southwest. Western Colorado (defined by the Colorado River) links the state to sparsely populated and isolated areas of Utah, Wyoming, and beyond. Finally, the Front Range (defined by its layout parallel to the Rocky Mountains rather than by rivers) is an urban corridor that connects the over 80% of the state's population that lives there to other parts of the state, the nation, and the world through highways, rail lines, commercial aviation, and high-speed communications technology (Abbott, Leonard, and Noel 2005, 7–8). These diverse natural and human landscapes affect how Latinxs—and others—live and work in Colorado. There is no such a thing as *a* Latinx experience, or *a* Latinx community, in Colorado. Rather, cultural, geographic, economic, and political factors have combined to create a mosaic of Latinx communities and experiences: the Hispano farmer of the San Luis Valley, the sugar beet worker of the Eastern Plains, the chambermaid of Vail, the small business owner of Grand Junction, the college



MAP 0.1. Geocultural regions of Colorado. Source: Sophia E. Linn, Geospatial Centroid, Colorado State University.

student of Fort Collins, the yuppie of Denver, and many, many others. Local, national, and transnational social networks and economic links connect these Latinxs to each other, to homelands in Latin America, and to American society at large. As such, borders—whether real or just imaginary social constructs—connect as much as they divide and define Colorado as a unique setting but also as an integral part of the American West.

The Numbers Game

The significant presence of Mexican American, Chicanx, and Latinx populations in most of Colorado's counties by the early twenty-first century reflects decades of rapid internal growth, as well as shifting domestic and international patterns of labor migration. When teaching about Latinxs, I refer to the US Census Bureau as "the birth certificate of demographic minorities." If your group is not recognized and counted as such by the US Census Bureau, it might as well not exist. Numbers mean recognition,

resources, and political leverage. In the case of Latinxs, accurate numbers tend to be a problematic issue for several reasons. First, Latinxs tend to be poorer than the average population, and that makes them harder to count. Nontraditional housing arrangements (e.g., living with relatives), lower levels of literacy, unemployment, underemployment, irregular employment, seasonal employment, and other factors combine to make poorer populations harder to track and count than more affluent ones. Second, undocumented Latinxs (or those who are regularizing their status) are understandably reluctant to be counted by government agencies for fear of persecution and deportation. That leaves uncounted not only a large, undetermined number of undocumented Latinxs but also members of their immediate family (e.g., spouses, children) and roommates and tenants living with them. Third, language barriers lead to lower response rates during the decennial census. Non-English-speaking Latinxs are less likely to be counted, even though the US Census Bureau provides forms in several languages and hires bilingual census takers. And fourth, historical trends oftentimes combine with poverty and other factors to create distrust of authorities, including the federal government and its US Census Bureau. For some Latinxs, coming out of the shadows can feel threatening; it is better to lay low. All these reasons combine to make Latinxs particularly hard to count. As a result, most official figures from the US Census Bureau and state authorities usually tend to undercount the number of Latinxs in the United States (C. Rodríguez 2000, 177–181), and Colorado is no exception. The numbers are not entirely accurate, but they are all we researchers have. We are left with no choice but to rely on official statistics, though we must err on the side of caution and assume that there is more than meets the eye. This section relies on those government statistics to paint a profile of Colorado's Latinxs, while remaining cognizant of the aforementioned issues of reliability that may undermine the accuracy of the data.

The 2020 decennial census counted well over a million Latinxs in the state of Colorado (or 21.88% of the state's population). That is a 41.2% increase from 2000–2010, when 735,601 Latinxs (or 17.1% of the state's population) were counted by the US Census Bureau in 2000 (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, and Albert 2011, 6), and 21.6% growth from 2010–2020 (US Census Bureau 2020). In total, Colorado's Latinx population grew a whopping

