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*Research
Essay*

**“Community Control:
Civil Rights Resistance in the
Mile High City”**

Summer Burke


On Thursday, September 12, 1968, an 8-year old black elementary school student made his way through the Five Points neighborhood in Denver, heading home from school. As he walked his usual route, Gerald Mitchell passed Gregory’s Dry-cleaning, owned by white neighbor, Oather B. Gregory. As he skipped by the drycleaner’s shop without stopping, a screen door, propped ajar, caught Mitchell’s arm. Bleeding, Mitchell walked into the shop to tell the owner what had happened. Bryce O. Gregory, Oather’s adult son, was working the counter when Mitchell approached. As Mitchell began to retell Gregory what had happened, Gregory left the counter, retrieved a steel bar from the back, and returned to face Mitchell. Gregory shouted at the boy, demanded that he leave, and eventually threw cleaning liquid on the 8-year old. Mitchell fled the store. What followed was unexpected violence in the city of Denver for the next few nights.¹

“Symptoms of an Underlying Disease”² – Denver and the Nation

Denver politicians in the mid 1960s enjoyed a relatively conflict-free existence regarding race relations. In 1965, when Watts broke out in riot, Denver smiled and applauded their “more western, individualized” approach to racial conflict.³ It was assumed, “Denver blacks in general were a select element of the Negro population in the U.S.”⁴ Residents considered their city to be unique; its racial make-up was a “phenomenon.”⁵ While Denver’s black population trailed steadily behind the Latino population throughout the 1960s and 70s, with blacks representing about 11% of the population in a 25% non-white city, white liberal Denverites boasted about their integrated community with racial tolerance found due to a racial balance in population.⁶

Denver, like other cities in the west, was not a city where civil rights failed or stalled. Instead, Denver citizens experienced their own version of the movement with its own distinctive victories and defeats, collisions and conquests. But the nuances of Denver’s civil rights movement have been conflated with its story of how “unique” and “exceptional” its black population was at the time.⁷ Falling victim to the national trajectory which places The Movement in the south beginning with *Brown v. Board* and ending with the Civil Rights Amendment in 1964, Denver made nonviolent protest at the center of its story and viewed black militancy, along with its local rise of black power as a malfunction of the local movement.

Black power in the late 1960s was once blamed for the fall of the civil rights movement. The more militant and abrasive black power approach was mistaken for the alternative civil rights movement, contradictory to the progressive approach of nonviolent marches in the South. However, recent scholarship contextualizing black power and the Black Panthers in particular, restructured this paradigm. This move toward a more inclusive approach to studying black resistance across the country steered The Movement out of the Memphis to Montgomery narrative, and instead provides a more textured understanding of black radicalism as a vital aspect of civil rights history.⁸ As the lens widens to view civil rights activity in the West, the movement lengthens chronologically as well. While the Civil Rights Amendment was passed in 1964, most



western civil rights activity took place in the later part of the decades, and Denver was no exception.⁹

Denver's Black Panther Party (BPP) chapter was one of many across the U.S., and internationally, that gained recognition in 1967.¹⁰ The specific events of the rise of Denver's local BPP remain shrouded in secrecy. Local documentation of the party can be found only in newspaper articles and through oral interviews.¹¹ Histories of the national movement merely mention Denver's BPP in passing, and specific names are never used.¹² Locally, their history has been erased. In 1968 and 1969, the Denver Police Department raided BPP headquarters multiple times. Upon his arrest in 1968, leader Lauren Watson's home was also raided and vandalized by the Denver PD. The loss of the local chapter's history is due to police destruction.¹³ *The Rocky Mountain News* first mentioned the local BPP in 1967 when they introduced Watson as the "self proclaimed leader" of Denver's Black Panther Party. However, more recently, Watson has assumed a posthumous cult following. Young scholars at Colorado University conducted interviews with Watson's family members and friends. Through these anecdotes, Watson's history as an activist and community member became more readily available for public knowledge. The Denver Public Library's collection consists of a short biography of Watson, hailing him a "certain type of activist." Watson is credited for the start of Denver's BPP, due to his relationship with Denver's black paper *The Denver Blade*. In 1967, the paper sponsored Watson's trip to San Francisco to meet and interview Huey P. Newton at the height of Newton's infamous imprisonment.¹⁴

Regardless of the credit they've been denied, the Denver BPP was instrumental in the local civil rights movement, particularly from 1968-1971. By embracing the national party's ten-point program, the BPP radicalized Denver's civil rights climate. They publicly criticized Denver's police force and elected officials for racist practices. The BPP also instituted a free breakfast program for school children, and attempted to take control of their community through the local schools, and by recruiting young black men interested in making change.

