

# CONTESTED STORYTELLING IN PUBLIC SPACE

*An Analysis of Art and Equity  
in Pueblo, CO*



Aletha Spang



Introduction

Pueblo, Colorado has had a long and complex history with equity. It was developed on indigenous land for the purposes of ore-mining and railroad expansion, resulting in the enslavement and marginalization of indigenous peoples in addition to the exploitation of workers. As the second largest former steel manufacturing city in the country, Pueblo has seen economic booms and declines throughout industrialization and the beginnings of globalization. The history of labor, economic decline, and loss of land rights have created generational trauma and issues of inequity that deeply affect the people living there today.

While it is currently the most affordable city in Colorado, Pueblo is poised for rapid development and expansion in the coming years as a city in close proximity to both Colorado Springs and Denver. Recent patterns of urban growth across the front range have shown how easily

gentrification and inequity can occur. When growth happens without emphasis on equity, injustices of the past are carried into the future, resulting in further trauma and lacking resources for city residents. Pueblo needs to address historical and current inequities across the city in order to be prepared for future pressures of growth and climate change that will exacerbate these issues.

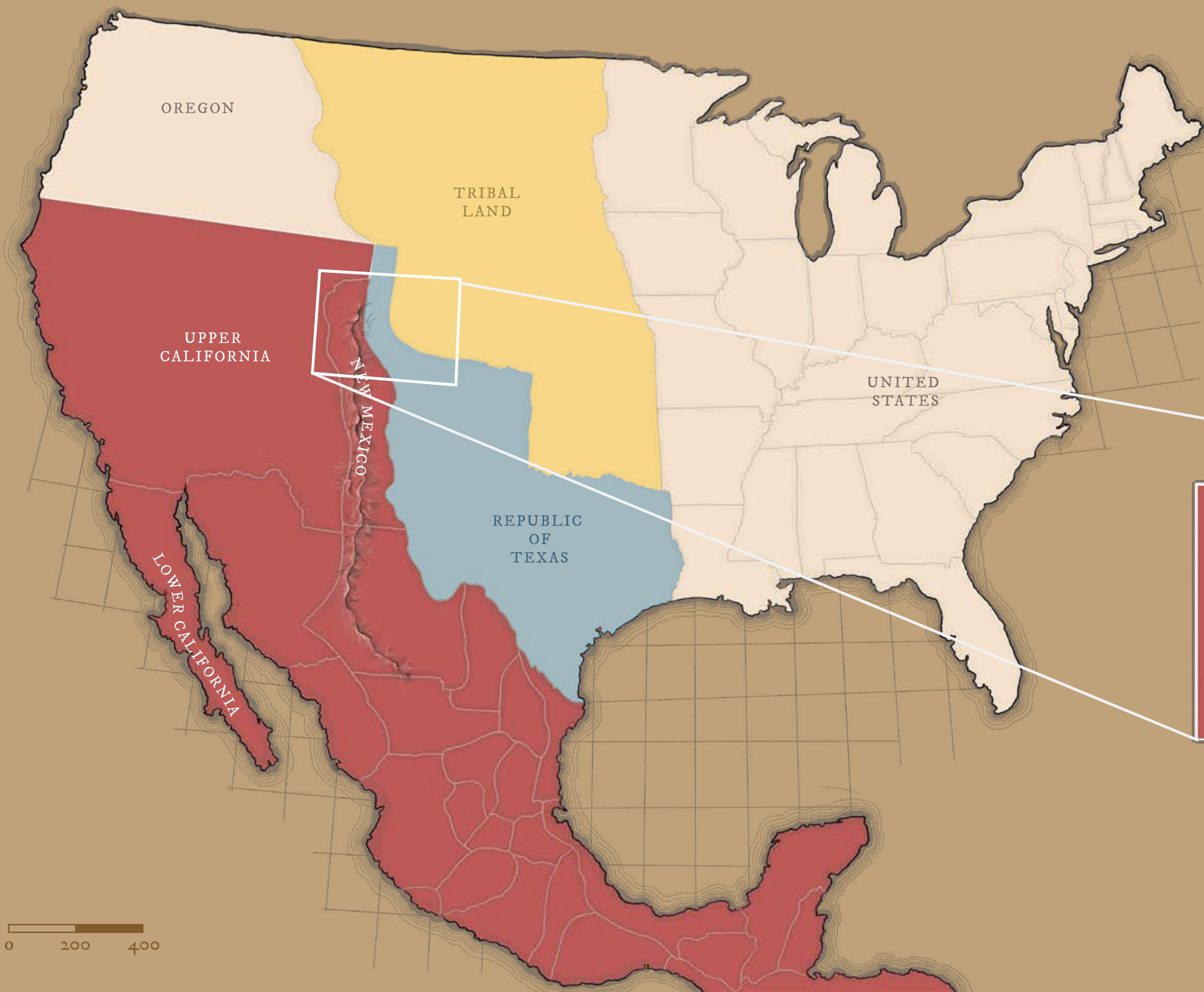
This project seeks to interrogate the narratives Pueblo tells about itself through its public art framework to identify where inequity lies within representation and belonging in public space. When certain stories are not told by a city, the affected residents feel silenced and left out of political processes. By improving equity within public space, Pueblo can celebrate the history and stories that make it an incredibly unique and culturally rich city.

