

## The Last Conquistador of El Paso, Texas:

### Valdez and Ibarra's Documentary Portrait of a Paradigmatic City

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In the late eighties, when the El Paso City Council grants funding to renowned Anglo sculptor John Houser (1935-2018) for the completion of an equestrian statue of Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate (1550–1626), El Paso's underlying ethnic tensions reignite. Meant as a gesture of acknowledgement of the centuries-old Hispanic<sup>1</sup> presence in (what is known today as) the U.S.A., the planned statue is lauded by the New Mexican Hispanic Culture Preservation League (NMHCPL) and reviled by the Native American Acoma, who bear a grudge against the so-called Last Conquistador on the account of his cruelty against their ancestors—crimes for which he was convicted during his lifetime<sup>2</sup>. In the hour-long documentary *The Last*

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<sup>1</sup> As G. Cristina Mora explains in her recent book *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American*, the term 'Hispanic' as a designation of Hispanic panethnicity was created after the 1960s census (cf. also Mora, "Cross-Field Effects"). Up until the census, Latin American immigrants were classified as "white" and grouped together with European Americans, much to the dismay of activists of Latin American descent. Their argument was that the lack of a term with which to signify the large community of Latin American immigrants in the US who hailed from Spanish-speaking countries generated the said community's institutional invisibility. The use of the term 'Hispanic' as a separate classification was supposed to lend a voice to this previously ignored minority. In 1976, as a result of a growing awareness of the existence of a perceived 'Hispanic' community, the US Congress passed the only law in the country's history that mandated the collection and analysis of data for a specific ethnic group, namely "Americans who identify themselves as being of Spanish-speaking background and trace their origin or descent from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish-speaking countries", i.e. including Spain, but excluding Portugal and Brazil (cf. Lopez et al.). Since then, the terms Latino/a, Latin@, and Latinx have been gaining terrain both in layman and academic settings as possible alternatives for the governmentally imposed signifier 'Hispanic' (cf. Santana; Beltran). To wit, the Pew Research Center uses the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably, whereas the Census Bureau only uses the term Hispanic, presumably for the sake of historical continuity (cf. Lopez et al.; Taylor et al.). There is much debate about the differences between all of the above-mentioned terms. This issue will not be addressed here. The present article echoes the designations with which the protagonists of *The Last Conquistador* self-identify. These are: Anglo, Native American, Hispanic, and (occasionally) Latino.

<sup>2</sup> Oñate and his men reached the Acoma settlement in October 1598. Based on previous accounts of the placidity of the Acoma, Oñate believed the *pueblo* would accept his rule without much resistance. However, in December of that year, the Acoma began refusing to supply the Spanish with provisions. A fight ensued during which ten of

*Conquistador*, which was first broadcast by the acclaimed PBS series P.O.V.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, John Valadez and Cristina Ibarra record the escalating dispute between the NMHCPL and the Acoma, as well as the fruitless mediation attempts of John Houser and the City Council. *The Last Conquistador* exposes how El Paso's desire to reinvent itself as cohesive and harmonious with the help of Houser's art eventually forces the city to own up to the distance, both societal and spatial, between the Anglo, Hispanic, and Native communities of the Southwest (cf. Sanchez et al.).<sup>4</sup> Even within the Hispanic community, there seems to be little sympathy between the long-established Hispanic Americans, who have lived on US soil for generations and are by now financially secure, and the recent border-crossers, who are depicted in the documentary as underprivileged and underrepresented. In this article, we argue that the documentary portrays El Paso as a "paradigmatic city," a concept coined by migration scholars Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar to signify a specific urban locality through which the entire nation-state can be generalized (182). Glick Schiller and Çağlar use the concept deridingly, in order to denounce the "methodological nationalism" that underwrites the paradigmatic city's seemingly innocent equation of society and nation-state (180). We contend *The Last Conquistador* is permeated with the same derision, as it makes