TABLE 0.1. Latinx population of Colorado, 1910–2020

Year	*State Total*	*Latinx (n)*	*Latinx (%)*
1910[a]	783,415	3,269	0.42
1920[a]	924,103	14,340	1.55
1930[a]	1,018,793	57,676	5.66
1940[b]	1,123,296	92,549	8.24
1970[b]	2,207,259	255,994	11.60
1980	2,889,964	339,717	11.76
1990	3,294,394	424,302	12.88
2000	4,301,261	735,601	17.10
2010	5,029,196	1,038,687	20.65
2020	5,773,714	1,263,390	21.88

Sources: Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, and Albert (2011, 6); Gibson and Jung (2002, 38); US Census Bureau (1980–2020); Wilmot (2006, 17).

a. In 1930, the US Census Bureau counted "Mexicans" as a separate category (for the first and only time). The figures for 1910 and 1920 are estimates.

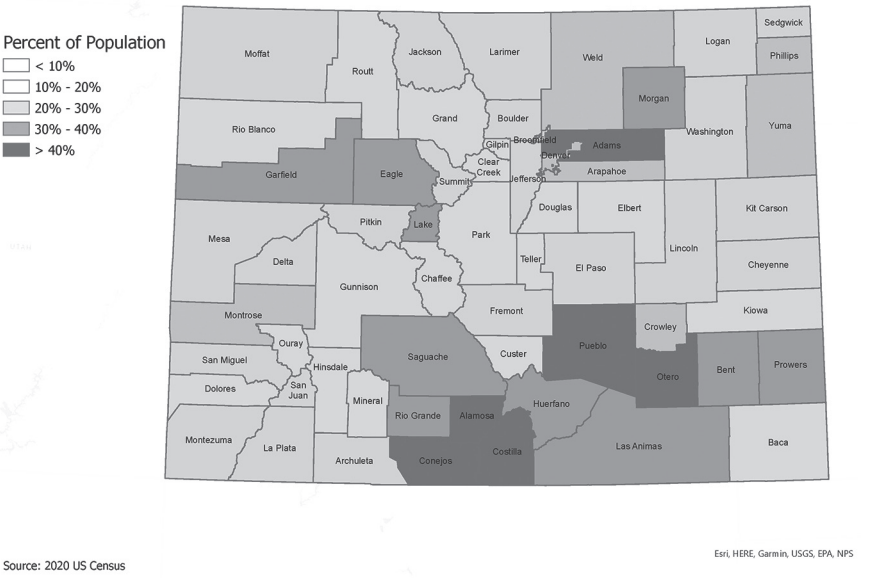
b. Estimates based on sample data.

72% from 2000 to 2020, at over twice the rate of the state's 35% overall population growth (UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute 2023)! Table 0.1 shows the approximate number of Latinxs in Colorado since 1910, although it was not until 1980 that the US Census Bureau tried to count Hispanics nationwide accurately by employing a "Hispanic origin" category. Before 1980, the bureau used categories such as "Mexican" (1930), "Spanish mother tongue" (1940), and "Spanish surname" or "Spanish language" (1950–1970) to count the Hispanic population of the US Southwest, so the resulting data only provide a guesstimate of Colorado's Latinx population (Wilmot 2006). If the questionable data are used, the percentage of Latinxs in Colorado has ostensibly increased from an official low of 5.6% in 1930 (the "Mexican" category) to today's high of over a fifth of the state's population.

Demographic shifts are behind many of these changes. As of mid-2022, it is estimated that Latinxs (or Hispanics) make up 22.5% of Colorado's population. That is approximately 1.3 million Latinxs out of an estimated population of 5.8 million Coloradans (US Census Bureau 2022). To put it simply, about one out of every four to five Coloradans is a Latinx—and the