Table of Contents

3	<i>Setting the Scene:</i> A Brief Cultural History.
8	<i>Citywide Art Analysis:</i> Cultural Representation in Public Space.
12	<i>Historic Arkansas Riverwalk:</i> Art Analysis in a Key Destination
16	<i>Discussion:</i> Rethinking Pueblo’s Public Art
20	<i>References</i>

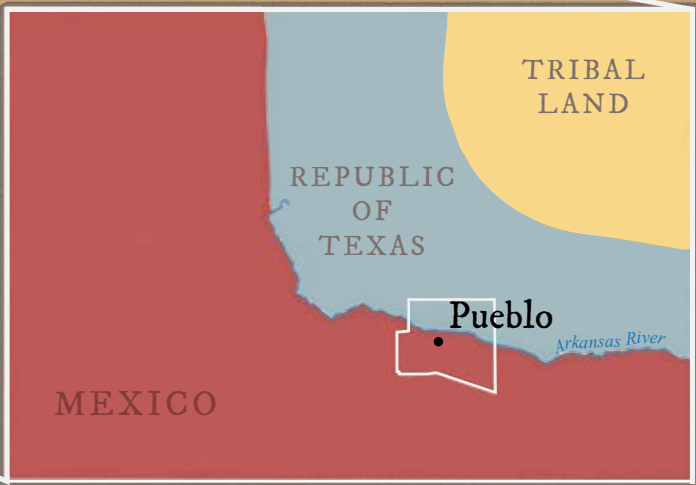






“ A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A *borderland* is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. ”

— Gloria E. Anzaldua



The city of Pueblo,  
Colorado has always been .....  
a borderland,

situated in limbo between contested cultural identities and ownership. Originally home to the overlapping Ute, Apache, and Cheyenne Nations, the land was seized by Spanish conquistadors as colonized territory in the 1500s. Parts of northern Colorado were turned over to France after Napoleon’s conquest of Spain in the early 1800s and then sold to the United States during the Louisiana Purchase. In 1810, Mexico broke away from Spain as an independent country and declared one of its northern borders to be the Arkansas River.<sup>1</sup>

As a developing town directly on the southern banks of the Arkansas River, the land that would become Pueblo existed on the border, within walking distance of the United States but marked as distinctly different. Territorial disputes between Texas and Mexico led to the violent Mexican-American War in 1846, ending with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and secession of territory.<sup>1</sup> The border was moved far south from the Arkansas River, leaving the land that had formerly been Mexico to become part of the United States.

Though the land was handed off, it was far from empty. Through the changing claims in ownership between Indigenous, Spanish, French, Mexican, and American territories, the people of Pueblo remained deeply connected to the land. Generations of residents watched the land change hands while they stayed fixed in place, resulting in conflict between citizenship and identity. White settlers and prospectors began moving into the land, founding new towns and claiming vast swathes of territory. Prior laws and traditions of land ownership were no longer honored,

particularly among land-holding Mexican and Indigenous women who were often married by white men for access to land titles.<sup>2</sup>

The people existing in the area were not only robbed of land but forced to undergo a violent Americanization process to erase Mexican and Indigenous heritage. The federal government outlawed the practice of traditional religious ceremonies and required children to attend schools in which they were forced to speak English and learn white-washed versions of their history. Although the government tried their best to erase cultural traditions, the people of Pueblo held on to their history while adapting to a new form of Mexican and Indigenous reality in the United States with the introduction of the Chicano identity.