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Oñate's men were killed. To retaliate, Oñate ordered the *pueblo* be burnt to the ground. The Acoma resisted the attack for three days, only surrendering when the Spanish began firing canons into their settlement. Oñate's men captured the surviving 500 Acoma and took them before Oñate. After a trial led by Oñate himself, it was decided that all males over 25 were to have one foot cut off, all adults were sentenced to twenty years of servitude, all the boys were to be placed in the care of priests, and all the girls were to be sent to New Mexican convents (cf. Toombs; Rogow; Pérez). Word of Oñate's tyranny ended up reaching Mexico City and, eventually, the King of Spain. Oñate stood trial and was found guilty of, among other things, cruelty against the natives, his own officers, colonists, and priests. Disgraced, Oñate was summoned back to Spain, where he worked as a mining inspector for the remainder of his life (cf. Weber).

<sup>3</sup> The Public Broadcasting Service's public television series P.O.V., an abbreviation for 'point of view', is the longest-running showcase for independent non-fiction films in the U.S.A. See [www.pbs.org/pov/about/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/about/).

<sup>4</sup> In our article "Documenting Juan de Oñate's Diminishing Influence over the Southwest: The Last Conquistador on El Paso's Trialectics of Spatiality" (Sanchez et al.), we elaborate on the heterogeneity and hyperrealism that seem to converge in *The Last Conquistador* by drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia and Edward Soja's definition of exopolis. In the present article, the focus is on the portraiture of the city of El Paso by the City Council, on the one hand, and Valadez and Ibarra, on the other.

a point of El Paso's naïve but nevertheless discriminatory efforts to reimagine itself as exemplary of the supposedly spatially and societally wholesome United States.

### **El Paso as a Paradigmatic City**

Generally considered to be the founding father of the Texan city of El Paso as well as the New Mexican cities of Santa Fe and Las Cruces, Juan de Oñate is a household name in the Southwest of the U.S.A. Countless ballads pay tribute to his memory, pageants commemorate his arrival to New Mexico, schools are named after him, effigies are erected in his honor (cf. Trujillo). Only in recent years has the general public become aware of his involvement in the massacre and mutilation of the Acoma Pueblo, partially thanks to the kind of protest actions, rallies, and demonstrations depicted in *The Last Conquistador*. We suggest that the portrait the documentary paints of El Paso is that of clumsily hinged together panel painting passing for a sturdy composition. Valadez and Ibarra's film presents El Paso as a tiered spatial construct consisting of affluent Anglo and Hispanic El Pasoans ruling the city from upon their mythical hill, the Acoma in their New Mexican reservation that seems to spill over into the city of El Paso, and those stuck in between: the mute(d) Mexican migrants of the downtown who have no pay and no say.

Mexican-American writer David Romo, in a voice-over that significantly overwrites the merry sounds of a fundraiser held by the New Mexican Hispanic Culture Preservation League (NMHCPL) for John Houser's statue, explains the city's demography as follows:

In our city Latinos are 80 percent and whites are 20 percent, yet the whites still have an enormous amount of power. But unfortunately, it isn't only just a white-brown thing because many browns want to be white. It's real complicated. We all have a legacy of both sides, part the Indian from one side and part Spaniard from another side. That's what we are, you know. And so, which side are you gonna take? (00:33:21-00:33:52)

The NMHCPL and the Acoma Pueblo have picked their side and are residing in the space allotted to that choice. The less well-off Mexican migrants of the downtown, on the other hand, are shown to be in an unstable, undesirable state of ‘becoming’ that corresponds with the dilapidated, in-need-of-repair city center in which they are depicted to dwell. They have not yet decided—or are not aware that this city and, by extension, this nation expects them to decide—whose side they are going to take. Hence, they are relegated to the geographical purgatory that is El Paso’s rundown downtown.

