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Gabriel R. Valle  
riel30@gmail.com

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# **The Hidden Costs: A Case Study for Sustainable Development Studies**

Gabriel R. Valle

University of Seattle, Washington

## **Introduction**

The greatest threat to human existence is not the ecological crisis, the environmental exploitation, or the economic meltdown at present. The greatest threat to our endangered planet, our endangered home that is pushed to the limit each day, resides in something deeper. Is it possible that human individuality has blinded us from the interconnectedness of our world? Do we not understand how our lifestyle affects the well being of other beings? Maybe it is our individual consciousness that does not understand the human responsibility? Are we too caught up in celebrity gossip and reality TV to acknowledge our responsibility to the earth, to our brothers and sisters, and to our past and our future? Perhaps deep in human ignorance we do not see beyond ourselves into a universe of infinite possibility. We can either take the path that leads to environmental degradations, social inequalities, and economic expansion at the cost of humanity or we can take the path less traveled. For mainstream culture the path will be unknown and uncomfortable, but this path has the possibility for mankind to see past its petty differences to a common future. This path will not be easy to find and it will not be easy to take. Those who have benefitted from the status quo may not like this research, nor will it be liked by those who find it difficult to choose a new way. But it is this path, this alternative to our current way of life that must be taken in order for us to reach a sustainable future. As a student of Chicana/o Studies I endeavor to explore the impact of neglect, development, and possibility within environmental justice as central to our field.

This study takes place in the greater Lake Tahoe basin. My objective is to explore the way development has affected the area's ecosystems, marginalized local people, and brought corporate greed to the top of the food chain. What began as a simple study on the ways that immigrant communities around the lake live and survive rapidly expanded into an examination of the area's economic, social, environmental, and cultural worlds. This research views the world with a holistic approach where my aim is to focus on social, economic, or environmental issues. Many people have questioned my reasoning on the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental issues. Many residents of Tahoe, Anglo and Latino, do not see the correlation between the environmental policies of the area and the marginality of the Latino community. Many do not see the connection between economic expansion and environmental degradation, or the need for social equity in order to achieve an ecological resilience. Yet this research rests on the axiom that social justice, economic prosperity, and environmental quality are essential to the understanding of marginalization and the human experience, are central to our field, and are important to continue a path of action research inspired in Chicana and Chicano Studies.

In today's world, environmentalism is closely associated with environmental ethics, which Aldo Leopold and John Muir preached about in the past. Environmental ethics is defined by Peña as: "A field of moral philosophy that focuses on the effects and quality of the relationship between humanity and nature."<sup>1</sup> Through conservation and environmental laws, environmentalists impose regulations that marginalize those who do not fit into mainstream environmentalism. In contrast, environmental justice more specifically addresses racial consequences in its objective: "The abolition of racial discrimination in environmental laws and regulations. This includes elimination of patterns of disproportionate environmental risk and harm based on race."<sup>2</sup> In a way, these two movements argue against each other; however, if used together, they could present a potential for social liberation.

One of the most influential texts in Chicana/o Studies, Devon Peña's, *Terror of the Machine*, helped me to construct the analytical and methodological framework for this study. Peña demonstrates that the economic expansion and industrialization of the border region affects the people of the area far more than was anticipated. In his final chapter, Peña discusses the importance of environmental action. He argues that ecology is essential to the understanding of marginalized communities,

My commitment to social justice for Chicanos leads me to use working of environmental sciences not just to explain ecological destructiveness in theory, but to challenge it in practice. It is here that ecology, specifically restoration ecology and ecosystem theories, proves invaluable to my work in the maquilas.<sup>3</sup>

Peña argues for an analysis that focuses on the marginalization produced by maquilas and their social and economic impact on people. Moreover, he argues that the maquiladora industry is a threat to people where they live, work, and play. Peña's pioneering work inspired me to examine the impact of development on the marginalization of Tahoe residents. While there are many differences in the conditions at the El Paso border and in the Tahoe area, the impact of development in any place warrants examination. Cheap labor, bad living conditions, environmental degradation, economic expansion, and social marginality occur in Tahoe on a daily basis as they exist on the U.S./Mexico border and other localities. Tahoe residents and officials consciously and subconsciously cover and ignore these inequalities with rhetoric about a new "green infrastructure" so visitors and locals will not see this "separate" reality.

## Literature Review

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<sup>1</sup> Devon G. Peña, Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida (Tucson: University of Arizona Press 2005) 194.

<sup>2</sup> Peña, Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida. 195.

<sup>3</sup> Devon G. Peña, The Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender, and Ecology on the U.S.-Mexico Border (Austin, Tex.: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1997) 284.

Several different areas of study are embedded into this research. In many respects, I relied upon a diversity of methods in order to better understand the complex issues surrounding the Lake Tahoe region. My study explores the concept of sustainability, which is grounded on economic justice, environmental justice, and social equity.

I began this research with the idea of relating our social and economic worlds to our environmental world. This effort revealed important connections we have to place, to people, and to the environment. Moreover, I learned from Peña's, *Terror of the Machine*, and Laura Pulido's, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice* that low-income residents are often more susceptible to the negative side effects of economic development. Often times, low-income communities suffer from bad living conditions, unhealthy water, inadequate heating, and unreliable public transportation. All of these conditions have a profound effect on any community and on the greater society in which communities and people are imbedded. Peña and Pulido also situate the agency and the social movement mobilization of Chicana/o and Mexican American communities in their efforts to improve their quality of life. Their struggles manifest into labor struggles, environmental quality, health care, education, and much more. My research in the Tahoe area reveals this same outcome.

