

The Effect of Globalization on the Places of Summit County, Colorado

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The movement of people, capital, and culture associated with increasing globalization has had a profound impact on shaping the places we inhabit, the cultures we interact with, and the ways we live. The development of Summit County, Colorado, represents one of the most profound landscape evolutions of the past 160 years. In less than two centuries, the forces of globalization developed an isolated area with limited agricultural potential, unruly topography, and an inhospitable climate into one of the most expensive and well-known tourist destinations in the United States (Blevins, 2023). The progression of this process underscores how the imposing force of globalism can reframe our understanding of place and, by extent, reinforce or challenge existing cultural, social, and ideological norms. By examining how the changing focus and intensity of globalization have been reflected in present and historic development paradigms in Summit County, Colorado, we can see the profound power of globalization in shaping the ways we interact with and consume nature and the places that surround it.

Globalization is an ongoing process whereby the intensifying interactions of people, ideas, and products lead to greater integration between different communities across economic, social, and cultural relationships. This trend

towards homogeneity has had a profound impact on the conceptualization and relationship between people and place as the array of social, cultural, and ideological interactions that define them are reconstituted (Oakes & Price, 2008, p. 254). These changes are often met with local resistance as the historic rigid association between place and identity is eroded by exchange and assimilation with outside groups (Oakes & Price, 2008, p. 255). The conflict between local and global desires is one of the primary contributing factors to the development and identification of place across time and space.

Much of Summit County's development has been produced by the conflict between the shifting desires of globalism and the local cultural values embedded in the landscape and surrounding places. Initially, the nomadic Ute Tribe inhabited the high mountains and dense forests of Summit County during the summer months, leaving to avoid the harsh winter months (History Colorado, 2015). The heavy snow, dense mountains, and lack of transit routes made the county one of the most isolated areas in the Rockies and contributed to a lack of human development well into the 19th century as transcontinental rail and transportation projects connected through areas with more favorable topography and less intense winters (*Maps of the Railroads*, n.d.).

Globalization and Extraction (1860s-1910s)

Globalization first began shaping the places of Summit County with the discovery of gold and silver in the surrounding mountains in 1859 (Summit County, n.d.). This discovery, part of the larger Colorado Gold Rush, drove thousands of prospectors into the Rocky Mountains in search of gold and other valuable metals. The mass migration of people into this undeveloped region led to the creation of railroads, mines, and water diversions that enacted lasting changes in the physical landscape of the region (Dutta, 2019). Each of these developments was created to support the extraction of natural resources. Breckenridge, the county seat, was incorporated during this boom period to serve miners. As a result, the places of Summit County during this era were constructed around the extraction of precious minerals and other natural resources valued by globalization (Gilliland, 2006).

This initial incursion of prospectors into the Rocky Mountains reconstituted the relationship between people and the places of Summit County. This process, enabled by the connection of capital, transportation, and markets through globalization, created a culture of extraction whereby the value of the landscape was derived from its ability to generate wealth (NWCCOG, 2019). Simultaneously, the meaning of Breckenridge and surrounding towns developed around their utility as gateways for resource extraction. Developments designed to further this culture of extraction continued to scar the landscape until the exhaustion of ore deposits and lower global market prices made mining unprofitable (Gilliland, 2006).

The initial mining boom and development of Summit County underscore Oakes & Price's analysis that globalization has the ability to alter how cultures view themselves and value the places that they inhabit (Oakes & Price, 2008, p. 254). By

placing value on the natural resources held in the mountains, globalization shaped the societal view of Summit County from an area defined by isolated wilderness to an area of economic opportunity. This shift led to a concentrated culture of independence, rugged individualism, and extraction as the association between Summit County and gold pulled more people into the mountains. Such an intense concentration of people, culture, and purpose gave explicit meaning to the places of Summit County as "mining towns" defined by their relationship to rare metals (Gilliland, 2006). During this period, globalization, aided by settler colonialism and capitalist ideologies, acted as the dominant mechanism in constructing the identity of the places that inhabited Summit County.