Those whom Romo calls “whites” and “browns [who] want to be white” usually are captured on film in elevated spaces throughout the city. To this group belong, on the one hand, John Houser and the presumably Anglo philanthropists who support his work, such as those shown to be present at his fundraiser. On the other hand, there are the NMHCPL members and the Spanish-surname representatives of the City Council who repeatedly try to justify on camera why they came to the “controversial” decision of erecting a statue in honor of Oñate (00:02:04). John Houser is most often to be found in his artist’s studio: an impressively tall warehouse-like hangar that can barely hold the bombastic equestrian statue on which he is relentlessly working—usually floating in mid-air, either hoisted high up or straddling some part of the gigantic horse. Significantly, as he is shown to be hacking, cogitating, and polishing away, he is never alone. Attending his every move, assisting him every step of the way are handymen who Houser addresses exclusively in Spanish. The reason for that is not the bilingualism of El Paso, but rather the location of the hangar: it is situated across the border, in Mexico City. Interestingly, this fact is never mentioned<sup>5</sup> in the film, perhaps as a way to imply the porousness of that region and the continuity of Mexican

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<sup>5</sup> Nor is there ever any reference to Ciudad Juárez, El Paso’s twin city situated right across the Mexican border. It could be argued that El Paso’s intertwinement with Ciudad Juárez is only indirectly acknowledged throughout the documentary, as this conurbation is considered common knowledge in the (Southwest of the) U.S.A.

bodies, on both sides of the border, performing menial jobs for the sake of a people to which they do not belong.

Valadez and Ibarra's omission could be interpreted as hinting at El Paso's and, by extension, the nation's senseless insistence on borders in a region that keeps resisting John Agnew's "territorial trap," i.e. "conventional thinking [that] relies on three geographical assumptions—states as fixed units of sovereign space, the domestic/foreign polarity, and states as 'containers' of societies" (53). Agnew's critique of this kind of geopolitical thinking (cf. Agnew, "Still Trapped in Territory?") was originally aimed at countering "the reductive nature of thinking in international relations and international political economy" by challenging "this static, 'closed' approach, in which interstate relations [...] were deemed to be best studied at the international level only, with state power on other levels deemed unimportant to the interplay of states within the international system," as Reid-Henry explains (753). Moving beyond Agnew's epistemological critique, Glick Schiller and Çağlar use the term "methodological nationalism," to emphasize how widely accepted and deeply embedded the conflation of society and nation-state is in "the political assumptions and identifications that underlie so much of migration scholarship" (180). Because methodological nationalism has been a 'container' theory of society for most social theorists, the territorial trap of equating society and the nation-state has become an established *a priori* "in migration studies and in most urban studies that focus on migrants" (180). The documentary makers' choice to collapse El Paso and Mexico City could be said to go against the said *a priori* and to signify their unwillingness to accept the hollow artificiality of the kind of "conventional thinking" that feeds territorial traps and paradigmatic cities (Agnew, "The Territorial Trap" 53). Valadez and Ibarra's implicit blurring of geographical boundaries is indicative of their documentary's interest in El Paso's fluidity—and its stubborn resistance to it.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the documentary does not disclose the location of the NMHCPL's fundraiser either. All we are shown is that it is taking place on the terrace of an ostentatious hacienda that overlooks lusciously green valleys—a refreshing sight in the otherwise deserts Southwestern landscapes shown in the documentary. It is, quite literally, on a hill and thus symbolically evocative of the Puritan myth of the city upon a hill, one of the founding myths of the American nation-state. According to Joyce Appleby, American exceptionalism structures the political consciousness of the American people by projecting qualities onto them that, supposedly, are enviable because they represent “deliverance from a common lot” (419). The trope of the exemplary city upon a hill links ideological segregation to spatial segregation and can be traced back to a sermon that John Winthrop, one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, allegedly wrote in 1630 on his way from England to New England on board of the legendary *Arbella*:

Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when hee shall make us a prayse and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “the Lord make it likely that of New England.” For wee must consider that wee shall be as a **citty upon a hill**. The eies of all people are uppon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee haue undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. (47; emphasis added)