As I further investigated the field of sustainability I came to the conclusion that in many respects sustainability is a utopia. Indeed, it appears as though those fighting for sustainability often neglect the reality that many low-income residents face on a daily basis. Chaia Heller examines this issue in her text, *Ecology of Everyday Life*. She concludes that if we continue to romanticize about sustainability and our human/nature relationship we will never be able to attain sustainability. The view of nature as pristine and pure fits into a model aesthetics and austerity. Roderick Nash explores this focus in his study, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. He sees the American mind as a collective consciousness rooted in history without consideration of human consequences. He fears that we love the wilderness to death. We set up wilderness reserves and national parks so we can know that there is still wilderness somewhere as a place to be consumed as beauty. He argues that we designate animals to regions such as the grizzly bear to Alaska and the bison to Wyoming, but in a manner that prescribes control, taming, and organization for the sake of human pleasure. The history of American expansion across the west has demonstrated to the American mind that wilderness is just that, wild, and if tamed, it can be controlled for the benefit of mankind. Nash points out that as we have begun to realize the importance of wilderness it appears that we allow wilderness to be wild, as a pond in the American landscape where wilderness reserves are controlled at the expense of wilderness itself again for the pleasure and control by and for mankind (sic).

Given the persistence of wilderness in the American imagination, we can begin to understand how places like Lake Tahoe sell themselves as the "gem of the Sierra.s" and into a situation where development destroys the very scenery and environmental qualities everyone "loved." Understanding the development tactics used by developers in resort communities is essential to understanding the economic gap that resides in the

Tahoe area. *Downhill Slide*, by Hal Clifford explains how the corporatization of the ski industry has destroyed the character of many ski towns. By creating the ski village at the base of the mountain, ski resorts have altered the housing market. Thus, creating a domino effect that starts with higher land value and ends with a higher cost of living, which inevitably prices many residents out of the area or well below the poverty line. This phenomenon, as told by Clifford, has spread across the West to benefit wealthy second homeowners by creating fake villages, which lack authenticity and character. Redevelopment agencies, tourism, and the housing market reap the benefits of this new development strategy while the local community is left to fill the remaining service jobs.

My research is based on the principle of place. How important is place, and why do we need place, and more importantly, how does space become place? Timothy Beatley and Kristy Manning examine this concept in depth in their study, *Ecology of Place*. In this text they look deep into the issues encountered by every town, city, or metropolis when creating a sense of place. Beatley and Kristy believe that by creating a sense of place in the cities in which we live we can solve many of our economic, social, and environmental issues. By creating a sense of place people learn to care for the city they live in, the land they walk on, and the people that help make the city unique. Therefore, residents shop local, support local causes, help local food banks, and volunteer to help the local environment. David Holmgren goes a step further in his text *Permaculture*, a term that he co-coined. Permaculture is when we (people) are rooted in a place deep enough to have a connection to it. Holmgren claims that once we are grounded in a place we begin to create local cultures of place, which in the long run benefits the community. Holmgren's idea of permaculture coincides with Beatley and Kristy's theory of place, by creating a sense of place, by being grounded in a place, we become more aware of our surroundings. We do not fly through life at the expense of everyone else. Rather, we actually become more social beings, we become more caring, and in turn we become more of a community. These two books add to the discourse of place and place-making, yet the authors over simplify the concept because they neglect to acknowledge the inequalities that exist within our institutions and in our communities.

John Elkington's foundational work, *Cannibals with Forks*, helped me to create a framework for the study of the Tahoe area, which allowed me to examine inequalities and space. He argues that twenty-first century exploitative businesses must change their current trends and claims that by creating a business model that is responsible for one's actions and is grounded in economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity, businesses will become role models for other businesses and the trend will spread. He believes that all companies must realize the concept of the triple bottom line, the idea that everything is dependent on people, profit, and planet. Moreover, he argues that if we are to create a sustainable future in the twenty first century we must take account of all interlocking elements of communities.

Regional planning has been one of the biggest concerns in many resort towns. Some of the questions that resort communities ask include: How to develop, how much to develop, and how to maintain the character of the town? Joe R. Feagin in, *The New*

*Urban Paradigm*, examines ways in which city planners went wrong in the past. He discusses the root cause of social issues in the city by examining the urban design of our cities. For example, he argues that consideration about where to situate services such as public transportation can only be efficient if when services and need match. The practice of developing and then pricing communities out of the service corridor results in more problems of displacement and a lack of imagination. Our sprawling cities have gutted the inner city leaving it out-dated and run down. Michael H. Long views the gentrification of the city in his text, *Gentrification amid Urban Decline*, as one of the most important issues of the twenty-first century. Long argues that without a just system of redeveloping the inner city, low-income residents will be left out and further marginalized. Long argues for an approach to redevelopment that does not displace residents, but rather provides jobs, housing, and a better quality of life for both wealthy and poor residents. Mary Pardo in *Mexican American Women Activists* rounds out the issues of place, development, and community agency. Her work advances my understanding of the role of people in resistance and action that challenge development on a daily and sometimes obscured manner.

My study begins with an awareness of the complications that the Tahoe region has had in developing a stable economy and how the Mexican population has filled the need of the area's current labor market. My aim is to identify the connections between past, present, and future relationships between the Latino Community and the general public at large. In the extant scholarship I found a necessary place for my research. My research took place in the Tahoe region in 2009. I used qualitative methods to gather evidence for my study.

### **Development: From Run Down to High End**

The first question that any resident, politician, or agency must ask is: Why redevelop? The answer one receives is often short and avoids the real issues at hand. When I asked that question I heard many answers, for example: "it tends to bring more money into the community as a whole and to the city's general fund as well," and "there is an increase of employment opportunities with the bigger projects." Regrettably the agencies do not ask themselves: How does redevelopment help and hurt the community, especially low-income minority residents?

"For local governments in California, redevelopment is one of the principal tools available for revitalizing areas that are physically or economically blighted."<sup>4</sup> This means that local government can dictate what needs to be redeveloped by declaring it "blight." Once declared, "blighted" the city hands the matter over to the redevelopment agencies to create a plan of redevelopment. "A redevelopment plan provides the agency with powers to take certain actions such as purchasing and selling land within the area covered by the plan (project area), improving dilapidated facilities, and using tax

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<sup>4</sup> Grant Boyken, *Rethinking Redevelopment Oversight: Exploring Possibilities for Increasing Local Input* (Sacramento, CA: California State Library, California Research Bureau, 2007) 1.

increment financing.”<sup>5</sup> In this model, once an area is considered “blight” it passes to the redevelopment agency to propose projects.

The South Tahoe Redevelopment Agency (STRA) was created in 1988 by the City of South Lake Tahoe to give the dying Stateline area a facelift.