numbers just keep on rising. Nationally, Colorado has the seventh-largest percentage of Latinxs among US states, and it has the ninth-largest Latinx population in the nation. The growth of the state's Latinx population has also taken place at a rapid pace: 41.2% growth from 2000 to 2010, and 21.6% growth from 2010 to 2020. These state-level percentages are close to the US national trends for those two decades: 43% Latinx growth in the United States from 2000 to 2010, and 23% Latinx growth in the United States from 2010 to 2020 (US Census Bureau 2000–2020). A closer look at some of Colorado's largest metro areas also reflects some interesting patterns. Fort Collins, Colorado Springs, and Greeley had the fastest Latinx growth from 2010 to 2020 (at 41.2%, 38.7%, and 37.4%, respectively), while Denver's Latinx population went slightly down during the same period (by 4%) due to the high cost of living in the state's capital (Alvarez 2021; Frank 2021). As Latinxs left the city of Denver for the suburbs, Adams County joined the growing list of majority-minority counties in Colorado, after the 2020 census confirmed that people of color made up the majority of the county's population (53.9%), which covers the northern and northeastern suburbs of metro Denver (including a small portion of Aurora, the most diverse city in Colorado). Adams County's precipitous demographic change was fueled by the growth of its Latinx population, which by 2020 accounted for about 41% of the county's population (from 29% just a couple of decades before). Most of these Latinxs are of Mexican and Mexican American origin, and like other locals in the Denver metro area, Latinxs have been moving to Adams County in the last few decades to escape Denver's traffic congestion, high crime rates, and the city's steep cost of living. The suburbs of Adams County are quiet and spacious, the schools are good, and real estate prices are more affordable (Foster-Frau 2021).[11]

The spatial distribution of Latinxs in Colorado also shows some interesting patterns. As seen in map 0.2, as of 2020 most of Colorado's Latinxs are clustered in three geographic areas: metro Denver and environs, southern Colorado, and (more recently) the Western I-70 corridor. Metro Denver and the counties that surround it house most of the state's population, and by extension, most of Colorado's Latinxs. The urban/suburban counties of Adams, Arapahoe, and Denver are at least 15%–30% Latinx, as well as more sparsely inhabited rural counties further east into the plains, such as Morgan, Weld, Logan, Phillips, Yuma, and Kit Carson. Denver has



MAP 0.2. Latinx Population of Colorado (percentage Latinx, by county), 2020. Source: State Demography Office 2020.

a significant Latinx population whose growth has paralleled the metro area's rapid development in the last four decades. Its growth spurts now make it hard for the visitor to distinguish between the city proper and surrounding cities (like Aurora) that have been absorbed into the metro area. This urban sprawl created hundreds of jobs that have attracted Latinxs from other parts of the state, the nation, and overseas to metro Denver. Not too far away and connected by highways, the rural counties of the plains have historically provided agricultural jobs for Latinxs, but as some rural areas have been turned into bedroom communities (or exurbs) for commuters to metro Denver and other cities, service and construction jobs have sprung up there too. Change is currently the norm for this part of the state, where farms nowadays coexist uneasily with new, pricey housing developments.

Colorado's Front Range urban corridor not only is home to most of the state's population (84%) but also accounted for 94.8% of its population growth from 2010 to 2020 (Cronin and Loevy 2021a). Not

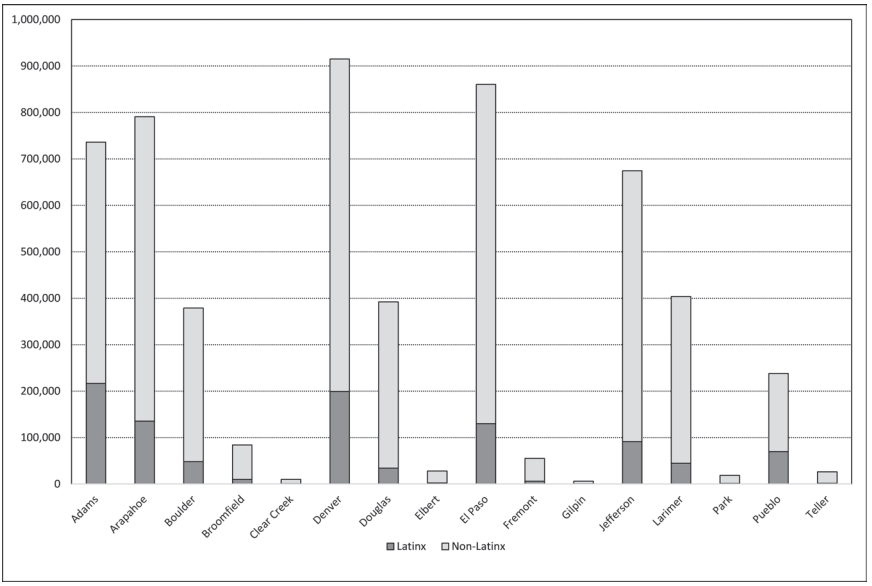


FIGURE 0.2. Latinx population of the Front Range (by county), 2020. Source: US Census Bureau.