Americanization was not limited to the people who had been residing on the land already but also spread to new residents who were immigrating to Pueblo to take part in the evolving industries of agriculture, steel, and rail. In the late 1800s, the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company was established in Pueblo to make steel for westward railroad expansion. It quickly became the largest steel producer in the West, requiring a large workforce to be housed within the city. Immigration began to rise to fill steel manufacturing jobs in addition to agriculture for the next few decades, leading Pueblo to become the most ethnically diverse city in Colorado. Workers came from all over the world to settle in Pueblo with more than 40 different languages being spoken at the factory. Immigration soon led to small but vibrant ethnic neighborhoods forming throughout the city.<sup>3</sup> Immigrants were not the only workforce for the



History Colorado.

city, as many Chicano residents and white settlers also participated in the growing industries.

Instead of celebrating the diversity and rich cultural histories, the city of Pueblo sought to homogenize workers into a single American culture. Immigrant neighborhoods were typically categorized as “hazardous” in redlining practices due to a concentration of “foreign workers”. Colorado Fuel and Iron’s Sociological Department, led by Dr. Richard Corwin, revolutionized racist exclusionary practices in the interest of Americanization. The department was created to resolve racial differences that contributed to worker strikes, primarily by stripping workers of cultural identities to avoid any future conflict.<sup>4</sup> Any cultural features that were not strictly ‘American’ were seen as dirty, less valuable, and were suppressed. Corwin supported the pseudo-science of eugenics and believed that the environment in which people lived shaped them into becoming racially

inferior. His department focused their attention on shaming families for their living standards, cultures, and building types, where children were often given grades in school based on how clean their mothers kept their houses.