The Project Area for the South Tahoe Redevelopment Agency (STRA) was adopted on June 28, 1988 by Ordinance NO. 746. The Project Area is located in the northeast portion of the City of South Lake Tahoe and encompasses approximately 174 acres. Major land uses include tourist facilities and commercial development. The Project Area generally runs along Highway 50 from just west of Ski Run Boulevard to the California-Nevada border.<sup>6</sup>

The goal of the agency was to enhance the natural beauty of the City of South Lake Tahoe. A member of the SLRA told me that during the late 1980s their discussions and community workshops with local community members informed them that what the community wanted was a center for tourism. Once constructed, this first attempt at redevelopment would forever change the identity and character of the city. Heavenly Village would become known as the staple of the tourist industry around the Tahoe basin. The development was uniquely organized and constructed with mixed use and transit-oriented development. A member of the SLRA stated,

...the ski buses do transportation, [vacationers] can go to their hotels, catch Heavenly ski bus, go to the transit center [at Stateline], get off and ride the gondola and go up to go skiing. So there are those benefits, transportation, water quality for sure... and then plus you have the natural new or more advanced products.

Since the projects completion in 2001, the Stateline area has seen a “20% reduction in vehicle traffic at the Park Avenue and U.S. Highway 50 intersection...”<sup>7</sup> where the Heavenly Village currently stands. This means less sediment runoff into the lake, less CO2 emissions, and less traffic. Their goal was to create a more walkable atmosphere centered around Heavenly Ski Resort where visitors could shop, eat dinner, and spend money while being outside.

There is a very compelling power dynamic in regards to the redevelopment agencies and how they function within the city. For the most part the upper elite class holds the power to determine blight and the plan of redevelopment to be carried out. For

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<sup>5</sup> Boyken 5.

<sup>6</sup> South Lake Tahoe Redevelopment Agency 2004, City of South Lake Tahoe, 28. Jan. 2009 [www.cityofslt.us/redevelopment-housing/redevelopment.html](http://www.cityofslt.us/redevelopment-housing/redevelopment.html).

<sup>7</sup> Restoration in Progress: Environmental Improvement Program Progress Report (N.p.: Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, 2007)

example, in the City of South Lake Tahoe, residents were excited about the new development at Stateline. However, what was not mentioned was how this redevelopment would impose corporate control of the entire city because of their dependence on Heavenly Ski Resort and tourism in general.

Under the law, redevelopment agencies are required to form a project area committee [PAC] if: (1) „a substantial number of low- or moderate-income persons, or both, live within the project area, and the redevelopment plan will give the redevelopment agency the authority to acquire residential property by eminent domain;. or (2) „the redevelopment plan contains one or more public projects that will displace a substantial number of low- and/or moderate-income persons.<sup>8</sup>

That said, community participation is very important in regards to redevelopment and redevelopment policies. While democracy has claimed open involvement in PAC participation, Environmental Justice struggles have often time resulted from an inability of community participation and not from a lack of willingness to participate. For the City of South Lake Tahoe there has been several different community workshops where the agency works with local residents to help create the community they wish to see. “Redevelopment agencies can be molded into what you want them to be,” the SLRA member told me. In this sense, community connection is important because “PAC membership is limited to elected representatives of residential owner-occupants, residential tenants, business owners, and existing organizations within the projected area.”<sup>9</sup>

It is also important for the locals to not neglect the PAC, because once the plan is passed to the redevelopment agency the plan can change from their original plans without the community’s knowledge. The power dynamic established by these elected representatives determines how a community interacts with its neighbors to benefit the whole, or to benefit an individual.

For the environmental health of the Tahoe area it is important for redevelopment to take place. Many of the old sites are out dated and are insufficient considering Tahoe’s delicate ecosystem. They were built in an era in which the focus was to develop car-oriented places, which increase sediment into that lake and neglect of health codes in old housing units was not a great concern. Agencies, developers, and politicians hold a powerful place in the dynamic of city planning when they weigh out the social, economic, and environmental benefits of any given re/development.

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<sup>8</sup> Boyken 9.

<sup>9</sup> Boyken 9.

## **Objections to Redevelopment: A Local Perspective**

In the majority of cases, redevelopment takes place in low-income areas where residents have historically had a limited role in city policies. This is true in the Lake Tahoe area, however, what is important to note when considering redevelopment in a resort town, is not how and who the redevelopment affects directly, but how the domino effects of redevelopment create economic disparity among the area's citizens. As a result, the Environmental Justice movement has seen redevelopment as a ploy to not only "enhance" run down areas of the city, but to also further displace low-income residents. In the case of South Lake Tahoe, the redeveloped Heavenly Village displaced long-term local businesses by replacing them with trendy boutiques and chain stores. A TRPA spokesperson explained that, "The TRPA cannot address maintaining local businesses because it is out of our jurisdiction. We prefer to see local businesses that care about the community go up, however, often times big money fills the spots." The SLRA member also pointed out that "we are not coming in with an idea of what to do with the financing; we are coming in as a financier." Their claim is that based on the advice that they received from the community through their workshops; the public wanted a high-end tourist destination for their Park Avenue development. What the SLRA neglected to tell me was that the majority of the workshops the redevelopment agency held were during the day—a time when displaced people could not participate. Most low-income working people in the South Shore cannot afford to take work off to go to a meeting at ten in the morning. The agency also held two meetings at four in the afternoon for the Park Avenue development, without consideration for childcare. Thus, the few residents who were done working could not attend because they could not afford a babysitter. One Truckee family resource representative told me: "They [Latino families] are working two jobs, and if they are a couple, one of them is working and the other does childcare, so that is the reality. If you are working at minimum wage and you are going to a meeting, you are going to have to hire a babysitter, and that doesn't compute [economically]." Many Latino residents are so busy trying to survive that the topics at these meetings seem irrelevant to their daily lives, which does not give them much incentive to participate. A local Latina expressed her frustration when she stated, "I just don't get how this relates to me and my situation." Her argument demonstrated the divide between the service working Latino community and the business oriented Anglo community.