"Mayors Like My Type" – Denver's Myth of Progress

At first glance, one might dismiss Denver's civil rights struggle as anti-climatic. If one centers on riots in Los Angeles, the rise of Black Power in Oakland, or inter-ethnic issues in Phoenix, Denver's sleepy civil rights activity might go unnoticed. Many white and black residents of the Mile High City made the comment that the black experience in Denver just "wasn't that bad," compared to that which was happening on a national scale.¹⁵ But further inspection complicates this trajectory.

Denver prides itself on its symbols of progressive politics. In 1957, the city passed an anti-discrimination housing law that stated that no person would be prohibited from purchasing a home based on his race. While politicians pointed to this icon of Denver's lack of de jure segregation, it didn't halt de facto segregation in neighborhoods. Instead, like other cities, it simply recorded a law that didn't necessarily mandate behavior. Denver's blacks were nonetheless restricted to the inner city neighborhood of Five Points. The Five Points neighborhood, located north and east of the Denver capital building, is the historical home to the city's black community.¹⁶ But Denver's politicians were more likely to point to the Park Hill neighborhood as an example of housing integration in the late 20th century.¹⁷ In 1960, self-proclaimed liberal white homeowners started The Park Hill Action Committee (PHAC), a neighborhood activism organization that advocated for intentional integration of the

community.¹⁸ The PHAC encouraged white homeowners to stay in Park Hill, blacks who were shopping to consider maintaining appropriate ratios of race in the neighborhoods that interested them. “If one Negro is living on that street, look for a house on another street,” they encouraged.¹⁹

Another jewel in Denver’s crown is the liberal stance the city’s residents took when it came to electing their politicians. Elvin Caldwell, of Five Points, was the first black man to serve on Denver’s city council. Caldwell maintained an accommodating stance regarding all political issues he confronted. His conservative methods were much preferred by the governor, the mayor, and the police chief. Caldwell, remembering those days, once stated, “Mayors like my type. I’d like to tell you, it’s just a fact of politics. Mayors... they like someone they can sit down with and they can talk to and try to work things out. They don’t like – you know, lambastes them into the paper and then in the afternoon calls and says ‘can we sit down and talk it out?’ I never resort to that technique and I think I got along with all the mayors.”²⁰


Denver government officials boasted that community members had an active voice in proposing solutions to neighborhood concerns. In 1967, Mayor Tom Currigan attempted to resolve the “racial violence” problem by delegating the responsibility to members of the black community. A group of volunteers formed the Commission on Community Relations for the City and County of Denver, Colorado. The Commission identified a number of issues within the Five Points and Park Hill neighborhoods, and provided which pointed to a number of concerns in the Denver area that many residents faced. Black youths faced a lack of jobs, and on weekend nights, they had no productive means of entertainment. The Commission advocated for weekend “Negro youth dances” at the YWCA in Five Points.²¹

The Drycleaner Riot

On the night of Gerald Mitchell’s altercation at the Drycleaners, nearly 100 teenagers and young men returned to the East Denver store. Black Panthers Lauren Watson and James E. Young led the ambush, though Watson claimed that he was only planning to confront Gregory, and that he regretted the results of the conflict.²² Rioters threw rocks at the window of Gregory’s shop, but for the most part, the crowd remained nonviolent. When a police force of over 80 men responded, they dispersed crowds with Molotov cocktail tear gas, but as soon as the tear gas disseminated, crowds returned to the shop and the riot turned ugly. Police arrested Watson, and as a *Rocky Mountain News* article of the incident claims, “In the excitement and widespread use of tear gas, a few seemingly innocent area residents became victims of police efforts to put down the disturbance.”²³

Though the crowds finally dispersed early Friday morning, they returned with renewed spirit on Friday night. On September 13th, nearly 100 young to middle aged black men stormed the Five Points intersection. They beat up Bryce O. Gregory, looted the drycleaner’s register, trashed nearby businesses, and continued shooting at the firemen. Once police arrived, forty-three men were arrested, and fifteen were injured. Friday night’s violence resulted in a citywide outbreak of disorder. Nearby, various groups of young adults vandalized East Denver.²⁴