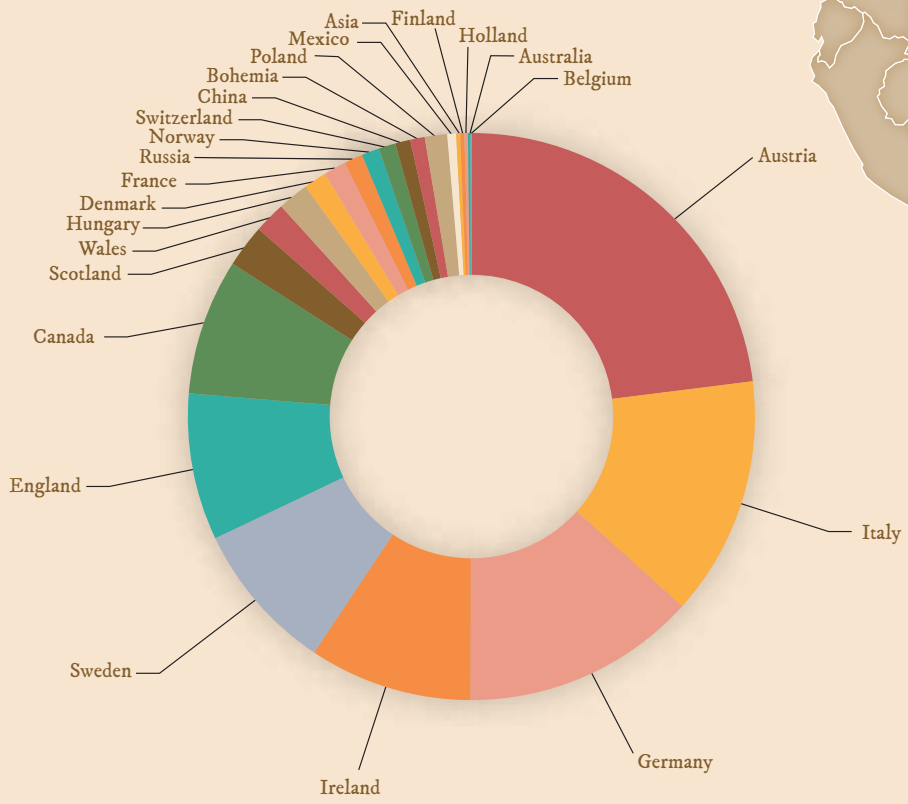
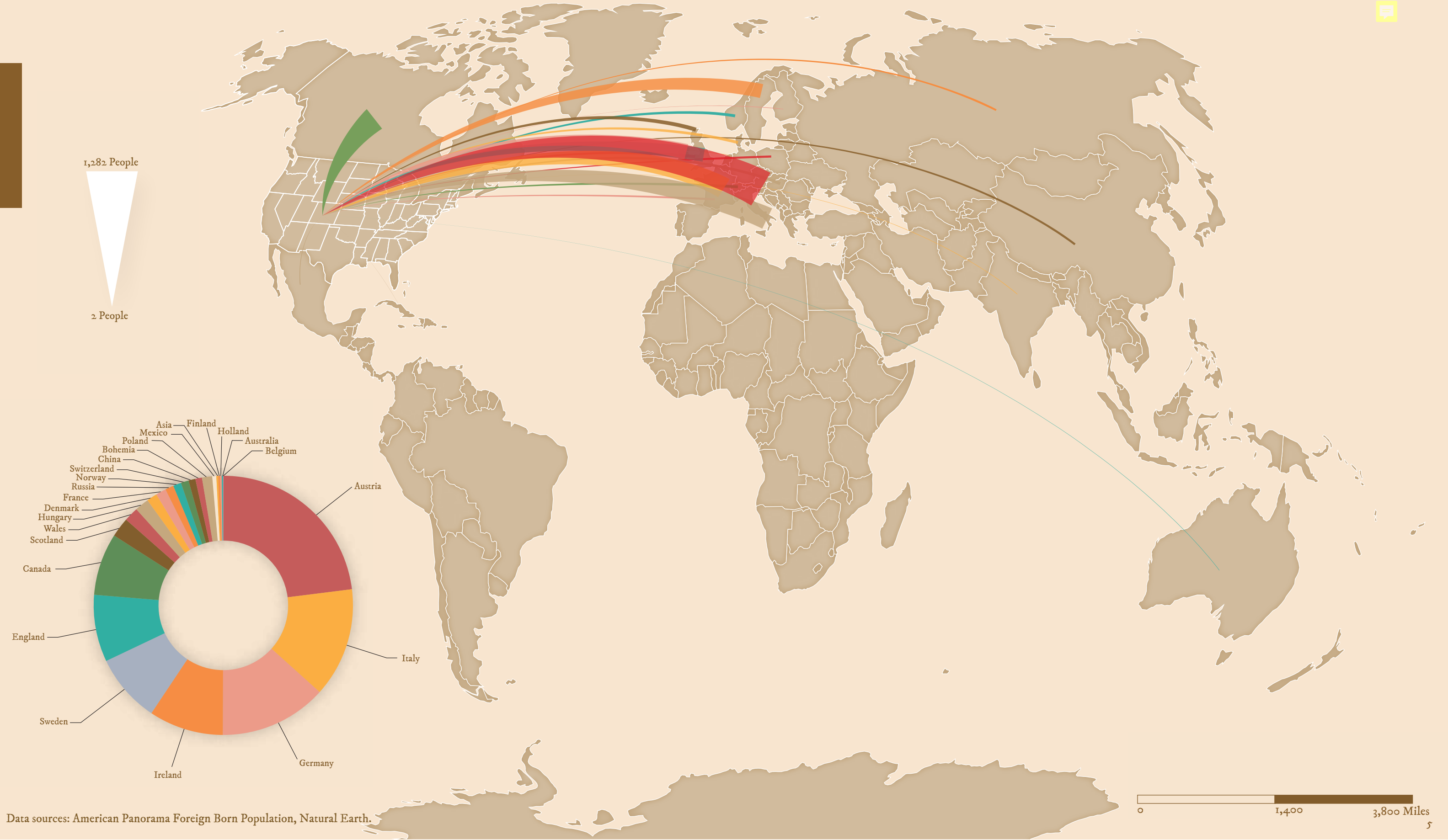
This forced process of Americanization is not unique to Pueblo but has left a profound and lasting impact on the city’s cultural identities. Generations of workers have been told that they are not worthy of being in Pueblo unless they maintain a new American identity and have been shamed for their cultural traditions and heritage. Despite these hardships, workers have been instrumental in making the city into what it is today. Pueblo has a robust history of labor organization and union action that has led to better conditions for workers across Colorado. It was also a hub for Colorado’s *El Movimiento*, the national Chicano Movement that successfully confronted racism and discrimination within education, health care, media, and businesses.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Library of Congress.  
<sup>2</sup> Dawn DiPrince.

<sup>3</sup> Boyce.  
<sup>4</sup> Rees.  
<sup>5</sup> Hollowell.



# IMMIGRATION INTO PUEBLO | 1900



Data sources: American Panorama Foreign Born Population, Natural Earth.