The redevelopment process transformed the Tahoe area and its image from a run-down mountain town to a trendy vacation spot, and in this process it has become a resort destination. "As a town becomes known as a resort, prices rise, which leads some to sell their property to outsiders drawn by the resort, making it more cosmopolitan and boosting the resort's image, thus causing prices to rise, and so on."<sup>10</sup> This process is what makes living in Tahoe essential and near impossible at the same time. There is need for a service workforce. However, because of the exorbitant cost of living in the area, many workers cannot make ends meet and must commute to work. The STRA states that one of the benefits of redevelopment is the creation of more

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<sup>10</sup> Hal Clifford, Downhill Slide: Why the Corporate Ski Industry is Bad for Skiing, Ski Towns, and the Environment (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2002) 96.

employment and job opportunities. During the construction process of Heavenly Village, the agency estimated that there was a need for 700 construction jobs, and since completion, it has created 500 new jobs, mainly in the restaurant and retail industry. These new developments were essential in supporting an economy built upon development. An official spokesperson of the Town of Truckee stated:

...they [developments] create employment... you know, construction, some high end employment and a lot of labor employment. There are a lot of service workers out there; they take care of the golf courses... all those kinds of things. I think these supper high-end, Lahontan was the first [high-end residential development just outside of Truckee], and now Martis Camp is the next high end [development], has created stronger psychology of economic stratification in this community. But I don.t think it.s positive.

As the development around resorts became more prevalent, the economy boomed and the demand for land grew. A Truckee city council member explained:

We had the best of plans...even though they were fairly basic in the early and mid 90s, and what we had... really starting about 1999 was a kind of land rush. Closely associated with the dot com boom... we had the top one percent of the people in the Bay Area clamoring to buy a piece of the mountains. And so our property land values went through the roof, construction went wild... and we rode that. Even the dot com bust didn't slow that down, maybe leveled it a bit. But we kind of just went right through that. And so we have had almost ten years of a very robust construction/development related economy. So that's good... everyone was kind of over-employed and doing well. However, that phenomenon priced most of the working class right out of housing in Truckee.

This Truckee representative was extremely concerned about what these implications meant for the authenticity of the town. As many residents were forced to leave the area as a result of high rent and cost of living, the homes became filled with second home owners, which only vacation there only a few weeks a year. "The town could be doing great economically and this place would not necessarily be better off for it. We might do a bang up job plowing the roads, but if all of our employees live in Reno then the heart is really ripped out of this community," he said. It wasn't until recently that city planners and developers began to see this outcome as a bad thing. For most planners, progress means growth. "Simply put cities and planning are reflections of capitalism and at the same time help to constitute it."<sup>11</sup> By allowing special interests and

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Allmendinger, Planning Theory (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 68.

development agencies to dictate planning for economic advancement, many of the communities are now split along class and racial lines. “The existing divisions of class, race, gender, and other socially constructed differences can generate conflict and dissent with the collaborative community”<sup>12</sup>

There are many ways in which redevelopment agencies work above the law. Some residents in the Tahoe area feel that redevelopment agencies are more powerful than the city itself. In many ways that is true because they work as separate legal entities. One South Lake Tahoe council member told me:

[Redevelopment agencies] ...can do two big things, which I feel are unacceptable and have fought against for fifteen years... number one is that through the process of condemnation and taking, using eminent domain, they take property and condemn it. That is one of the things that has happened in this town that has split the community wide open.

When using eminent domain the city is forced to relocate residents living in the housing being redeveloped. However, the city is not forced to relocate businesses who were once located on the newly redeveloped area, which leaves them outside looking in. “The second thing they do,” the council member told me, “which from my standpoint it is totally unacceptable, is that they can create public debt through selling municipal bonds.” He later claimed that South Lake Tahoe’s debt was because of redevelopment practices.

During this decade several new developments have changed the Tahoe area. In the North Shore, the Village at Squaw was completed in December of 2003 with 285 condominiums, suites, six restaurants, twenty retail shops, and a spa. The Village at Northstar is in its final phases of completion. Homeowners enjoy the amenities of the up-scale communities near Truckee, Grey’s Crossing, Old Greenwood, and the Northstar Highlands. There is also a proposed re/development at one of the last small scale ski resorts on the lake. Homewood Resort has now expressed interest in building a four-season resort. If the plan receives the approval of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), and other governing boards, the development would include a north base development, a south base development, and a mid-mountain redevelopment. Homewood’s claim is that it will enhance the environmental standards and increase job opportunities on the West Shore. The development would include about 300 new units, both hotel and ownership. That number of units is almost the total population of the community of Homewood. During the community workshops that took place in 2008, residents told developers that the main thing they wanted from the development was to maintain “consistency with the scale and character of Homewood, California.”<sup>13</sup> Is that

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<sup>12</sup> Devon Pena and Joe Gallegos, “Local Knowledge and Collaborative Environment Action Research.” *In Building Community: Social Science in Action* Ed. By Philip Nyden, Anne Figert, Mark Shibley, and Derryl Burrows (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1997) 88-89.

<sup>13</sup> “Homewood Mountain Resort Master Plan Project Notice of Preparation,” Placer County and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, 2008, 9 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.placer.ca.gov/Departments/C>

possible with a development of this size? How will this development affect those who will not benefit from the increases of skiers or the increase of tourism? If projects do not take into consideration what will happen to these communities there is a good chance that there will be more people priced out of the Tahoe area.