Globalization and Identity (1920s-1950s)

Sociologist Stuart Hall identifies the changing relationship between culture, place, and identity caused by globalization as resulting in a diaspora where people are dispersed from their original homeland. Hall further identifies that this diaspora can be characterized in two different ways. First is the traditional closed method, whereby people long to return to the defined historical place where a given culture is practiced. Second, the newer open method in which people view their relationship with culture, identity, and place as being developed out of a fusion of different backgrounds and experiences (Hall, 1995, p. 273). This approach, enabled by the progress of globalization, represents "new ways of being someone" in a world increasingly defined by movement and migration (Hall, 1995, p. 273). These new forms of identity contrast historic place-based views by contributing to a unique fusion of culture, identity, and place present in individual and collective imagined geographies. Hall examined these divergent approaches to understand how changes in an individual's cultural context caused

by globalization have the capacity to construct landscapes.

Globalization promotes these new forms of imagined geographies by creating opportunities and incentives for individuals to migrate to new locations. This process can be seen clearly with the initial development of Summit County; however, changing conditions disrupted this dynamic during the 1920s. Following the rapid growth of mining infrastructure, a marked reduction in global prices and local production of rare earth metals led to an economic depression that upended the cultural identity of the county (Kraitz, 2023). The same globalizing market forces that pushed thousands of people into Summit County ended up leaving ghost towns in their wake (Dutta, 2019).

Such a drastic change led to a dissociation between the places in the county and mining culture as depleted local resources and international markets enabled by globalization invalidated the economic calculus that sustained the region. The loss of mining in the region marked a cultural shift that upended the first dominant representation of space in Summit County. In the wake of this economic depression, many miners adopted a closed mindset towards the diaspora caused by globalization. Consequently, those with the means to do so chose to leave mines in Summit County to find places with greater economic opportunity or a more cohesive cultural identity. Such a mass migration led the population of Summit County to decline by more than 80% from 5,459 in 1880 to 987 in 1930 (Colorado State Demography Office, 2024).

Despite the economic conditions, some who migrated to Summit County adopted an open approach to their diaspora. One such example was the soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division who had trained in the Colorado Rocky Mountains for winter combat in World War II (Warren Miller Entertainment, 2021). Upon returning to Colorado, two of these veterans, Larry Jump and Sandy

Schauffler, created the Arapahoe Basin Ski Area in 1945 (Norman & Henceroth, 2020). Similarly, Norwegian immigrant and ski racer Trygve Berge opened the Breckenridge Ski Area in 1961 (GoBreck, 2019). Summit County survived as a place due to the vision of people like these bearing an open diaspora. By working to create their imagined geographies in physical space, these individuals set the stage for the next phase of globalized development that shaped Summit County into the place it is today.

Globalization and Development (1960s-1990s)

Geographer Doreen Massey argues that the process of space-time progression supported by globalization has led to profound spatial and cultural disruption as places and cultures interact with each other (Massey, 2008, p. 258). Space-time compression is the effect caused by the decrease in time needed to transfer people, goods, and information from one place to another. Massey states that some communities have resisted these compressive forces by attempting to define clear spatial boundaries that isolate places from other cultures and ideas. This is contrasted with Massey's concept of a "progressive sense of place," which seeks to view place as "a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (Massey, 2008, p. 258). These contrasting views reinforce the conflict between the ways and extent to which place should be defined in a broader globalized society.

The tension between these different conceptualizations of space began to emerge in Summit County as the development of recreational, hydrologic, and transportation infrastructure increased the accessibility and desirability of the recently reconstituted landscape. The opening of Keystone and Copper Mountain in 1970 and 1972, respectively, represented the ongoing expansion of skiing infrastructure in the region (Summit

County, n.d.). While initially limited in scope, these ski areas and the places that surround them began marketing the abundant snowfall and natural beauty of Summit County to attract tourists. These visitors, some of whom became locals, cultivated the extant outdoor culture of the county. This new sense of place reconstituted the landscape from extraction to experience as people began to value the experience of recreating outdoors (Hague, 2018).