surprisingly, Front Range counties are also home to four-fifths of Colorado's Latinxs—about a million Latinxs as of 2020 (US Census Bureau 2020). To a large extent, the Front Range drives the state's demographic dynamics, and Colorado's Latinxs are no exception to that trend. Figure 0.2 displays population data for Latinxs and non-Latinxs in Front Range counties. Two trends are readily apparent. First, Adams, Arapahoe, Denver, El Paso, Jefferson, and Pueblo Counties, which are home to Denver and its suburbs, to Colorado Springs (El Paso County), and to Pueblo, is where most Latinxs in the Front Range (and Colorado) are to be found. Denver and El Paso Counties are the largest counties in Colorado (in terms of their population), so it is not surprising to find plenty of Latinxs where most of the state's population concentrates—and where most of the jobs are. Second, Boulder, Douglas, and Larimer Counties are emerging Latinx enclaves just a short distance from Denver. The growth of their Latinx populations—again—reflects these counties' overall demographic growth and the increased availability of jobs. Thus, Latinxs are both beneficiaries of the state's demographic growth at large, and active drivers in the process. Latinxs not only go where the jobs are (as most

people do) but are also local creators of jobs and other economic opportunities that attract new residents.

Southern Colorado is the historical heart of the state's Latinx community (MacAulay 2011). The San Luis Valley was first settled by Hispanics from New Mexico, and from there they spread into the Arkansas River Valley. Cities like Pueblo and Alamosa anchor these communities lying on both sides of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range. At least 30%–40% of the population is Latinx in counties east of the range, such as Las Animas, Otero, and Pueblo, and the percentages are even greater west of the range in counties such as Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Rio Grande, and Saguache. With the exception of Pueblo and Alamosa, these are mostly rural communities, and most of the jobs are in agriculture. Some families here have cultivated the land for generations, whereas others are recent arrivals that work as field hands or in the service sector in small towns. These areas truly feel like borderlands—particularly in the San Luis Valley—and the roots of the Latinx community are deep and strong in there.

The Western I-70 corridor is a more recent development tied to Colorado's tourism industry. The construction boom of resort towns like Aspen and Vail in the 1990s–2000s attracted hundreds of Latinxs. Jobs were plentiful not only in construction but also in the service sector in places such as hotels and restaurants and in such occupations as maids, gardeners, and childcare providers in private homes. The construction boom was fueled by a strong economy in which wealthy individuals were buying condos and second (or third) homes and/or investing in businesses in resort towns, and thousands of Latinx immigrants were drawn to an area of the state in which there had never been any major Latinx communities before. These towns are historically white—and now very affluent—and the sudden influx of Latinxs has created significant challenges, as the newcomers are oftentimes first-generation immigrants with low levels of literacy and limited English-language skills. To make things even more complicated, the boom times of the 1990s–2000s drove up real estate prices, making it practically impossible for working-class Latinxs (and even middle-class Anglo families) to live where they work (Park and Pellow 2011). With real estate prices averaging in the millions of dollars for homes in places like Aspen, and with few affordable housing options available in these resort communities, Latinxs have to live

in mobile home parks or commute to work from towns far away—often driving two hours to get to work. As of 2020, counties like Eagle, Garfield, and Lake were 30% Latinx or more (US Census Bureau 2020). These Latinx communities are located mostly in towns lying downriver from Vail and Aspen, like Edwards, Gypsum, Basalt, Carbondale, Glenwood Springs, New Castle, Silt, Rifle, Parachute, and Battlement Mesa. Some of these are poor, boom-and-bust rural towns hit hard by the downswing of oil and gas prices; thus, they are affordable, and their location next to I-70 makes for an easier commute. Further west, the cities of Grand Junction and Montrose—and their construction booms—have also attracted Latinx immigrants. Montrose even serves as a bedroom community for those Latinxs who commute to Telluride, another major resort town in the state.

