

Living Denver
History Colorado Podcast
S1E2: Josiah Lee Lopez

María Islas-Lopez: In the spirit of healing and education, History Colorado acknowledges the 48 contemporary tribes with historic ties to the state of Colorado. These tribes are our partners. We consult with them when we plan exhibits; collect, preserve, and interpret artifacts; do archaeological work; and create educational programs. We recognize these Indigenous peoples as the original inhabitants of this land.

My name is María Islas-Lopez, and I'm the Museum of Memory manager at History Colorado.

In this four-part series Denverites perform original poetry inspired by their neighborhoods. Each episode features a unique glimpse into community building, current challenges in our city, and visions for the future.

Welcome to *Living Denver!*

Josiah Lee Lopez: My name is Josiah Lopez. I've lived in Denver, Colorado all my life. I grew up on the Westside and I currently live on the Westside.

María Islas-Lopez: Josiah Lee Lopez is an artist who uses the street as an inspiration in much of his work. Whether murals, graffiti, or graphic design, his art touches on the complicated narratives of urban identity. Josiah received his Master of Fine Arts from the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Here's Josiah reading his poem, "Westside Excursions: Adolescent experiences circa 1985-1992."

Poem: Westside Excursions

Westside
City streets.
Almost left untouched.
Overturned, demolished, a shell of its former self.
Born and alive, dead and reimagined.
Occurring many a time throughout the century.
The jets, and the dwellers of the grand and modest homes all relocated.
Asphalt, lawn green, shrines for the members of thee eternal sleep.
Bathtub La Virgen, chain link, gateways to the many generations of story familia.
Remembering frequent flyers of that proud machismo, fista cuffs on Mariposa.

The fine rukas with their Mile High hairdos and their Kelly Kapowski tennis shoes, circa 1992.

Santa Fe Cinco de Mayos with the smell of chiles, corn dogs, and cotton candy.

Lowrider Coupe de Ville, hum, boom of that epic bass.

Nighttime sounds of revving engines, the scrapes of big bodies on chrome to concrete.

Dodging the one time, la jura and that alleyway beatdown.

Gangsta life with the colors worn proud, hermano against hermano.

Aztec street warriors fight amongst themselves, territorial hood disputes.

Slangin rocks brought treacherous descent.

The vitality of the green and royal purple madness.

Old Victorians and the jets in full effect.

From La Alma, La Familia to Baker, Alameda.

Under the 6th Avenue bridge, I lost my tonka truck playing innocence,

via cheap Mad Dog 2020. A la brown girl, sugar sugar.

Hiding my heat in my sock and not in the small of my back.

Graffiti monikers dictating life and death.

This side, that side, no one really owns that block, except for the ghost's of it's past ancestors.

40 shack excursions, smoking pinner leño's.

I got a 20 sack of yerba buena and a fresh cut from Jiggs.

Famous Pizza and Chubby's on 8th, burning rubber, Dragon Lowriders.

A stroll to Sunken Gardens, sweet aromas of 11th Avenue tortillas.

Rollin' to the big Broadway waving and making the sign of the cross.

Forehead, to chest, to shoulders as I pass Saint Joes.

Writin' tags on dumpsters, school boy licks of Snicker bars and beef jerky.

Grandmothers and Mothers on porches lulling their baby's to sleep.

Crazy Coca Romero sings to the moon.

Until the vale of the night sky touches the Westside.

Ad Break:

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Family History

Josiah Lee Lopez: My great great grandpas and grandmas, they're from the San Luis Valley. My grandfather used to live right on Auraria campus, before they tore a lot of stuff down.

And my grandpa, you know, he's passed away, but he goes, "yeah, I remember, you know, we go down to the railroad tracks and we'd find cigarette butts, and then there was a place where they had pickles. We used to find cigarettes and eat pickles." And I go, "well, how old were you?" And he goes "about eight years old." Like, "oh, you're already smoking at eight years old?" He goes, "Yeah." And I go, "OK." But, you know, they start early back then.

They moved before they destroyed the properties. Actually, I got free tuition for my first semester that I went to Auraria. There's a lot of history there.

Memories of the West Side + Rocky

Josiah Lee Lopez: As a teenager, I lived on the West Side and I lived right on 4th and Fox with my friend, me and my friend Rocky. I also mentioned him in the poem.

Rocky Romero was the one that introduced me to the West Side.

The real west side is Baker and La Alma, you know, Lincoln Park, and then all the way to Alameda.

But him and his mom more or less took me in. I moved there because I had a lot of troubles at home. I kind of got to do what I wanted over my friend's so I lived there about a couple of years.

Rocky? He was tall, way taller than me, he was six foot. I'm a short dude, you know, 5'5". So, he was kind of like my bodyguard cuz I had a big mouth so we were always cool like that.

How I met Rocky? I was in 11th grade. We were in a history class and I was drawing on my desk, like I always used to, and he seen what I was drawing. He said, "hey, that's pretty cool, I can draw too." And I go, "Oh, yeah?" He's like, "yeah, look at some of my drawings." And they were of, uh, there's this punk band called The Misfits. He liked to draw a lot of the band logos and then he said, "hey, can you draw this for me?" And I said, "yeah, I can draw that."

In high school we had a lot of adventures. We shared a common love for art. You know, and we had our business, our little airbrush business. We used to do shirts and stuff for the guys around the neighborhood. And we made a couple bucks. We'd always buy food and beer. In the poem, it's called The 40 Shack and we go, we ditched school, we go to the 40 shack and you get a 40 year Old English, go there and drink our beers.

It's knocked down. I don't know what's there now, I think they put up another house or something, but it's right across from West High School.

I remember the tortilla place, and actually you could smell it from the grounds on West High. It's still there. It caught fire actually one time, I think a couple of years back. They're still there.

So Chubbys is a Mexican restaurant. They have these big, massive burritos and they're pretty darn good. They've been there a while, you know, but they had one on the West Side back in the day right there on 6th, they replaced it with the sushi place. Usually we'd ditch school and you go there and get a smothered burrito with the extra hot chili and the cheese. I used to always get beef and bean and a Cherry Coke.

My friend Rocky, his mom worked at Famous Pizza. And we'd always go there after school, and get a piece of pizza. My pizza? Sausage and mushroom, that's my pizza I liked. There I always used to get a Sprite with grenadine in it. And now it's of voodoo donuts, so that's a bummer.

I went to the one on Colfax. I was like oh that's kinda cool. But why are these people standing in line waiting for a donut like... that had cereal on it?

Homecoming

Josiah Lee Lopez: I'm kind of a well-known graffiti writer. I've been writing graffiti since like 1993.

I have this one painting and I did. A self-portrait. And it had me in the background as a silhouette and then in the front, it was a skull, a calavera. It was like death, and he's kind of laughing. And it's kind of like the phrase "smile now, cry later." And that was like kind of my life back then. I was just starting college. I didn't know what direction I wanted to turn. But I could have stayed around all my friends. Back then, you know, my clientele were drug dealers and gangsters. So, like, you know, they paid good money. So like and they were my friends. That's how I started off selling art.

I have three murals on the West Side, between Kalamath and Santa Fe, I have a mural. It's kind of a space, Chicano type of theme going there. And I have a mural down underneath the 8th Avenue Bridge. All the murals are on pillars. My pillars were Acoma, Cherokee, Shoshone, and Navajo. I got images from Native American textiles and ceramics and kind of worked from there with patterns and stuff. And then I have, then one pillar I have is Chief Washakie, and he was, uh, from the Shoshone Nation.

The streets in Denver are named after Native American tribes, so, like, just trying to pay homage to that, you know what I mean? So it's very important. And like my great, great grandma, she was Apache. And then there's my dad's side, there was a Cherokee. You know, it's part of me.

Those murals no one has ever tagged on them since they've been there, since 2013. 'Cause people of the neighborhood, they have respect.

I think a lot of times the people that are gentrifiers or whatever the developers or whatever, they use the artist to bring in people so like you get all these people that have money and hipsters or whatever, what not, yuppies, I don't know what they call them now, but they're like, "oh, I want to live in this neighborhood. It's so cool."

You know, there's a lot of people that are like generations that they've gotten their houses from their parents or grandparents, you know, and like, gentrification, you know, property taxes go up. Well actually, I knew a couple of people that lived down there on 1st and Fox, but they sold their house.

The last time I seen Rocky was probably a Halloween party about five, six years after we graduated high school. That's that's all I really remember, really. When he passed

away, I had heard from a mutual friend and he's like, "Hey, you know, Rocky died?" And I was like, "Oh man, no way." And he's like, "Yeah, he died... He got cancer." You know, when somebody dies, especially when they're your age, you kind of like, you know, you're questioning your own mortality. Hard times back then hard times.

Visions for Denver & Belonging

Josiah Lee Lopez: What it means to me, to belong? I don't know, just being a fixture there, living there and having people recognize you, and just where you can go to somebody's house and just kind of kick it.

I can't speak for anybody else, but, I don't know, I just think things are spread out now. Like where I live right now, that was Lincoln Park projects, and they were pretty bad. They knocked those down back in the 90s, though. But you know what? A lot of people, they just, everybody knew each other. You could say, "oh, yeah, I know that person," And like, "oh, yeah, I know him, they're related to this person." And like, everybody knows everybody in this little area here, it's because a lot of people migrated from the San Luis Valley in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

It's changed.

I'd like the West Side to stay intact and not be overrun by people that are paying high rents and stay with the people that have lived there forever--like my grandpa.

Being Chicano in Denver means familia, tradition, heritage, in the past, in the future.

Credits

María Islas-Lopez: Learn more about Josiah and his art at josiahleelopez.com

For a transcript of this episode and to learn more about the Building Denver Initiative visit HistoryColorado.org/Building-Denver.

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And I'm Maria Islas-Lopez. Thanks for listening.