**“We Cannot Solve our Problems with More Cabins in the Woods”**

The Chicano communities as well as other low-income minority communities have been at the center of the gentrification of urban redevelopment for decades across the U.S. The gentrification of these communities “usually happens in three phases: (1) the deterioration of life and housing conditions; (2) a transitory period characterized by renovation of housing and „beatification. usually by Anglo outsiders; and (3) a final phase where only former homeowners among the original residents remain in a mainly Anglo neighborhood.”<sup>14</sup> This process of redevelopment and beautification displaces low-income minority groups from a neighborhood while replacing them with an upper class, mainly Anglo neighbors, thus segregating the two communities based on race/ethnicity and class. According to Feagin, “corporate investment and disinvestments are linked constantly to state action and have major economic, social, and political effects on urban households and communities.”<sup>15</sup>

Through these practices our country’s socioeconomic gap will continue to grow. Policies that are designed for an entrepreneurial atmosphere will continue to neglect class and race/ethnic differences. By allowing already upper-class groups of entrepreneurs to restructure and redevelop low-income communities, we are allowing this elite class to rule our city policies. “These newly adopted policies aim at encouraging private enterprise to make up for government disinvestments through a policy of preferential taxation to favor free enterprise in certain urban areas and the promotion of inter-city revitalization with community involvement.”<sup>16</sup> In most cases, the Chicano community is unable to compete in the redevelopment arena because of the lack of representation and money. “The haves-versus-the-have-nots reality has bitterly split ski towns and, in combination with theological schism over land use, has deeply faulted the socioeconomic and political landscape in many mountain communities.”<sup>17</sup> A Truckee representative stated:

Progress for me is making the town a better place that’s a result of the development that will occur here. Now that doesn’t mean bigger... that means better services, better

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ommunityDevelopment/EnvCoordSvcs/EIR/~/.media/cdr/ECS/EIR/Homewood/NOP.ashx>. Internet Accessed 9 December 2008>.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuelle Le Texier, “The Struggle Against Gentrification in Barrio Logan.” In Chicano San Diego: Cultural Space and the Struggle for Justice (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007) 209.

<sup>15</sup> Joe R. Feagin, The New Urban Paradigm: Critical Perspectives on the City (Lenham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998) 26.

<sup>16</sup> Le Texier 211.

<sup>17</sup> Clifford 104.

housing opportunities for our residents, better schools and public facilities, that better... more seamless mix of people... breaking down cultural barriers that is White-Latino. That's progress.

This Truckee representative's idea of what progress means demonstrated his conflicting views. Does progress mean development? Does progress mean growth? Does it mean social equity, economic prosperity, or environmental quality? This is a constant struggle in the Lake Tahoe area because tourism is a consumption-based economy. While city government might be guided and influenced by social and moral justice, will big money and big business prevail?

A commonly stated goal for all of the redevelopment agencies around the lake is affordable housing. Their challenge is not only how to acquire affordable housing, but also because of the restrictions in place, where to put affordable housing. "The income gap is almost the sole reason why affordable housing and transportation have become the biggest, most complex, and most contentious issue in ski resorts around the country."<sup>18</sup> As with many resort towns, the struggle for affordable housing is not seen by the tourists. The Tahoe basin lacks adequate affordable housing. The STRA spokesperson told me that once a redeveloped area is in progress or complete, the "...redevelopment gets a part of that increase in property tax, ...20% of that goes to the housing department which helps out the low-income housing programs that we have." However, according to a local Latina, "...in housing, they don't think about the Latino community. They talk about affordable housing, but affordable for whom? They are expensive; one thousand dollars a month... most of us are only making eight or ten dollars an hour." Therefore, many in the Latino community cannot afford *affordable housing* and are forced to live in, as a local called them, "slums," described to me by a South Tahoe council member as follows:

Because of the nature of the workforce being primarily service oriented, we're talking about minimum wage jobs. That prohibits good housing. And because of the service industry we have here a very large "immigrant" population. I don't care which term is used, "Hispanic", "Latino", whatever. What I have seen happen over the years... we have apartment complexes that were considered nice housing when we came here [48 years ago]. What we have done because of the impact of this population that I spoke of and the low wages, we have created in my mind slums.

Often what is not understood by the general community is that these "slums" are a result of the development that has taken place in the area. City governments have focused the attention not on improving the quality of life of these residents, but rather on where to put them. Regardless, if as a tourist, or a local resident for that matter, you do

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<sup>18</sup> Clifford 192.

not walk back behind the five star hotels of South Lake Tahoe, across the tracks of Truckee, or down the back roads of Kings Beach, you will see only images that support the idea of the region as paradise.

In the resort town these disparities are even more evident. The root cause of this is not the redevelopment itself, but rather the development that is a side effect of redevelopment and reinvestment because money and investments are then funneled into these areas and thus further neglect the needs and resources of low-income communities. Realtors, developers, and special interests thrive off of new development selling wealthy Baby Boomers a piece of the mountains. “The message here implies that the buyer will purchase a life, but in truth all that’s for sale is a lifestyle; a pretty stage set to entice visitors and buyers, and a nice second home.”<sup>19</sup> Across the basin the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) estimates that about seventy percent of all the houses around the lake are owned and used as second homes. Because of this phenomenon, residents have lost a sense of place. Downtowns are seen as “where the tourists go” according to one resident. “I don’t want to critique what Placer County is doing,” said the Truckee council member, “but whatever they do has a huge impact on us.” Truckee is situated on the border of Nevada and Placer counties. The town of Truckee does not allow for gated communities, however, because some of the newer more recent developments are just outside of city limits in Placer county, developers do not need to follow Truckee codes and allow for gated communities. This creates an interesting dynamic for those inside the gated communities and those in the town of Truckee. Truckee cannot control what Placer County does, regardless of the effect on the town. This elitism and segregation has brought wealthy residents to the mountains because “more people wanted to taste the magic of these [mountain] towns.”<sup>20</sup> Once completed “Life in the ski town starts to look a lot more like the daily rat race anywhere else.”<sup>21</sup> Many of the newly revitalized downtowns are designed for tourists and second-home owners at the expense of the local and constant residents. “High end tourism meant more money, which attracted more people, and those people wanted more things, and the spiral of impossibility began.”<sup>22</sup>

The high rent in downtown areas make it near impossible for local merchants to remain. Chain stores and high-end boutiques have taken over the downtown corridors of the Tahoe area. “The survival of local merchants helps to preserve the character of communities, and the personalized attention they provide is vital to maintaining not only quality service, but also the types of connections that constitute the fabric of community.”<sup>23</sup> Today, Starbucks, Jamba Juice, Pete’s Coffee, and high-end art galleries have replaced the stores that were once owned and operated by local families.

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<sup>19</sup> Clifford 90.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford 39.

<sup>21</sup> Clifford 59

<sup>22</sup> Clifford 102.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Beatley and Kristy Manning, The Ecology of Place: Planning for Environment, Economy, and Community (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997) 149.