Italian immigrants were one of the most prominent groups arriving to Pueblo and have had a dynamic history in the United States. Immigration from eastern Europe peaked in the nineteenth century leading up to the start of World War I as people tried to find economic prosperity or escape religious prosecution. As they arrived into American cities, immigrants often faced ethnic and religious discrimination from residents who blamed them for taking American jobs and economic hardships. Italian immigrants were a frequent target of hatred, as pseudo-scientific theories claimed that people of Mediterranean heritage were inferior to people of northern Europe and depicted them as criminals, part of the mafia, or subhuman in cartoons and news stories.<sup>6</sup> Italian people were frequently attacked and Catholic churches and charities were vandalized and burned.

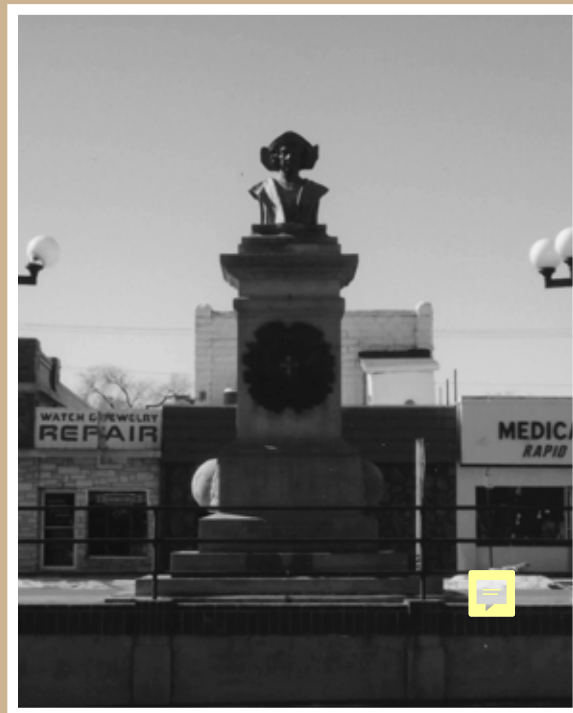
This discrimination was common in Pueblo, where there were more Italian immigrants per capita than any other city in the United States.<sup>7</sup>



Many immigrants had to change their names to be less Italian-sounding in order to find employment at Pueblo's steel mill, and were frequently targeted by the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>7</sup> Italian neighborhoods such as Bessemer were demarcated for redlining practices and avoided by other residents.

Hector Chiariglione, an Italian immigrant and worker at the steel mill, became a prominent leader in Italian communities and labor movements across the nation and worked to end ethnic discrimination against Italian people. Under his leadership, the first celebration of Columbus Day in Pueblo happened in 1892. A monument to Columbus was unveiled thirteen years later on one of the busiest streets in the city.

Another turning point for Italian communities took place in 1892, when the worst attack yet happened on the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage. In the city of



National Park Service Records.

“ [T]he monument provided a vehicle through which they inserted themselves into discourses pertaining to the founding of the American nation and countered nativist rhetoric. ”  
— Marianna Gatto

New Orleans, eleven Italian immigrants were lynched in one of the largest mass lynchings the country has seen. Italian Americans across the country as well the Italian government were outraged by this event. Within the following year, President Benjamin Harrison proclaimed a national observance of Columbus Day in order to make a statement against discrimination while also resolving the diplomatic crisis.<sup>8,9</sup>

In 1906, the state of Colorado became the first state in the country to recognize Columbus Day as an official holiday after long campaigning from Italian communities. Other states across the nation quickly followed. From that point on, the figure of Columbus was forever linked to Italian heritage and American pride. Columbus was now seen as one of the few Italian figures that was accepted and celebrated by American people, allowing Italian communities to gain acceptance and belonging in wider society. Many Italian people began to utilize Columbus's figure to uplift their own businesses and public reception. The image of Columbus was removed from his historical significance and transformed into a new

symbol of Italian pride and belonging. Although Pueblo's monument to Christopher Columbus was seen as a symbol of social mobility and belonging to Italian Americans, it was an act of violence to cultural identities that had been directly affected by his arrival. Columbus and

his party were notorious for killing hundreds of thousands of indigenous people in the Americas and enslaving millions more.<sup>10</sup> The details of violence he perpetuated have been passed on through the families of those who experienced it firsthand. But history books and education systems across the country erased that narrative in favor of a revisionist, palatable story of discovery

that silenced any alternative telling. In 1992, the first protest against the Columbus monument took place in Pueblo with the goal of bringing awareness to the violence and injustice of Columbus's actions.<sup>11</sup> Activists attended an annual wreath-lying session by politicians dressed as Columbus and his soldiers and carried out a skit talking about the atrocities that Columbus committed. This soon became an annual protest event on Columbus Day, and grew in numbers. Rita Martinez, a local Pueblo woman, became one of the key organizers of the yearly protest. She also was involved in political campaigning against the celebration of Columbus, and successfully pressured Jared Polis to sign a bill changing the official name of Columbus Day to Mother Cabrini Day in early 2020.<sup>12</sup>