But the growth of Colorado's Latinx population goes beyond the mere redistribution of people from one place to the other lured by the promise of better jobs, housing, and schools in the Centennial State. Overall, Latinxs in Colorado tend to be young, married, and with children, though poorer than average. Most are also native born (75%) and of Mexican origin[12] (74%); 53% speak a language other than English at home (Pew Hispanic Center 2011; UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute 2023). "Other" Latinxs make up 16% of this population: a mix of mainly young folks who embrace a pan-ethnic identity (McConnell and Delgado-Romero 2004), and older Hispano families who no longer see themselves as connected to a very remote Mexican ancestry. Puerto Ricans, mostly found in Denver and Colorado Springs (due to the heavy military presence), account for another 3% of Latinxs—making them the second-largest national-origin group among Colorado's Latinxs.

Table 0.2 summarizes the main demographic and socioeconomic indicators for Latinxs (and non-Hispanic whites) in Colorado. As seen in the table, the median age for Latinxs in Colorado is only 28, which is well below the median age for non-Hispanic whites (or Anglos) at 40. However, when the total is broken down by national origin, it is obvious that most of the native-born Latinx population is made up of children and young adults (a median of just twenty), while the foreign-born population is older (with a median age of thirty-six). Essentially, we are looking at two Latinx generations: one of adults in their prime reproductive years, and another one of their children. This demographic phenomenon

TABLE 0.2. Selected demographic and socioeconomic indicators for Latinxs in Colorado, 2010–2020

	Latinxs	*Non-Hispanic Whites*
Median Age	28	40
Native-born	20	
Foreign-born	36	
Percent Married	47%	53%
Native-born	39%	
Foreign-born	61%	
Annual Personal Earnings (median)	$22,000	$34,200
Percent in Poverty		
17 and younger	31%	9%
18–64	21%	10%
Homeownership Rate	47%	70%
Percent Uninsured	27%	11%
Native-born	17%	
Foreign-born	56%	

Sources: Pew Hispanic Center 2011; UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute 2023; US Census Bureau 2020.

is particularly common among immigrant families, which are usually made up of middle-aged adults with children. Other data further reinforce this trend. For example, marriage rates (for persons ages fifteen and older) are higher than average for foreign-born Latinxs (61%), well over the 53% for non-Hispanic whites, who make up the majority of Colorado's population. Moreover, in 2010 Latinxs made up 31% of all the births in the state (Pew Hispanic Center 2011), which was well over their 21% share of the state's population, and nowadays 20% of Colorado's Latinxs are ten years old or younger (UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute 2023). Thus, Latinxs in Colorado tend to live in family units with children, and they are younger than their Anglo counterparts.[13]

As in other parts of the United States—though not as pronounced a trend—a generational gap exists between Latinxs and Anglos in Colorado. Latinxs tend to be Gen Xers, Millennials, and increasingly Gen Zs, while Anglos tend to be older Baby Boomers. The gap is not as wide in Colorado, because of the state's younger-than-average population, but