This expansion of outdoor recreation culture and tourism was promoted by the rapid development of infrastructure that enabled space-time compression between the snowy peaks of Summit County and surrounding population centers. The construction of Interstate 70 through Colorado represented the largest and most impactful infrastructure investment in Colorado's Western Slope (Cox & Love, 1995). The highway alongside the Eisenhower-Johnson Memorial Tunnel enabled people, goods, and ideas to traverse under the imposing Continental Divide in record time and relative safety from winter weather conditions. This development, enabled by globalization's desire to connect resources and places, fundamentally altered the accessibility, landscape, and human geography of Summit County (Berwyn, 2007). Such drastic alterations brought numerous people into the mountains, which increasingly defined the value of places through the experiences of tourists (CDOT, 2024).

At the same time as transportation infrastructure expanded, the natural resources of Summit County were again being harnessed to support the hydrological demands of agricultural, industrial, and municipal users in the West. The thirst for water in Denver led to the construction of Lake Dillon in 1963 (Denver Water, 2013). The reservoir, along with the 23-mile-long Roberts Tunnel under the Continental Divide, diverts snowmelt and runoff from Summit County to fill the taps of customers in Denver. Prior to construction,

Denver Water purchased large swaths of land in the Blue River Valley, eventually forcing the residents of Dillon to relocate their town from the soon-to-be-inundated landscape (Denver Water, 2013). This hydrologic development represented a profound shift as places in the county were reconstituted to accommodate the resource demands of distant communities.

During this era of rapid development, Summit County adopted a decidedly progressive sense of place. This decision, driven by economic necessity and the lack of local resistance, ushered in a new relationship with globalization founded on the experiential value of the landscape and its constituent places (Nash, 2005). As a result, the county was redeveloped and reconstituted to support the desire of people to recreate in the Rockies. This recontextualization of the landscape defined new social norms about the acceptable uses of the land and the role of the people that inhabit it. These new norms of recreation and relaxation became self-reinforcing as the development of highways and water projects accelerated space-time compression, which further integrated the region into the global networks of tourism and capital. As globalization promoted further interaction between external cultures, capital, and concepts, the places in Summit County became increasingly shaped around the experience of tourists. Such a drastic shift began to conflict with the historic representations of place and identity as globalized forces eroded local norms.

Globalization and Commodification (2000s-Present)

In her book, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, anthropologist Anna Tsing identifies how complex and contingent conflict and collaboration between local and global forces have the power to shape emergent cultural forms. This occurs, Tsing argues, through the process of friction defined by the

“awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnections across difference” (Tsing, 2005, p. 4). These instances of friction can enable or resist globalization as individual places react unexpectedly to the forces imposed upon them. As a result, local and global culture, place, and identity are co-created through a myriad of long-distance and cross-cultural interactions. Through these interactions, passive and active friction exerted by specific places can work to unevenly situate global forces in local contexts (Tsing, 2005, p. 3).

In Summit County, the accelerating pace of space-time compression and increasing rate of development throughout the last three decades have contributed to immense friction between the globalizing forces that drive recreation economies and the locals that sustain them. More people visited and moved to the area as local and global communities began placing greater value on the experience and culture of outdoor recreation. Initially, this growth was met with the expansion of ski areas, trail networks, and transit infrastructure (Breckenridge Ski Area, 2023). As this process continued, people began to voice concerns about the consequences of continued development on the unique human and natural places in the county (Savall, 2022). As a result, residents supported development restrictions to protect the places they value from the growth driven by globalization.