Following the Drycleaner Riot, Denver Police Chief George L. Seaton, along with Councilman Caldwell and Mayor Currigan, announced that he would be increasing police protection in the Five Points community. Seaton promised to “beef up” police protection in the Welton Street district. He vowed to hire thirty-five more officers, a measure that would increase the number of officers in the neighborhood at a time. Seaton’s promise directly contradicted



community requests to decrease police numbers. Seaton blamed black militants for the unrest. He stated, “If you really want to do something, get people like yourselves to do things, not like Loren [sic] Watson.” Seaton’s disdain for Watson was obvious, as he blamed the Black Panther Party for provoking violence in the neighborhood and vowed to increase arrests. The announcement was met with mixed results.²⁵

“Not Shocked, Dismayed, or Set Back” – Continued Resistance in Denver

Contrary to Denver’s accepted narrative and histories that attempt to outline the city’s civil rights activity, the Panthers did not disappear after 1968’s altercation with police. Regarding the need for community control, Watson wrote, “We are intelligent enough to realize what Black people want is freedom and the power to determine their own destiny.”²⁶ Throughout the 1960s and 70s, the Denver BPP remained vocal and active. In 1969, their militant practices came in direct conflict with Denver’s progressive political gem. They openly challenged Elvin Caldwell for failing to fix the aggravated climate, and for ignoring problems with Denver PD. The BPP demanded that Caldwell advocate for the immediate dismissal of specific aggravating police officers that patrolled the Five Points neighborhood. Additionally, they called for an immediate end to harassment of black children by the police, arguing that children could not be arrested if the police failed to notify parents. Once again, the Panthers argued that the solution to this problem would be the full removal of white police from black neighborhoods.²⁷ The result was a severed relationship with Caldwell and increased harassment from the Denver PD.

By the mid 1970s, the Denver Panthers lost their steam. Denver community members were more preoccupied with Corky Gonzales and the national Chicano Movement, as well as the War on Poverty. Watson retired and the majority of Denver’s BPP members had moved out of the city. But their legacy in the Mile High City remains. The story of the Denver Panthers is of national significance because it speaks to a number of aspects of the civil rights movement. First and foremost, the Denver Panthers’ actions in the 1960s and 70s were a part of a greater civil rights discourse. The national Black Panther Party made a call, far and wide, for black men like Lauren Watson to answer, and they provided a platform for change. Denver’s BPP experienced police brutality, vandalism, and mistreatment, all which were encouraged by the city’s mayor, police chief, and elected officials, in a city which claimed that blacks just didn’t have it that bad. Denver’s black politicians were agents of change no doubt, but their mere representation in the state house and city council, and the school board did not inherently guarantee protection from racism. Denver’s blacks were involved in changing their city, through local politics, national conversations about school desegregation, and in the Panther’s case, through active resistance. Sure, blacks in Denver might have had an exceptional experience, but it wasn’t because racism didn’t exist. On the contrary, because Denver boasted a liberal image, and claimed that their racial relations were kept in order; African Americans in Denver had a harder time justifying their demands for improved conditions.

References:

¹ Alan Cunningham, "Negro Youths Harass Police in 20-Block Riot," *The Rocky Mountain News*, 13 September, 1968, 2-3.

² Jules Mondschein, *The Summer of 1967 -- Northeast Park Hill* (Denver, Colorado: Commission on Community Relations, 1967), 16.

³ Charles F. Cortese, *The Park Hill Experience* (Denver, Colorado: The Colorado Civil Rights Commission, 1974).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶ Denver's demographic makeup corroborates with other western cities. In 1970, Denver's black populace reached 47,011, making it 9.1% of the overall population. The majority of Denver's blacks lived in East Denver, and had situated themselves there for nearly a century, when black migration to Denver began.¹ The majority of Denver's black migration came from "North Central States" and the South, overwhelmingly second-migration participants, who had lived in urban centers prior to their move west. As in other western states, blacks overwhelmingly migrated from urban centers to the west, instead of directly from a rural southern base. U.S. Census, *Migration Between State Economic Areas*, within *Characteristics of the Population*.

⁷ Cortese, *The Park Hill Experience*.

⁸ See Robert O. Self's Introduction within Charles E. Jones, *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 519.