Winthrop's ambitious desire to be and, most importantly, be seen as an example of virtue from atop his hill can also be applied to the location of the City Council within El Paso. The murky cityscape of the downtown, which appears generally flat and underdeveloped, is broken up by the appearance of the City Hall: a crisp, bright, multistory building. The moments when its height and location are most apparent in the documentary are highly symbolical. The edifice first appears during a Council meeting, open to the public, to which both the Acoma and the defendants of the statue have been invited. They are to discuss “a permanent stay on any public funding for the *Wan deh Onate* monument,” as is flatly read

out by a member of the City Council who is clearly struggling with the pronunciation of the historic figure's name, signaling her poor knowledge of the Spanish language and, possibly, El Paso's Spanish history as well (00:40:43-00:40:50; emphasis added). As the Acoma enter the City Hall, they are made to go through the obligatory security check, after which they are led to an escalator. The camera focuses on how they are all, one by one, whisked away by the contraption to where the meeting is presumably taking place: the next storey, somewhere higher up. The height of the building is emphasized again when Anthony Cobos, the only City Council Representative who is adamant that the statue's funding needs to be curtailed, is filmed in his office, packing up. As Cobos reveals that he was not re-elected for another term because "a lot of the wealthy socioeconomic class did not come out and support [him]," he is seen walking out of the tall building, which dwarfs him in comparison (01:02:00-01:02:08). His fall from grace is now complete: he used to be up there, on that hill made of brick and mortar. Now he is back on the downtown streets, on a level playing field with the average El Pasoan.

When depicted at home in their New Mexican reservation, the Acoma also appear to be dwarfed by their surroundings. However, the effect of their physical insignificance in opposition to the majestic monoliths that are strewn across the desert is of a very different kind. The sunny and pristine environment of the reservation, to which one of the Acoman interviewees refers as "holy ground" (00:16:00), emerges as a spatial counterpart to the grey, industrialized, polluted city of El Paso. While the lack of urban planning seems to emphasize the sprawling city's negative spaces, the reservation's emptiness visually highlights the vitality of its surroundings. The few houses and squares that are shown onscreen seamlessly blend into their sandy milieu as they appear to have been carved out of the sandstone bedrock on which the Acoma live. In El Paso, it is suggested that human intervention within the city is desirable and, in fact, much needed. In the reservation, however, the Acoma are shown to minimize the

traces of their presence as best they can. The sacred space of their ancestral home is invited to rule over its inhabitants, which is the polar opposite of El Paso's expansionist approach.

Interestingly, *The Last Conquistador* does seem to draw one parallel between the Acoma and the affluent El Pasoans who support the statue—a similarity that removes them all even further from the migratory dwellers of the downtown. Both groups are either filmed in the outdoor spaces that correspond with their financial status and/or ethnic affiliation (e.g. the Acoma reservation or, for Houser and the NMHCPL, the hacienda's terrace) or in domestic replicas of their respective outdoor enclaves. The Acoma can be seen cooking, reading the newspaper, and pow-wowing at home and in a number of unspecified indoor settings. John Houser is usually pictured in his studio, in his hangar's living quarters or in a number of formal venues (e.g. the fundraiser, the Albuquerque public library, the location where the statue is unveiled). María Conchita Márquez de Lucero, the NMHCPL member who is given the most airtime in the documentary and claims to be a descendant of “Gerónimo Márquez, one of the colonists who came with Don Juan de Oñate” (00:34:35-00:34:40), is filmed either going through archives and microfilms in a library, completing her family tree in her office or conversing with her peers in what looks like the parlor of the NMHCPL's headquarters. Incidentally, during one of these informal talks, she is recorded as saying: “Which one of us hasn't had a benefit of the things that the Spanish brought in, you know? And to say: you shouldn't have come. Well, you know what? I'm sorry, they did come. They're here. Deal with it, get over it” (00:35:40-00:35:54). In an earlier fragment, she also stated: “What you keep hearing is ‘oh gee, these people are coming over the border’ now. We weren't newcomers, we have a legacy, I think, to be extremely proud of but unfortunately our people don't know their own history” (00:10:17-00:10:28). She seems oblivious to the fact that her plea for the incorporation of ‘her’ people in the U.S.A.'s mainstream discourse and historical



consciousness could just as well be applied to the migrants in downtown El Paso who have followed in her Spanish ancestors' footsteps.