In the past decade and a half the Truckee region has seen tremendous development. The main company that has joined in on this assault on the local industries has been East West Partners. The company has up-scale developments in four states including Colorado, Utah, South Carolina, and California, as well as one in Canada. This organization has completely altered the dynamics of Truckee. One local resident stressed, "There has been a big change here [in Truckee], but little benefit for the community." That is because East West has put a price tag on the area and it's community. "It's a fucked up thing East West did to Truckee, they turned it into a dollar sign," he told me. "And worst of all, because the H2B workers that they use, locals can't find a job." Because the Tahoe area is dependent on tourism and development for its economy many did not see the lack of work for contractors as an issue. Recently large construction companies began to monopolize construction in some of the new residential developments and only then did locals realize the severity of the situation. Every day Tahoe loses more and more of its local contractors because of the lack of work, and every day these large corporations exploit H2B workers with the few construction jobs left in the area.

The H2B workforce that has migrated into the area might be one of the hardest hits to local construction workers. The H2B is a work visa issued to employers by the federal government to allow for a cheap, foreign, and "legal" workforce. However, as a member of the local contractors union informed me, "They are like a form of indentured servants, but worse... like slaves." He went on to say, "These huge companies bring these guys here from Latin America, from Eastern Europe, from Asia, and they don't pay them well, they don't treat them well, and worst of all, as soon as they are done with them they deport them." Because of this workforce East West has been able to create an empire built upon the shoulders of cheap and "expendable" foreign labor as well as pitting local labor and transnational labor against each other. This union member clearly understands the machinations of the corporation as a divisive plan on labor, but also as a continuity of labor dependency.

In January of 2008, Midwest Drywall, a Wichita company, who also subcontracted houses for East West, was caught not paying their workers. In an article from CBS Denver, "Sixty-five contract workers from Mexico are seeking more than \$177,000 in damages after they came to Colorado on a the promise of jobs that never materialized..."<sup>24</sup> This is a great example of how big business has set up H2B workers to create a dual-wage labor market. In a sense, big business sees them as less costly than undocumented workers because they are "temporarily" legal. Companies can pay them far below the minimum wage and do not have to worry about them being deported until they have finished with their labor. In my discussion with the local contractors union, one member told me, "I wanted to see how easy it was to find workers, I called, told them I had work and needed workers, and all they asked was how many." In many respects this program is similar to the Bracero program of the mid-twentieth century.

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<sup>24</sup> Solomon Banda, "Suit: Immigrants Stranded After Jobs Fall Through" Associated Press. 22 Jan. 2008 CBS Denver <<http://cbs4denver.com/local/immigrants.stranded.jobs.2.639922.html>>

The only difference is these workers cannot be used for agricultural purposes, but as I was explained, “ski resorts use these visas, construction companies, and even the casinos” to fill their labor needs. The use of immigrant labor in this manner clearly demonstrates the privileged position of developers not only in terms of securing manageable workers, but also in the cynicism over current debates on just immigration reform to assist immigrant workers and their families who like the unofficial braceros were forgotten as a permanent underclass. This abuse affects both immigrant and native race/ethnic workers: “My son graduated from Cal Poly, he wants to work at the ski resort, but because of the cheap labor they use, he can’t even work as a lift operator,” one Latino mother told me. “Small mountain towns will keep ending up as what they don’t want to be until the people who live in them control the levers of power.”<sup>25</sup>

As Baby Boomers are set to retire in the coming years the Lake Tahoe region will most likely adapt to their needs. A South Lake Tahoe city council member told me:

Some of the folks that own those residential properties, and I’ve heard it from quite a few, is that eventually they plan to live there. So it is a second home deal and when they retire they plan to live here. The consequences are that Tahoe is becoming, if it is not already, a retirement community. That has serious ramifications.

His fear, and the fear of many other locals, is that this new retirement community will not be engaged in city politics or vote against taxes for public education, community infrastructure, and other tax hikes needed to preserve the community. “If you are going to talk about local government,” he said, “are those folks going to be interested at that age... they are retired and they don’t want any hassles. So just how active will they be in the community, is a big question mark.” As this group continues to grow in the Tahoe area there is an increasing disparity between them and the low-income Latino community. Wealthy retirees are moving to the mountains to enjoy the outdoors, to ski, and to be left alone.

Many Tahoe residents feel that they are losing control over their community. Special interest groups such as the Tahoe Visitor Authority (TVA) have profound power in the region. The purpose of the TVA is to generate tourism from outside the Tahoe area. The surrounding communities around Lake Tahoe pay yearly dues to the TVA in order to advertise the area, which one way or another helps to create a Tahoe identity. In other words, they create the perception that visitors have on the Tahoe area through a wide range of public media. Because of the area’s dependence on tourism and development as a means of commerce, many cities and organizations willingly donate to the TVA. Locals, unaware of the agency’s true intentions fear about who the real beneficiaries are - wealthy out-of-town investors. “Vast wealth not only corrupts democracy; its accumulation usually degrades the environment - super profits are

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<sup>25</sup> Clifford 237.

maintained by constant growth in production and consumption, aided by planned obsolescence.”<sup>26</sup> Special interest organizations, such as the TVA, have no problem moving through the legal roadblocks of the area. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) has become, as one resident put it, “a fee and fine organization.” They are no longer worried about putting in place policies for the betterment of the area’s communities; rather, organizations that work with the TRPA have the ability to push an agenda because they have the money.