⁹ To distinguish the metanarrative of The Civil Rights Movement from *Brown v. Board* to the Civil Rights Amendment in 1964, I will capitalize The Movement, whereas local activity will be identified as the civil rights movement or activity.

¹⁰ Started in Oakland, CA in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, the national BPP attracted a wide range of interested compatriots. The BPP party recruited young, disenfranchised men from urban centers, though activists, students, and politicians were also attracted to the BPP. Their ten-point program included community service and control, education through a newsletter, and "survival programs" such as free breakfasts for children. But the memory of the Panthers and the interpretation of their practices are often convoluted with images of their militant posture, and their violent interactions with police. Yohuru R. Williams and Jama Lazerow, *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.

¹¹ The lack of tangible BPP sources is in tandem with national modern research on the party. The BPP rarely published their true numbers of membership numbers, and their organization patterns were more spontaneous. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹² Williams and Lazerow, *Liberated Territory*.

¹³ The Black Panther Party newsletter 1969, Dr. Evie Dennis, interview by Summer Burke, March 17, 2010.

¹⁴ "Lauren R. Watson" (Unpublished pamphlet). Despite the DPL biography, which eludes to Watson's freelance article for *The Blade*, this author has no evidence of the article's publication.

¹⁵ Dr. Evie Dennis, interview by Summer Burke, March 17, 2010., Jesse T. Moore, Jr., "Seeking a New Life: Blacks in Post-Civil War Colorado," *Journal of Negro History* 78, no. 3 (06, 1993), 166.

¹⁶ Five Points was also home to most of Denver's poor, both black and Latino. This ultimately led to interracial conflict among residents and politicians in the area. *Lauren R. Watson*.

¹⁷ Park Hill was best known in Colorado as the only fully integrated community in the 1970s and 80s. Home to the majority of Denver's middle and upper class black families, Park Hill was 45% black, 45% white, and 10% Latino. Between 1968 and 1974, over twelve articles, sponsored by Denver University, sociological societies, and the Colorado Civil Rights Commission were published attempting to explain the phenomenon of Denver's incredibly achieved racial balance, particularly in Park Hill. Cortese, *The Park Hill Experience*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24., Housing Committee of the Denver Coordinating Council for Education and Research in Human Relations, *People who Live in Glass Houses* (Denver, Colorado, 1958).

¹⁹ *Rebels Remembered: The Civil Rights Movement in Colorado*, video recording; DVD, directed by Dick Alweis (Denver, Colorado: Alice G. Reynolds Memorial Fund, 2007).

²⁰ Alweis, *Rebels Remembered*.

²¹ The youth dances were not without issue, however. In the summer of 1967, while the Denver Police were patrolling the YWCA location of a Thursday night dance, they arrested a young man for jaywalking. Black teens resisted this arrest by throwing rocks at the officers, and police responded with force. Mondschein, *The Summer of 67*, 25., Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cunningham, "Negro Youths Harass Police in 20-Block Riot," 2-3.

²⁴ Michael Rounds, "3 Teen Dropouts Arrested Trying to Enter School," *The Rocky Mountain News*, September, 1969.

²⁵ Vocal East Denver businessmen applauded the measure, welcoming the additional presence of law enforcement. However, some voiced concerns. One pointed out that an increase in police presence had already caused problems in the community. Clemens Work, "Seaton: Will Enforce Law," *The Rocky Mountain News*, 27 September, 1968. Throughout the remainder of the 1960s, and despite the BPP demands and community concerns, Denver's police chief and mayor relentlessly advocated for increased police presence in East Denver, as they believed this would improve the relationships among Five Points neighbors, the Denver Police, and within the community. The BPP did not agree. Members of Denver's Black Panther Party requested a meeting with Chief Seaton, following Seaton's promise for a stronger police stand in Five Points. Lauren Watson, who led the meeting, outlined concerns that Seaton's commitment to increased police presence in Five Points would suppress black business through police involvement. Additionally, Watson took issue with Seaton's claim that the overall majority of Denver's black businessmen were present and accounted for at the meeting. Both Currihan and Seaton argued that black businessmen wanted increased protection in Five Points, and advocated for amplified patrols, as well as more vigilant response to issues in the community. Associated Press, "Black Militants React to Seaton."

²⁶ Lauren Watson, "Denver Panthers Determined: Community Control of Schools," *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service III*, no. 7, 1969, 6.

²⁷ Lyle, "Councilman Takes Stand Against Panther Demands," 5-6.

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