

**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!*

**Jonathon Stalls:** My name is Jonathan Stalls. I am a resident of Denver Colorado, lands of Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute. I identify as LGBTQIA+ and have been married to my husband for two years.

**María Islas-Lopez:** Jonathon Stalls was born and raised in Denver and lives in North Park Hill. He is an artist, social entrepreneur, and an advocate for social, economic, and racial justice. Jonathon is the Creator of Intrinsic Paths and Pedestrian Dignity, and the Founder of the Walk2Connect Co-op. In 2010 he spent 242 days walking across the United States and continues to move alongside thousands of people for thousands of miles.

Here's Jonathon reading his poem, "Empire Lines: Walking Denver's Colorado Boulevard"

**Empire Lines: Walking Denver's Colorado Boulevard**

**Jonathon Stalls:**

Do you feel it rising?  
Like lava and bones?

Cracked feet and strollers

Skirting edges of thrones

:

Cherry Creek doesn't see us  
More money, more clothes

Hilltop and cameras  
Humanity disposed

:

It's pouring outside  
Five bags from the mart

Milk, apples, and cans  
Sweating from the start

:

I can't wipe my eyes  
As I slip through the mud

Foggy glasses and pain  
Devoured by floods

:

My bags start to break  
Sending beans down the gutter

No cover at the stop  
Survival and thunder

:

Waiting for the bus  
Should be here soon

Yesterday's was late  
Stopped running at noon

:

I'll never understand  
Why it feels so violent

My heart beats like yours  
Too many are silent

:

Does public mean public?  
Like free days at the zoo

Car lobby kisses  
I pay taxes too

:

Money looks away  
Power clenches its grip

My humble human frame  
The daily practical trip

:

Like widgets and pawns  
Fixed on screens and machines

You bypass my bleeding  
Numbness, no feeling

:

Parking and driving  
Gods of cement

Ultimate separation  
Gas guzzling lament

:

It's no good for you, too  
So much cussing and honking

This road is a sham  
Lights blinking, no dancing

:

I walk and I roll  
Sick trees and dead bees

Splashed by the puddles  
Of consumer disease

:

Towers and growth  
Magicians of destruction

Colonial strings  
Worthiness equals production

:

City Park trees  
Give me rest and relief

Kids playing and jumping  
Shake off the grief

:

Park Hill skylines  
From golf course grasses

Blocked by fences,  
red lines, and classes

:

I want you to see me  
My eyes and my tears

I want you to know me  
My dreams and my fears

:

Stop slicing our lives  
By skin and by coin

Slow all the way down  
So all may join

:

My breaths and my being  
Are valid and true

Break free from the lies  
That keep me from you

:

*This poem is dedicated to all beloveds who move through the city of Denver by foot or on a wheelchair as their primary form of transportation, and unraveling from and imagining our way out of violent car-before-people practices on all arterial streets everywhere.*

### **Ad Break:**

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They're the producers behind the show you're listening to right now, and have worked with other Colorado clients like the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, and Rocky Mountain PBS, as well as international partners like the National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project.

They have also helped over 1,000 aspiring independent producers start, record, edit, and publish their shows out of their community studio and audio incubation space.

So if you're hoping to launch a new show, or level-up your existing production, visit [houseofpod.org](https://houseofpod.org) to learn more.

#### **[History Colorado](#)**

This podcast is part of the [Building Denver Initiative](#) at History Colorado, which is made possible through the generous support of Alec M. Garbini, AIA; Bank of

America; and the City and County of Denver's Community Planning and Development department.

### **North Park Hill**

**Jonathon Stalls:** So the neighborhood that I've spent the most time in is North Park Hill, and I feel a lot of tension and frustration with a lot of what is happening in the neighborhood. You know, being a white male really on just the northern side of a red line historically in Denver where school segregation was deep, certain homes were only sold to Black families and white families right on this line in Park Hill.

I would spend a lot of time walking the neighborhood, all different streets, and noticed a lot of the safety challenges related to kids trying to cross streets, getting from the rec center to the Boys & Girls Club to a lot of different spaces. I started an organization called Walk2Connect, I started these community walks because I wanted to invite people to be in connection with each other, getting outside.

So I just started making these connections, building relationships with people at the local library and at the rec center, and rooted neighborhood community folks that would gather weekly or monthly related to neighborhood issues. But it was bumpy at first because I was learning unhurried, agenda-less community connecting. And I love the phrase moving at the pace of trust. And I felt like I was learning that.

Literally moving by foot is medicine. It keeps me open. It keeps me healthy. It keeps my mind calmer and more relaxed.