it still has major implications for economic status. The older generations tend to be wealthier (having spent more time in the labor market), have greater rates of home ownership, and are on a more secure footing when it comes to access to health care. The fact that race and ethnicity go hand in hand with wealth only compounds the generational gap challenge, giving rise to all sorts of potential future issues as Anglo Baby Boomers age and retire, and younger Latinxs will have to take their place. For example, annual personal earnings for Latinxs in Colorado are only $22,000 (median) versus $34,200 for non-Hispanic whites (a $12,200 gap). Household annual income shows an even greater gap: $53,300 for Latinxs (median) versus $71,500 for whites (Pew Hispanic Center 2011; UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute 2023). These gaps are the result not only of age but also other compounding factors, such as education, which are harder to bridge. Only 17.4% of Latinx adults in Colorado have a college degree, versus 51.5% of whites—a massive 34.1% difference! That is the second-largest educational gap in the nation, after California's (at 34.5%), and it presents a major challenge for the state's future as Anglo Baby Boomers start leaving the labor market (Camacho Liu 2011, 9). To make matters worse, "Colorado ranks forty-eight in the nation in state support for higher education" (as of 2010), and "tuition is 29% higher than the national average," making it more difficult for poor students to get a college education (Straayer 2011, 210–211).

The income and education gaps are clearly reflected in Latinx poverty rates: The poverty rate for Latinx children in Colorado is over three times that of white children, whereas for Latinxs adults it is twice that of whites (see table 0.2). Colorado's minimum wage has increased substantially in the last decade, as Colorado roared out of the 2008 recession, and the state experienced the fifth-highest growth in the nation in real gross domestic product and in per capita income. As of 2021, Colorado's Latinx poverty rate was just 15%—one of the lowest ever recorded (Hindi and Griego 2023). But despite gains in income and falling poverty rates, Latinxs in Colorado still lag far behind non-Hispanic whites. One of the ripple effects of poverty is that it affects your ability to purchase a home (usually the largest source of personal wealth for Americans); only 47% of Latinxs in Colorado own a home, compared to 70% of whites. That places Latinxs at a major disadvantage and reduces the size of their financial

safety net. In addition, 27% of Latinxs in Colorado lack health insurance, whereas only 11% of whites are without health coverage. For foreign-born Latinxs, the uninsured rate is an alarming 56%. Lack of health insurance means that some of these families are just one catastrophic illness (or accident) away from financial ruin, and even a common malady can become a major burden on their finances. Moreover, preventive health care is oftentimes beyond the means of the uninsured, which translates into costly trips to the emergency room, which in turn overburdens medical services and increases overall costs for the public. Colorado is one of three states that defy the "Hispanic paradox": the phenomenon by which Latinxs have lower age-adjusted mortality rates than non-Hispanic whites, despite persisting income and educational gaps. In Colorado, higher-than-average rates of liver disease, diabetes, and overdoses among Latinxs help buck this national trend (Wingerter 2024)—a sobering reality check on the status of Latinxs in the otherwise wealthy and healthy Centennial State.

The worst part about these figures is that—in some sectors—Latinxs in Colorado are comparatively worse off now than they were forty or fifty years ago. For example, in 1970, Latinx families earned 72% of white family incomes; by 2010, it was only 50%. Gaps in college graduation rates and home ownership have also widened for Latinxs, even as poverty rates have gone down. Cuts in the provision of social services since the 1980s, combined with a changing economy that saw thousands of manufacturing jobs leave the state, hit Latinxs—and other communities of color—hard and undermined some of the gains made during the civil rights movement (Hubbard and Carnahan 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic also sent many Latinx households into a financial tailspin, hitting them harder than most Anglo families (Bunch 2021). The arrival of hundreds of impoverished asylum seekers from Central and South America has reversed some of the statistical gains made by Latinxs and presents new challenges that the state of Colorado has yet to meet (Rivera and Beaty 2022). Finally, Colorado is being loved to death: Demand for housing—and home prices—hit new heights right during the COVID-19 pandemic as remote workers and investors took advantage of low interest rates and flooded the market, even as the construction of new homes stalled during the 2008 recession and the COVID-19 pandemic (Kwak-Hefferan 2021).

Poor and middle-class Latinx families that had previously aspired to the American Dream of owning a home (Flowers 2022) are being priced out of this red-hot housing market.