The city of South Lake Tahoe is attempting to embrace smart growth policies in the general plan for the future in order to gain local community control. Smart growth policies concentrate on expanding the range of transportation including more walking and biker friendly communities. They also promote equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of development. The smart growth principles are modeled after the slow movement lifestyle of Europe called the Slow City Movement. The Slow City (*citta slow*) Movement grew into popularity in the late 1990s when American corporations began to destroy local community economies. This new wave of urbanism as a way of slowing down allows its citizens to connect with each other, which in turn, allows for local economies and communities where businesses and jobs can boom. The goal is to create new “approaches to urban development that do not merely focus on community-based economic development, but also on issues of sustainability and social equality.”<sup>27</sup>

By doing this, development and redevelopment happens with the best interests of the community in mind and not those of the developers. “The leading explanation about the process and content of mainstream urban development in the United States focuses on the dominance of business interests and the dependence of public policy makers on corporate-centered/mainstream economic development policies.”<sup>28</sup> In this way, corporations are taking away the “community” from the community and placing it in the hand of policy makers that are driven by dollar signs and not humanity. South Lake Tahoe is having difficulty fully dedicating to the smart growth principles because the economy is dependent upon tourism, which relies on development and redevelopment run by big business and big money, which in turn creates economic, social, and political disparity within the community. Devon Peña explains the importance of urban renewal and sustainability for the Chicano environmental justice movement as follows:

[It] is important to the future of the Chicana/o environmental justice movement because most Chicanas/os live and work in cities. Issues related to the politics of urban planning; gentrification; brownfields reclamation; access to affordable and safe housing, public health, and equitable mass transit; police brutality and racial profiling; urban agriculture and

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<sup>26</sup> Roelofs 2.

<sup>27</sup> Heike Mayer and Paul Knox, “Slow Cities: Sustainable Places in a Fast Word,” Journal of Urban Affairs (Sept. 2006, Vol. 28 Issue 4) 321.

<sup>28</sup> Mayer and Knox 322.

local foods security must continue to demand action in the environmental justice movement.<sup>29</sup>

A problematic situation that often occurs in most societies is that those in power do not want to lose their power. Because of power relations "...most of us will not change our beliefs and behaviors because some of us benefit from how these systems are organized."<sup>30</sup> The willingness to allow others access to power is what is needed to create sustainability in all areas of life. "The Western Model of Development is contrary to an emphasis on human development and ecological balance. It results in the depletion of resources, the despoliation of the environment, and the massification of society (i.e., atomized citizens maintained through mass marketing, resulting in loss of distinctiveness)."<sup>31</sup> For slow cities, the "community economic development is focused on smaller-scale areas such as neighborhoods and it attempts to benefit groups that have traditionally been left out of the mainstream economic system (homeless, minority, immigrants, etc.)."<sup>32</sup> For example, minority and low-income communities will no longer be left out because they will have created a space where their community relies on the local economy rather than on corporate dependence. "What local ownership really accomplishes is to put a community more directly in charge of its fate."<sup>33</sup> This model explains how "the creation of a local product glues together the local economy, employment opportunities, and the area's environmental assets... It is out of these connections that alternative spaces emerge."<sup>34</sup>

Due to the growing expansion of the Tahoe area it is more important than ever to reconsider our redevelopment policies and how they affect everyone involved. The corporatization of our redevelopment policies has created an atmosphere where the local economy cannot survive.

As skiing has become more capital intensive, ski towns have become ever more dependent for their livelihood on outside corporations and their publicly raised capital. No local entrepreneur can raise the sums of money necessary to compete at the top levels of today's ski industry.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Peña, Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida. 186.

<sup>30</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Racism Without Racist: Color Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States (Lenham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 2nd ed.) 221.

<sup>31</sup> Rubén O. Martínez, "Social Action Research, Bioregionalism, and the Upper Rio Grande," in Chicano Culture, Ecology, Politics: Subversive Kin, ed. Devon Peña (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998) 64.

<sup>32</sup> Mayer and Knox 224.

<sup>33</sup> Clifford 236.

<sup>34</sup> Mayer and Knox 224.

<sup>35</sup> Clifford 55.

It is impossible for us as a nation, or as a global community, to view sustainability as a viable outlet for development and redevelopment without guaranteeing our policies to be just. By allowing minority communities access to their community through employment, affordable housing, health care, and all the other amenities that redevelopment brings into a neighborhood, we can begin to incorporate all citizens so that everyone can benefit. Redevelopment can be a great thing for a low-income community. It can bring new life into the area. Unfortunately, in the United States the “free market economy has come to mean the pursuit of profits at the expense of human and natural resources, and material aggrandizement at the expense of human dignity, well-being, and developmental growth among workers and the poor.”<sup>36</sup> What is needed is cooperation between the redevelopment agencies and the community. By incorporating local contractors into the redevelopment, giving the tax breaks to the local restaurant owners, and circulating the wealth of the redevelopment within the community, redevelopment agencies will be able to create sustainable environments where the local community can thrive.

The TRPA estimates that the entire basin will be built out by 2028. According to a TRPA spokesperson, “...however, with environmental net gains of new environmentally friendly advancements, there is a possibility that it could be later as the maximum carrying capacity of the region will grow. If the development isn’t hurting the environment, then we have no reason to stop growth.” By increasing the carrying capacity of the lake, the environmental thresholds that were established by the original Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) signed into effect by President Bill Clinton in 1997 will be challenged. Based on the history of the Tahoe area, residents are weary of the TRPA’s intentions to control growth and stimulate growth at the same time. As one Truckee spokesperson said, “Everyone wants a cabin in the woods... but we cannot solve our problems with more cabins in the woods.”

### **Conclusion: A World of Possibilities**

Lake Tahoe is one of the most beautiful sights in the world. There is no wonder why people want live and visit the area. The flocks of tourists, developers, and merchants are always going to be on the seat of controversy in the Tahoe area. Tahoe is also home to community members who have settled here over the years—among those a vibrant Chicano/Mexicano immigrant enclave. With a new consciousness of how our actions are connected in all facets of our lives, Tahoe may be able to overcome the difficulties of past development practices. By creating space where locals can work cooperatively towards their future, the locals are placing themselves within the community rather than at the best interests of the developer. John Muir once said of the Sierra Nevada,

Oh, these vast, calm, measureless mountain days, inciting at once to work and rest! Day in whose light everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God. Nevermore, however weary, should one faint by the

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<sup>36</sup> Martínez 64.

way who gains the blessings of one mountain day; whatever his fate, long life, short life, stormy or calm, he is rich forever.<sup>37</sup>

Rich forever indeed. To some this wealth comes in the form of being outside in the fresh Tahoe air and to others this wealth comes in the form of greener and cleaner means of living. If this area can realize its potential by stressing the need for the local it too can be wealthy in the terms of a more cohesive community where community space and agency are prevalent.