The explosion of protests after George Floyd's killing in the summer of 2020 led to an increased focus on getting rid of the Columbus Monument. Cities around the country were dealing with pressure from various factions to remove public monuments to racist figures who had taken part in genocide or enslavement. Many cities began to willingly take down these statues, or had the statues taken down for them by groups of protesters. But Pueblo responded to protests around the Columbus Monument by increasing police presence and security around the statue, costing the city thousands of dollars a day to protect it. The protests by local activists quickly increased in frequency to weekly events, attended

<sup>6</sup> Library of Congress.

<sup>7</sup> Gatto.

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi.

<sup>9</sup> Schafer.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen et al.

<sup>11</sup> Latino History Project.

<sup>12</sup> Willard.



by activists from all over the front range, some of whom were arrested for trying to incite a riot. The protests were also attended by the Proud Boys and other far-right organizations who started violence against antifascist organizers by using mace or brandishing revolvers.<sup>13</sup> Links between these far-right groups and the local chapter of Sons of Italy, the group responsible for organizing Columbus Day celebrations at the monument, have long been suspected by local activists.

The city of Pueblo has been trying to solve the conflicts around the Columbus statue for a long time, particularly after increased conflict during 2020. They hired a mediator to reach an agreement between the two sides but failed after weeks of stalemate. The overall costs of security, policing, and mediation are estimated to be around \$100-200,000, far more than many believe should be spent on protecting one statue. And even if the statue was taken down, there are many people in the city who would go out of their way to reinstate it. The conflict may seem to be about the immediate issue of the statue, but is reflective of deep rooted issues of cultural identity representation in public space and the political power to choose what that representation looks like. The protests have lost momentum since Rita Martinez tragically passed away last winter from COVID-19, but have been continuing on a monthly basis with no signs of resolution in the future.

While the Columbus statue is infamous for its polarizing and politically charged nature, the rest of Pueblo's public art has gone largely unexamined. Discourse around Pueblo's art focuses on celebrating local artists and western heritage. Public art is seen as an inherently positive addition to public space, creating a more welcoming and engaging

environment through its presence. But these typical conceptions of public art depict it as a passive agent; merely objects located in space that have no direct effect on their surroundings or the people witnessing them. Instead, public art might be better understood as an active agent in the production of space and publicness. All art is deeply intertwined with cultural narratives, historical stories, and subjectivities that absorb into space and people around it, altering conceptions of identity and belonging.

The Columbus statue protests are not isolated incidents; they might be viewed as indicators of other deep-rooted conflicts between identity, representation, and belonging that exist within Pueblo's public sphere. This study seeks to examine the other cultural narratives and historical stories being told by Pueblo's public art pieces. The following research questions were used for analysis:

***Research Questions:***

- 1** How is cultural identity represented through citywide public art?
- 2** What stories are missing?
- 3** How can Pueblo's public art be more equitable?

Through this analysis, missing identities and underrepresented stories can be exposed and brought to city representatives and activists for future change. If the city of Pueblo seeks a more equitable future as they claim to prioritize, that must include an equitable public art system.