These development limits generated friction between global and local forces as capital continued to rapidly flow into real estate transactions in the county. The lack of buildable land and the extensive permitting processes meant that housing prices soared as supply was unable to meet global demand (Daniel, 2023). The wealthy had bought up most of the buildable lots and dwellings, while record numbers of tourists stayed in short-term rentals, more recently facilitated through global platforms such as Airbnb and VRBO. As this cycle intensified, local workers felt the pressure of an unaffordable

housing market, being pushed into the periphery of the county or out of it entirely (Tann, 2022). However, this globalization-fueled exodus has been met with extensive resistance by local actors seeking to maintain their sense of place in a changing world.

Simultaneously, the commodification of skiing and outdoor culture by publicly traded companies contributed to the corporatization and overcrowding of outdoor locations. Products such as the Epic Pass introduced more people into the places of Summit County while maximizing earnings (Vail Resorts, 2024). This new reality of exclusivity and profit conflicted directly with the inexpensive communal culture of previous decades as the vertical integration of resort services squeezed many working locals out of the market (Wendover Productions, 2023). At the same time, industry groups leveraged targeted advertising and tourist-accessible design strategies to present Summit County as a kind of global community wherein anyone can experience the splendor of the Rocky Mountains. However, in reality, this facade hides the transience and turnover that increasingly drive the adventure economy of the region (Sienkiewicz, 2020).

Globalization made Summit County into a paradoxical place where a minority of houses have permanent residents (Wendover Productions, 2023), where locals live in the next county over (Carman, 2023), and where thousands commute on gridlocked highways every weekend to recreate outdoors (Liu, 2024). This paradox, unfathomable outside of a resort community, is only sustained by a palpable passion for the outdoors held by the locals willing to work and the visitors willing to pay for it. This passion and the lengths people are willing to go to sustain it are a key source of friction as the places of Summit County grapple with wealth and opportunity that whittle away at the core of the community. Much like the mining boom of the 1870s, globalization enabled people to manufacture, distill, and market the natural experiential resources

of the mountains. However, it is unclear the extent to which this commodification can be sustained before the experiences and the places that support them become sufficiently degraded to preclude external engagement.

Globalization and the Future of Summit County

The dynamics of globalization and growth in Summit County, from initial mining development to modern ski resorts, have always been founded on the shifting demands of global systems. These changing demands have invariably led to tension with local populations who, from the Ute Tribe to the underpaid resort worker, have been displaced from the landscape by globalizing forces seeking natural resources. The interactions between globalization and this local resistance have reconstituted the places of Summit County in dramatic ways. Today, the goal of creating a progressive sense of place in the county is uniquely challenging due to the economic forces of globalization that inherently place the interests of locals and visitors at odds. This tension is heightened because the future of the region is simultaneously contingent on globalizing processes that bring wealth, spending, and development to the mountain community and the ongoing commitment of the locals who are willing to work to sustain it.

The immense force of globalization enabled the cyclical degradation, abandonment, recontextualization, and commodification of the places in Summit County. Without careful planning, consideration, and resistance, the region threatens to relive the reality of the mining era, when unchecked globalization degraded the landscape until it was undesirable or unprofitable to do so. Consequently, long-term sustainability is dependent on how the people and places of Summit County work to balance an open cultural diaspora and progressive sense of place with dynamics of friction

and resistance that work to counter the consuming forces of globalization. However, it is unclear to what extent this burgeoning local resistance can succeed in mediating the degrading global forces that sustain them.

By examining the past and present of Summit County, we are able to understand that globalization affects places by imposing changing consumer, cultural, and ideological values that work to reconstitute the landscape through networks of capital and relationships. The dualizing force of globalization, underscored by its potential for opportunity and destruction, manifests itself in the tension between the development, valuation, and understanding of the places in Summit County. From valuing the resources of the landscape to valuing the landscape as a resource, globalization has fundamentally shaped the ways we interact with and consume the natural beauty and resources of the area. These consumption and development paradigms have gone on to shape the places of Summit County to fit a globalized cultural ideology of recreation and luxury only possible in the unique local context of a mountain resort community.

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