### **Storm Story on Colorado Boulevard**

**Jonathon Stalls:** And so I would say a daily walk for me often is from my house in North Park Hill to City Park, and so when I'm walking on Colorado Boulevard like the things that I learn and see, both the beauty of the trees that are sprouting in between these impossible environments that are reaching and full of resilience, as well as some of the hardships of when there's a big old storm trying to blow you off the street.

If you know Colorado Boulevard, or most arterial streets in the city, it's registered as a small highway and it is a small highway. These cars are flying, it's also a semi truck traffic, bus traffic. And it's constant. And so anybody who's navigating there, even on a dry, sunny day, is easily susceptible to slipping and falling right into oncoming traffic.

So one one experience that I have had, I thought I was making time okay to beat the rain that was coming in, and as we know, for those of us who've been in Denver a while,

if a rainstorm comes through, it's super unpredictable. Sometimes it can just hit and it hits hard.

The visibility was really rough and I'm holding on to these bushes that are sticking out into the street. So anybody that's driving isn't seeing me at all, really, because I'm hidden behind this bush, but my feet are slipping on the mud. And I'll just never forget gripping the bush with both hands. Because the bush could just decide whatever dude, I'm breaking, you're done, but thank God it didn't. I held with both hands because when the stoplights are red you get these hopeful breaks to jump out on Colorado Boulevard itself and then find another way on the mud slope to navigate the environment just to get to the next intersection.

And so, I'm able-bodied, I can navigate, and I'm slipping, holding on with two hands to this bush. I mean, the violence in a storm and snow with hail at rush hour with families, with kids, elders, people who use a wheelchair. This is where it just gets really, really violent in a lot of ways.

People who have less income or who can't afford a single family home are having to live on these arterial streets. And these families are often a lot of times dependent on bus transit and getting to and from these areas by foot or by wheelchair. A lot of public housing is set up around arterial streets, and so to have these arterial streets be the most violent and house the people often that are in the greatest need of safe, comfortable spaces and places to get to where they need to go outside of the vehicle is really problematic.

If we're going to maintain our current relationship to cars or if we're going to try and trim that down because we really can't sustain it, beloveds, we cannot sustain it. And I am not anti-car I think the car can still be a part of this network.

But if we are serious about prioritizing human connection, human care and service, human body development and healing--mental, emotional, and physical health--and obviously our dependence on oil related to our relationship to the planet, we've got to push these edges.

### **An Invitation to Relationship**

**Jonathon Stalls:** My relationship to Colorado Boulevard it's a more honest reflection of a city's relationship to a lot of its people. I think I think it reflects some of the things we don't often want to see or talk about. But at the same time, it's also an invitation to this incredible web of people and experiences and backgrounds and stories and cultures and foods.

And so I get past Colorado Boulevard and then I kind of open myself to the spaciousness of City Park.

City Park feels like a break, like a point of relief, a reminder of the big, the big, the wide home that I believe so many of us, all of us seek.

If anybody who listens to or reads this poem and is feeling caught by it, or frustrated by it or is triggered by it, or is I mean, any kind of thing that's like I don't agree with that, I struggle with that, I just am like, please, beloved, please go out and walk or move however, you are made to move from 1st Avenue north on Colorado, either side of the street, good human, all the way up to 8th or 9th Avenue. And then read this poem again, please.

### **Visions for Dignity**

**Jonathon Stalls:** My vision for Denver flows into three frames and it would be one is human, people centered; two nature, earth centered; and three, cooperative and collaborative collective. And so those three frames to me are so, so important, I feel, to not only our survival as a species, but to where Denver as a space has a lot of creative people who have a lot of deep wisdom that are coming together. The confluence of these two rivers, the Cherry Creek and the Platte, like the confluence of the Indigenous wisdom that we have so much room to bring that up into the center. And so thinking about the lens of pedestrian dignity as just one of those branches out of the tree around, how are we centering the planet, the fragile human frame, in and of itself, to help us all have the capacity to be in other people's shoes and learning from their unique experiences.

In the end of the poem, it's why I end with this really humble, gentle, even and tender invitation around breaking free from the lies that keep me from you. Like what is getting in the way of us having more holistic, full-bodied, heart, guts, all of it included, into how we learn and grow and create place together?

### **Credits**

**María Islas-Lopez:** To learn more about Jonathon's work visit [www.IntrinsicPaths.com](http://www.IntrinsicPaths.com).

For a transcript of this episode and to learn more about the Building Denver Initiative visit [HistoryColorado.org/Building-Denver](http://HistoryColorado.org/Building-Denver).

And if you're interested in how Denver's ever-changing built environment has shaped the city from 1860 to today, visit our exhibition, *Building Denver: Visions of the Capital*



*City*. You can experience this exhibition at the History Colorado Center beginning May 29, 2021. Mention this podcast to receive \$2 off admission.

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