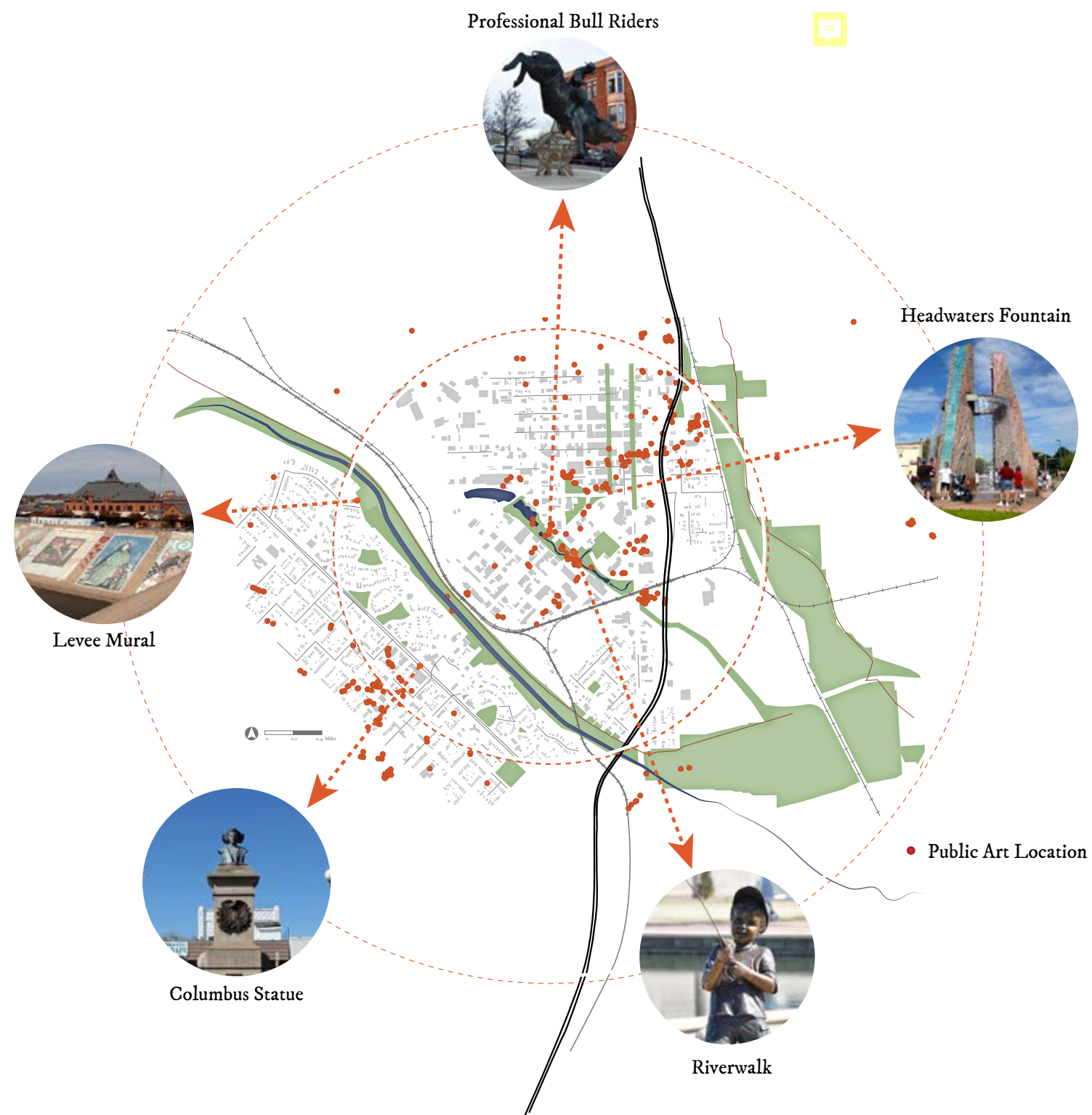
<sup>13</sup> Anonymous.