Judging by the unfortunate urban space in which these recent border-crossers find themselves moored, certainly in comparison to the comfortable settings in which Conchita circulates, there is little evidence of any affiliation or even understanding between the newly arrived Hispanic migrants and the settled Hispanics whom the NMHCPL seems to represent. What is more, at no point are these downtown-dwelling El Pasoans to be found indoors. They are either in a rush, brushing by the camera like tireless worker ants caught up in the hustle and bustle of this Southwestern anthill, or they are sluggishly moving across the screen while scavenging through the contents of a dumpster, palavering on the streets, or aimlessly wandering around the city. The secure domesticity associated with John Houser, the NMHCPL, and the Acoma is in stark contrast to the apparent homelessness of these urban paupers. Their de facto residential segregation within the perimeter of the city is unmistakable, as is their ambiguous identity. It would seem that in this paradigmatic American city, home and belonging can only be offered to those who show their true colors—or, rather, to those who can decide on their what their 'true color' will be. The social climbers, such as the Hispanic City Council Representatives or the NMHCPL, can choose to which "legacy" they will adhere: either "the Indian" or "the Spaniard" (00:33:45). Others, like the Acoma, have to resign themselves to the only option available: that of the native underdog. In the meantime, the new arrivals are not allowed a roof over their heads and are left to fend for themselves in the city's decrepit outdoors. Domestic bliss, it would seem, is only available to those who have a clear-cut identity, however marginalized that identity may be. Self-awareness and self-definition is a luxury to which the Hispanic newcomers do not have access (yet). They are the ones who appear to miss out on everything—the good and the bad—that comes out of this bitter feud.

## El Paso's Gentrification

The paradox at the heart of this drawn-out conflict about Oñate's equestrian statue is that it all began with the El Paso City Council's desire to reshape and revamp its historically underprivileged city. In an ethnically-varied sequence of talking head interviews that were shot separately and one-on-one, Anglo sculptor John Houser [JH] and Hispanic City Council Representative Larry Medina [LM] explain:

[JH] In the late 1980s, the city of El Paso was looking for ideas to make the downtown a vibrant, new place again. I came up with the idea of taking the history of El Paso and portray it in a dramatic sculpture. I thought what a great thing to excavate all that history out of the soil, out of the dust of El Paso and turn it into bronze and create these great figures and we could have like a sculpture walk through history. And I presented the idea to the City Council and everybody I talked to seemed to think it was a wonderful idea too. [LM] First thing that came to our minds was tourism and economy, because we're the 10<sup>th</sup> poorest city in America. So we need all the help we can get when it comes to tourist attractions and raising economy and the level of living and so on. (00:07:42-00:08:31)

Mexican-American writer David Romo, however, is quick to point out that it is impossible to ignore the ideological implications of such "Disneyfied, MacDonalidized" plans (00:10:54-00:10:57). Especially because "most of [these twelve figures], not all of them, are basically, you know, dead, white men: Europeans, Spaniards or Anglos, that came here and defined what our history would be" (00:08:33-00:08:54).

Romo's passionate speech is followed immediately by a determined Houser who remains seemingly undeterred by any kind of criticism directed at his person or his work. Houser fantasizes out loud about what his ambitious project would have looked like, had he been allowed to go through with his vision:

[JH] Although I had the concept of the 'Twelve Travelers Memorial of the Southwest,' the actual selection was, I think, under the control of the city of El Paso. The first figure that was selected by the city was Fray Garcia, who built the first mission at the Pass of the North. It was the largest standing figure in Texas at the time, in bronze. The second figure was selected to be Don Juan Oñate, who named the city 'El Paso.' He brought

the Hispanic culture, the language, the religion, everything that has sort of given the Southwest the peculiar character that it has today. (00:08:56-00:09:32)

Houser's obsession with grandiose statues, it is suggested, runs through his veins. Early on in the documentary, he tells the camera his father was one of the assistant-sculptors to Gutzon Borglum, the artist responsible for the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. As archival stock footage of the construction of the monument is rolling, Houser elaborates on his desire to continue his father's legacy, stating "[Mount Rushmore] was all part of the milieu of [my] childhood [...] so [...] I was not daunted when I began to think of doing big sculptures; to me it is as natural to do a horse that is 36 feet high as it is to pluck a flower" (00:21:17-00:21:35). Given this context, the question arises whether Oñate's memorial was truly born out of Houser's desire to celebrate El Paso's history in order to "[raise] [the city's] economy and the level of living and so on" (00:08:28). A number of close-ups of Houser polishing up Oñate's facial features hint at the possibility of there being personal, self-aggrandizing motives behind all this zeal: the resemblance between the sculptor and the sculpture is uncanny. Juan could be a chip right off John's block. Moreover, the Acoma reveal during one of their get-togethers that the originally allotted budget for the sculpture, funded with taxpayers' money, came just under \$200,000 (00:29:42). The final cost, however, amounted to nearly \$2 million (00:29:44). And indeed, in a separate talking head interview, Houser confirms the Oñate statue was never intended to be as tall as it ended up being. A clause in Houser's contract allowed him to keep enlarging the statue as long as he could find funding for it—which he seems to have done with the help of fundraisers such as the one featured in the film (00:29:57-00:34:23).

The question remains as to how exactly the City Council was thinking of amalgamating such a pompous collection of deluxe statues in the downtown of a city that, onscreen at least, appears to be as worn-out as the inhabitants that wander through its

streets—especially after the camera lifts the veil on the living conditions of El Paso’s blue-collar suburbs. The presence in those neighborhoods of Anthony Cobos, who at this point is still campaigning door-to-door for his re-election, visually suggests that the decaying downtown, where he has his office, has organically spread out toward these drab housing projects. It should come as no surprise then that the people whom Cobos is addressing on camera—both in Spanish and in English, for good measure—in his search for “real, genuine opinions” bluntly point out the Third World poverty in which they live (00:45:16). The questions raised by a middle-aged man on the appropriateness of spending millions of dollars on public art in a city that can barely make ends meet is poignant enough:

I don’t know but I think those [mumbling] should be spent somewhere else. Don’t you think so? Besides some statue? Say, for example, housing, the conditions of the streets. We got a lot of problems here. If we’re gonna spend some money on a statue, I didn’t... I think there’s some other, some other projects, some other things that we can spend the money on. Because if you stop and think. I mean... I mean, if you ask the people around here “Who’s Oñate?” I mean, you know. He’s history. But who’s Oñate, huh? (00:45:23-00:00:45:59)

Houser and the City Council’s sugarcoating of their intentions for El Paso is irreversibly damaged by the uninhibited intervention of a lanky teenager of the working class *Segundo Barrio* neighborhood. Sitting on the ledge of what once appears to have been a demolition site that now serves as an improvised playground, he draws Cobos’ attention to some children frolicking in the back. The scene to which he is referring could have taken place in any developing country of the world: the boys are repeatedly climbing onto the jagged, dirty back wall of the site, jumping off it, and landing on a grimy mattress that was presumably dumped there (00:46:05-00:46:27).

What is the added value, the documentary appears to ask, of pumping money into public art in a city that is so obviously drowning in structural inequality, residential segregation, and spatial racism (cf. Neely and Samura; Kapoor; Cook et al.)? According to

Tim Hall and Iain Robertson, it was generally believed in the eighties, which is when Houser first submitted his project to the City Council, that public art was crucial to so-called “urban regeneration” because of a “broader shift towards ‘cultural’ means to address the problematic legacies” (5). Concretely, publicly funded artistic projects were thought to help urban centers with addressing community needs, tackling social exclusion, adding educational value, promoting social change, and developing a sense of community, a sense of space, and a civic identity (Hall and Robertson 10-17). Hall and Robertson, however, do stress that none of this can be achieved if public art is premised on corporate patronage, which is “one of the mechanisms by which corporate finance is able to inscribe difference and exclusion into the urban landscape by lending these spaces auras of distinction and exclusivity appropriate to their corporate contexts” (20; cf. Goodey; Miles; Phillips). The Council’s passive attitude towards Houser’s many attempts to increase the project’s budget with private funding sources begs the question of their complicity in perpetuating the “exclusive, uneven development” of the city (Dark and Miles qtd. by Hall and Robertson 20). That the Council selected a project submitted by Houser, whose link to the grandeur and patriotic ardor of Mount Rushmore is highlighted several times throughout the documentary, does not seem to be a coincidence either. Geographer David Ley famously warned for the gentrification that goes hand-in-hand with attracting public urban art by famous artists, to whom he refers as “the expeditionary force for the inner-city gentrifiers” and the “colonising [sic] arm of the middle classes” (191). Building on Ley, Stuart Cameron and Jon Coaffee add public policy to the equation. Public policy “seeks to use ‘positive’ gentrification as an engine of urban renaissance” and sets up the scene for “gentrification by capital” or the natural outflow of low-income households and the influx of yuppie middle classes (40; 44). El Paso’s original scheme may have been motivated by the gentrifying promise of public art to organically replace the poor masses with

a more desirable demographic. It is certainly cheaper than tackling the fundamental problems of the city—of which the living conditions of the underprivileged majority are only a symptom.

Towards the end of the documentary, at the statue's long-overdue unveiling, Houser is filmed addressing the crowd, which consists of friend and foe. After reminding “those [booing] people over there” that “it was solely [his] intention to recognize that portion of our past, never to offend the present,” he dedicates the monument to both “the struggle of the indigenous people of that time and to that small group of intrepid colonists” (01:06:00-01:06:23). The documentary closes with the image of a defeated group of Acoman activists, staring dejectedly at the statue from a safe distance. Off-camera, Houser's sophistic speech symbolically enhances the ambivalent space in which Oñate's effigy finally came to rest—a location that is not disclosed in the documentary, for reasons unknown. The statue found its home not in El Paso's drab downtown, but among the transitory travelers of El Paso's airport, a place as neither here nor there as the bronze behemoth itself.<sup>6</sup> Today, Juan de Oñate's sculpture is referred to as ‘The Equestrian’ (cf. Pérez), an alias that is meaningful in its meaninglessness. It would seem that the contagious equivocation found in downtown El Paso, which the City Council resisted for so long, ended up engulfing the horseman after all. Stripped of a concrete name and a concrete home, Oñate becomes a surprisingly accurate representative of the evasiveness of El Paso, its people, and its history.

As the closing credits start rolling, it becomes evident that *The Last Conquistador* refuses to formulate a conclusion, let alone a clear morale. It could be argued, however, that the gist of the story—its conclusive punchline—was given away halfway through the film, at the fundraiser. The festive tone of this scene quickly turns sour when it becomes clear that

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<sup>6</sup> It is unclear whether the statue's relocation to the airport was motivated by the offense the statue might have caused to the long-suffering inhabitants of downtown of El Paso, by the fact that over \$700,000 granted by the El Paso City Council came from airport revenue funds (Blumenthal), or by the increased protection against vandalism offered by the airport's federal territory status (Hernandez).

the largest checks being written out at that gathering do not come from Hispanics or self-confessed Hispanophiles but from “a very small but very powerful group of people that has been a tremendous support in keeping this thing alive and making it happen,” as Houser puts it (00:31:23-00:31:33). After Houser’s introductory speech at the event (00:30:01-00:30:57), a member of the NMHCPL is shown to be delivering what seems to be a sales pitch to an elderly, all-American-looking couple. She manages, on camera, to coax them into buying a miniature bronze maquette of the yet-to-be-finished equestrian statue for \$5,000. A fair deal, she implies, considering “\$3,000 is tax-deductible [...] since it’s a non-profit work” (00:31:01-00:31:08). She does not insist on the aesthetic or cultural value of the maquette, but on the financial aspect of this seemingly charitable purchase because, as it turns out, her elderly interlocutors belong to a wealthy, Anglo group of attendants whose ties to the project and its symbolism are purely monetary. The confident self-satisfaction that emanates from these philanthropists suggests that they, not Oñate, are celebrated by the statue and its many maquettes. It is their money that will help Houser finish the sculpture. It is their merit, their glorification. The statue might have started as a means to boast of the Spanish seniority in the Southwest and highlight that “Oñate founded the capital of New Mexico a decade before the Pilgrims ever set foot on Plymouth Rock” (00:05:42-00:05:50), but Valadez and Ibarra appear to use the fundraiser scene to imply that the statue only confirms what it is supposed to contradict. The Pilgrims and their Anglo descendants still take ideological and sociocultural precedence in the Southwest, largely due to their unshakeable spending power.

The camera then turns to a small group of these Anglo philanthropists who admit they are aware of the controversy surrounding Oñate’s person:

[Man 1] The controversy is that because this conquistador is a specific person, I mean he actually lived, he... uhm... wreaked some violence while he lived around El Paso. [Man 2] He was not politically correct. [Man 1] He was not politically correct (chuckles, takes a sip from his drink). [Man 3] So... [Man 1] Well, I mean he sort of

ravaged the countryside. I mean, he was not a gentle conquistador. He was a typical conquistador. And he killed and... etcetera, etcetera. [Man 2] Pillaged. [Man 1] ... pillaged and what have you. So he's not sort of a model that you might expect to be represented in the middle of El Paso. (00:31:48-00:32:35)

With this interaction in mind, it becomes even more mystifying as to why the Anglo elite seems to be all too happy to finance a statue honoring a convicted Spanish Catholic criminal—a man who epitomizes everything that goes against the Puritan-inspired ideals this ruling class exemplifies. Perhaps the answer to the mystery lies precisely in the complacency of the Anglo high society. Without missing a beat, Valadez and Ibarra splice in another shot of the same group of people admiring the artwork itself, completely ignoring the “politically incorrect” symbolism they mentioned shortly before: “[Man 1] But look at the detail in this, huh? Look at it, ain't it beautiful detail? It is really going to be really nice. [Man 2] It is fabulous. [Man 1] It really is.” (00:32:26-00:32:32) The NMHCPL and other upwardly mobile Americanized Hispanics depicted in *The Last Conquistador* seem to blindly mimic the values and ambitions of the established elite, such as Winthrop's trope of the city upon a hill. They also gladly join forces with the Anglos in their aversion of those, like the Acoma Pueblo, who resist and denounce a Eurocentric worldview. The fundraiser scene lays bare the hypocrisy underlying the entire controversy: as long as the ambitious Hispanics keep climbing the social ladder under the supervision and on the terms of “the very small but very powerful group of people” present at that event, there will only be mutual support and understanding (00:31:23-00:31:33).

In the end, *The Last Conquistador* succeeds in delivering a powerful blow to the intentions of these established (Anglo) and rising (Hispanic) elites, but perhaps not in the way the documentary originally intended. If Agnew's territorial trap, Glick Schiller and Çağlar's paradigmatic city, and Valadez and Ibarra's documentary premise initially rejected the idea that a nation should be thought of as defining of and defined by its territory, then the



documentary only testifies to the opposite. The labeling used in the documentary for and by Anglo, Hispanic, and Native Americans and the segregation according to these ethnic denominations within the city of El Paso tacitly validate the methodological nationalism that all the characters of the documentary have incorporated and accepted as unalienably truthful. Ultimately, *The Last Conquistador* provides living proof that as long as a nation can financially support its self-fulfilling patriotic prophecies, it will be able to trap its nationals in the paradigm it has devised for them, no matter how creatively they try to circumvent or challenge it.

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