In conclusion, Latinxs represent the tip of a generational iceberg in Colorado. They are poised to become a sizable part of the state's population in the near future: 35% of Colorado's total population by 2050, according to estimates based on US census data (Bell Policy Center 2018). And as their numbers increase, Latinxs will figure more prominently in the state's economy and politics. However, major hurdles remain in their path: closing the educational gap, economic inequality, health disparities, access to affordable housing, and legalization of the undocumented—just to name of few. These challenges do not augur well for Colorado. The state needs to invest more in educating and providing services for its poorest residents, yet its hands are tied by a series of budget-balancing and tax-cutting measures enacted over the last three decades (Straayer 2011). It remains to be seen whether Colorado lawmakers will find their way out of this fiscal conundrum and help close the gap between Latinxs and Anglo Coloradans, or if the socioeconomic gains of the 1960s–1970s will be further eroded.

Organization of This Book

This book examines the history and current standing of Latinxs in Colorado in order to raise awareness about the state's largest minority group—and one that keeps on growing. Latinxs in Colorado have been a subordinated part of the population since the arrival of US troops into the territory, and it was not until the 1960s–1970s that the Chicano Movement forced a reassessment of their exclusion from mainstream society. Since then, Latinxs in Colorado have made important strides, yet their future—and that of the state—depends on making decisions now that will prioritize equitable growth for all Coloradans. This book seeks to inform; but, also, to question. It seeks to provide some answers, as well as to generate discussions. I like to think of it as a point of departure.

The format of this book is geohistorical, in more than one sense. As stated earlier, geography is a major determinant factor in Colorado (and throughout the American West). How the territory and state of Colorado was acquired, settled, and developed by the United States was determined

to a large extent by geographical factors. Similarly, the role that Latinxs played in that economic history is also influenced by geography. Latinxs went or were attracted to where jobs and opportunities existed for them, and that usually paralleled the state's economic development. Thus, the history of Latinxs in Colorado can be more or less told following a geographic format that takes them from the first Hispano settlements in the San Luis Valley to the latest immigrant arrivals in remote parts of the Western Slope to the ever-changing dynamics of Denver's Latinx community. Each chapter in this book covers a different geographic area of the state, as well as a different period in the history of Latinxs in Colorado. Some overlap is unavoidable, as significant events took place in different parts of the state at the same time, but the geohistorical format of the book aims at helping the reader understand the connection between peoples and places that is so intrinsic to the history of Colorado and the American West.

Chapter 1 starts where it all began: in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado. There Hispano farmers established the first permanent settlements in the newly acquired territory shortly after the end of the war with Mexico, only to see the land grants that they had obtained a few years before being lost to a new legal and land tenure system that was beyond their control. As American capitalism irrupted into the San Luis Valley, local Hispanos sought ways to shelter themselves from its consequences and held on to their culture for generations—and to this day. As a result, the San Luis Valley became the historical heart of Colorado's Latinx community, and it still remains a major Hispano/Chicanx/Latinx enclave.

Chapter 2 looks at the expansion of the sugar beet industry into the plains of eastern Colorado during the twentieth century and the central role that Latinxs played in it. The development of the sugar beet industry—as well as other crops—attracted hundreds of Latinx workers who extended the cultural borderlands into dozens of rural communities throughout eastern Colorado. Hispanos from the San Luis Valley, New Mexico, and other states, as well as immigrants from northern Mexico, made up the bulk of the agricultural workers who planted, tended, and harvested sugar beets, and did a myriad other jobs. Although nowadays eastern Colorado is the state's most sparsely inhabited region, the migration of hundreds of Latinx workers established deep-rooted communities

in the region and served as a springboard for future migrations into other parts of the state.

Chapter 3 examines the widespread sociocultural revolt of the 1960s–1970s that eventually became known as the Chicano Movement. Although El Movimiento played out throughout Colorado (though in different ways depending on location), it was in the urban centers of the Front Range where it found its utmost expression. Not only did large numbers of Latinxs live in cities like Denver and Pueblo, but it was also there that unofficial forms of segregation and discrimination (in jobs, housing, and respect for civil rights) were most rampant and obvious. Moreover, these cities housed the state's largest schools and main postsecondary academic institutions, thrusting students to the forefront of the Chicano Movement. El Movimiento was a watershed event that transformed Colorado's Latinx communities and forced the Anglo establishment to reexamine racial relations in the nation.

Chapter 4 fast-forwards to the 1990s and looks at how international market dynamics have transformed the state and the face of Colorado's Latinx population by focusing on socioeconomic changes in the Western Slope. There, the forces unleashed by trade deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) brought about an expansion of agricultural markets and a demand for cheap immigrant labor. The expansion of the resort industry would also bring Latinxs to work in upscale locations like Aspen, Telluride, and Vail. Finally, the rapid growth of towns and cities in a formerly underpopulated region created hundreds of jobs in construction and services—jobs that Latinxs would come to fill. In barely two decades, some Western Slope communities underwent significant transformations: from fairly homogenous, Anglo communities, to ethnically diverse towns with growing immigrant populations from Mexico and Central America.

The conclusion revisits the themes presented in the preceding chapters and places Latinx history in Colorado in the context of the American West and the nation. Colorado's Latinxs are more than just another Latinx community in the United States; they represent a unique case study in the northern US-Mexico borderlands and in international migratory circuits. While Colorado's Latinxs share many traits with other Latinx communities across the nation, their particular historical, cultural, demographic,

and socioeconomic characteristics, as well as the geohistorical context provided by Colorado's topography and economic development, make of them a case unlike that of neighboring states or elsewhere in the nation.

Latinxs in Colorado are at a tipping point, best exemplified by the race for Colorado's Sixth Congressional District in 2014. A safe Republican district for years, the Sixth historically encompassed the affluent suburbs south and east of Denver. For a decade, it was the political bastion of Representative Tom Tancredo, who ran—unsuccessfully—for the Republican presidential nomination and the governorship of Colorado (twice) on a nativist—if not outright xenophobic—platform. In 2010, redistricting brought major changes to the district, whose boundaries shifted north, losing some of its wealthy suburbs to the south and gaining all of Aurora, a racially diverse city with a large immigrant and refugee population. In 2012, incumbent Mike Coffman, a "birther" who publicly doubted that President Barack Obama was an American (and later apologized for his remarks), narrowly won reelection by less than 7,000 votes (or 2% of the vote). Coffman had also demanded the use of English-only ballots and had voted against the DREAM Act in the past. Shaken by the close outcome and facing a changed district that was now 20% Latinx, Coffman "evolved" in his position. He softened his stance on immigration, began attending Latinx community events, and decided to learn Spanish (Fox 2014). During the 2014 congressional campaign, he even participated in a Spanish-language debate hosted by the local Univisión TV station in Denver. He easily won reelection against a well-known Democratic opponent. Representative Coffman's "evolution" points out to the changing demographics and political landscape of the Centennial State, where Republicans—until recently—stood far to the left of their counterparts in states like Arizona. Representative Coffman saw the writing on the wall and took the appropriate measures to save his political career. Other Republicans, like former Senator Cory Gardner, also modified their positions on immigration in the face of a changing electorate. Flip-flopping politicians are nothing new; what is new is the role of Latinx Coloradans as agents of change. Whereas in the past Latinxs suffered the brunt of decisions made by authorities who did not care much for them or had to resort to protest politics to be heard (as in the 1960s–1970s), nowadays the growing electoral weight of Latinxs is weeding out extremist, reactionary

candidates who, like Tancredo, would have been easily elected in safe districts just a decade or two ago. Though the political influence of Latinxs is not even across the state, their influence in some areas translates into a changing political environment statewide, where moderation and compromise in issues like immigration, education, health care, and jobs, is becoming the new normal. In this sense, Latinxs are destined to play a major role in a changing state by fueling change as well as benefiting from it. And in doing so, all Coloradans gain from a more competitive electoral landscape, where political offerings have to appeal to a large and diverse range of voters, and where elected officials can no longer rely on safe districts or comfortable legislative majorities to impose their personal agendas. Change is the only constant for Colorado, and Latinxs represent the tip of the iceberg.