# 02

## Citywide Art Analysis: *Cultural Representation in Public Space*

### PUBLIC ART IN DOWNTOWN PUEBLO



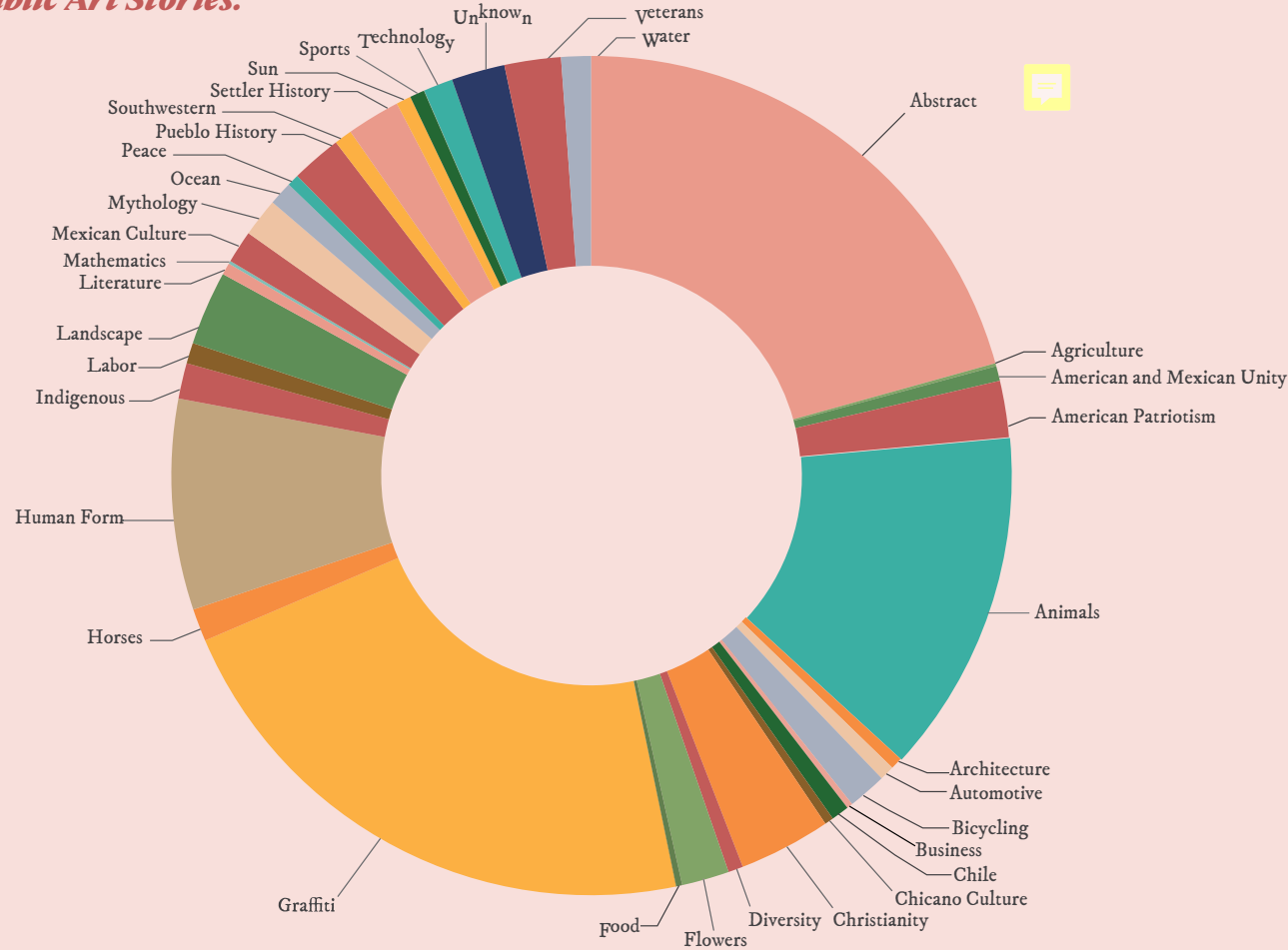


In order to investigate equity and representation within Pueblo's public spaces in addition to the Columbus statue, a city-wide analysis of public art was conducted. Pueblo has around 750 pieces of public art spread out across the city, with the majority of artwork concentrated around the downtown as the area most frequented by tourists and with specified creative corridors. Conducting a full in-person analysis of each public art piece was outside of the scope of work for this study. Instead, the analysis relied upon an ArcGIS Online map created by Kerry Bennett during a 2016 documenting public art around Pueblo. Bennett uploaded specific locations of public art pieces along with pictures of the piece, titles, years constructed, and artists. Where an art piece did not have detailed information, on-the-ground

analysis was conducted to confirm sculpture theme and form.

Each of the art pieces was assigned a story based on their visible appearance and theme. While the analysis attempted to be objective, there are inherent subjectivities and biases within thematic interpretation due to differences in identity and lived experience. It is important to note that these themes were interpreted by an outsider to Pueblo who was raised in Massachusetts, is white, and leans towards a far leftist political viewpoint. If the art pieces were assigned themes by people with drastically different lived experiences, various other interpretive outcomes could be found. This subjectivity emphasizes the political nature of public art; meanings and takeaways

Public Art Stories:



<sup>14</sup> Mitchell.

will be different based on the person viewing them. Regardless, general themes tend to remain consistent even if their interpretation may vary.

Out of the 35 different themes identified in the public artwork, the two most common were abstract art and graffiti art. Interestingly, these are in almost direct opposition to each other in terms of the narratives they convey. