

# THE FOOT at SITE SANTA FE

BY ALLISON GLENN

By nature and necessity, America is an amnesiac nation. One convenient ignorance is the belief that there are no more Indigenous peoples, though it remains taboo to talk about why and how that illusory erasure is made possible. In the Southwest United States, where the border wall has been since long before Trump, genocide may still be glossed over. But it's harder to hide that these states weren't always united and weren't always America. The land was lived on by the Dine, Apache, Ute, Paiute, and Pueblo peoples—and probably more Indigenous groups than I am remembering to name. The Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century in what is today called New Mexico (and was *actually* Mexico, until the signing of The Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848). A hundred and fifty years or so later, in 1993, the little town of Alcade chose to remember this Hispanic history with a memorial statue to the “last conquistador,” Juan de Oñate. They paid honor to a horror. As the Spanish-appointed governor of the territory, Oñate is infamous for giving the decree to both destroy the foodstuffs of the Acoma Pueblo and then, after some of the Acoma sought retribution in a counter-raid, attack the women and children of the village. After these ravages, Oñate ordered the amputation of the right foot of every Acoma man over the age of twenty-five.

In contrast to amnesiac Americans, Indians are a “long-remembered people,” in the words of Chickasaw writer Jodi Byrd. One night in 1997 a group calling itself Friends of the Acoma reached back in time with a chainsaw to remind the people of New Mexico what Oñate had done and what he deserved for it. They cut off the right foot of the statue and waited twenty years to come forward, revealing the booty first to filmmaker Chris Eyre, who is now making a documentary about the experience, titled *Statues Between U.S.* This summer at SITE Santa Fe, about an hour south of the Oñate monument, a cast of the amputated right foot was on central display in the first gallery of the 2018 SITElines biennial for art of the Americas.

The placement of the vandal's trophy in the show did not necessarily elevate it to the status of an art object, but it elevated the act that itself allowed the foot to be present. It brought out what the Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore calls the “poetic action” of Indigenous protest. In the press around the show, there was also a conscious stepping into, if you will, the current national conversation around monuments to include alongside the Confederate the Conquistador. Guest curator Naomi Beckwith named other new-world parallels, such as the 1991 decapitation of the statue of Empress Joséphine of France in Fort-De-France, Martinique.

Throughout the opening, the molding (the original bronze remains at a secret location) was referred to only as “the foot.” Though it is actually a boot, it is the image of the foot that captivates. The foot is always a scandal, even before it becomes a fetish. Bataille describes the foot, in particular the big toe, as an abhorrent reminder of man's base nature and claims that this abhorrence arises because the “human race distances itself as much as it can from terrestrial mud.” Even alongside his anthropological review of foot taboos in non-Western cultures, Bataille cannot resist the universalizing statement true only of a certain class of men, the conquerors. What he omits is that for many people, especially those from an Indigenous context, the distance traveled from the terrestrial was non-consensual and came with great destruction. Perhaps it would do Bataille good to consider that this cleaving has been traumatic for all humans. The order to amputate the Acoma men's feet was a horrific act of physical and symbolic violence. It brought lasting pain and impairment; it also so starkly displayed the insistence of the colonizers to disrupt and render nearly impossible the relationship between the colonized and their land, to be grounded.

If, as curator Candice Hopkins suggested during a gallery tour, the order to amputate Pueblo men's feet is a particularly emblematic case of new-world justice, we might see the counter-amputation as a case of new-justice revenge. The placement of the foot in a gallery while the repaired monument still stands reminds us of the unfinished project of retribution.