Throughout this research project I have kept in mind the lessons of Chicana and Chicano Studies—ours is a field dedicated to redressing past neglect in scholarship and issues. I have demonstrated that the history of the lake continually recurs as different expressions of exploitation. The study of transformed communities dedicated to tourism and visitors affects local community cohesion and continuity. Hal Clifford states, “Vacation real estate development is the last in a long line of exploitative, colonial, export-driven, and unsustainable economies that typified the development on rural American mountain communities.”<sup>38</sup> This is the past Tahoe has, perhaps unintentionally, chosen for itself. My research shows how communities, Anglo and Latino, are beginning to find ways to reaffirm the local.

The divide between the environmental movement and environmental justice movement must be closed in order for the area to benefit not just those who want to go skiing and hiking, but rather for those who reside in communities and want a better quality of life. This quality of life can be expressed as a common struggle as Pardo so clearly illustrates in the case of East Los Angeles and Monterrey Park. By placing the human experience at the center of environmentalism and urbanism we can find a common ground. The ways in which these two struggles will evolve over time is uncertain, but as this research demonstrates, neither one is benefiting if a step forward for one group means a step backwards for the other, or if one succeeds at the expense of the others.

Douglas Strong states that, “The heart of Tahoe’s environmental problem is urbanism.”<sup>39</sup> Regardless of how clear this is to see, it is also near impossible to stop. But that doesn’t mean that the area cannot change the ways in which they develop, in this process they can also change what progress means. However difficult that may be, the restructuring of our political and social institutions might be one avenue. I have discussed how redevelopment in the Tahoe area is important for the well being of the environment. These new developments create green and more cost effective business and homes. However, this new green wave has priced many residents out of the area—many of them Mexican Immigrants and Chicana/os. Redevelopment has taken homes

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<sup>37</sup> John Muir, My First Summer in the Sierras (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1987) 61.

<sup>38</sup> Clifford 225.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas H. Strong, Tahoe: An Environmental History (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 200.

away from families, businesses away from locals, and replaced them with corporate and big chain structures. Redevelopment and the gentrification caused by redevelopment have spread across the basin. Some see this movement as a vaccine to dilapidated housing, empty storefronts, and poverty; others see redevelopment as a disease spreading from neighborhood to neighborhood, from town to town, all while destroying the character of these small towns and marginalizing low-income residents. "The solution to this problem", points Michael Long, "lies in finding a program that encourages existing forces to revitalization while safeguarding the interests of original residents and their neighborhoods."<sup>40</sup> The alternatives to our common perceptions of development are there, whether or not they will be used and used correctly is another question.

Land ethic is what Aldo Leopold stressed over forty years ago, and finally today there are organizations and communities outside of the marginal discourses that are beginning to understand his principle. "We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points," he stated, "but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use."<sup>41</sup> With a raised awareness of how our actions affect people in all areas of their lives, we can begin to embrace a land ethic. Devon Peña argues that through sustainable development alternative spaces grow. Here is where a new consciousness of our actions can inspire people.

The... path leads perhaps to a promised land where ecological integrity, social justice, economic democracy, community empowerment, and cultural diversity are practiced and celebrated. This is a world where rivers that never wanted to be borders are restored to ecological balance. This is a place of safe homelands and refuge, where the mixed communities of humans and non-humans can one again truly prosper and flourish, where the life of the earth is reclaimed as sacred and the specter of the power of money no longer haunts the land and the people in the nightmare called the terror of the machine.<sup>42</sup>

In this space, where environmentalism and environmental justice merge, where alternative development methods are created, and our social and cultural worlds blossom, is where change can occur. Tahoe is no different than any other mountain town, and their issues are similar to those of large cities. However, if this area can embrace community and cherish culture, it has the potential of regaining the local.

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<sup>40</sup> Michael H. Lang, Gentrification Amid Urban Decline (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1982) 144.

<sup>41</sup> Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, 1949) 226.

<sup>42</sup> Peña, Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender, and Ecology on the U.S.-Mexico Border. 334.

The idea that we are entering a new millennium is, of course, a contrived, Christian way of making time passages. But it still affords a badly needed invitation to ponder the big picture of historical change. Just the idea that a thousand years should challenge us to move beyond our chronic myopia and lift our eyes to the far horizons of planetary possibility.<sup>43</sup>

For many people who have begun to embrace sustainability principles these possibilities are truly endless. For those who have struggled for social justice, for those who have struggled for environmental justice, and for those who have struggled for economic justice, the possibilities of a paradigm shift to a sustainable life where human-nature reciprocity can fulfill the needs of all humanity equals a future we can all embrace.

Where do we go from here? How can we take the utopian vision of sustainability and make it into something tangible? My observations have revealed that many people in the Tahoe area are ready to undo the past, but it also reveals that perhaps some are not quite ready to cross the borders needed to step towards the future. This study highlights differences of opinion where some believe social justice and economic equity must be reached first. Others believe that more laws and restrictions will control growth and conserve environmental resources allowing the rest to fall into place. What this research also shows is that what has been done in the past and what is currently going on is not working, and until that paradigm shift comes, we will continue to use the same outdated methods of the past.

As a scholar my humble contribution is identifying interventions within scholarship, in Chicana and Chicano Studies and in the timely return to the urgent plea that Peña brought to Chicano Studies (sic) in 1990 when he introduced the idea of environmental justice as Chicana and Chicano Studies. I believe that the first step to anywhere is dialogue. With this research I wish to express how power and control have made a region and its community--the Tahoe area--neglect quality of life over profit. I found that until the local people demand change, those in power will not relinquish it. So maybe the real question is not where do we go from here, but rather, how can we begin to demolish the boundaries that have been the dividing force for far too long? This is my hope and my contribution. I hope that Chicana and Chicano Studies is truly ready to expand its vision to include environmental and development issues as Peña, Pulido, Pardo and so many more have urged. I trust that my study will make a modest contribution to this field. I wish to further explore the complexities that embody the question of sustainable development by using this information and knowledge in future research. I hope to engage in the deconstruction of social, political, and even environmental institutions not merely as a practice of academic inquiry, but most importantly as praxis of life.

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<sup>43</sup> Roderick Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 4th ed. 2001.) 379.



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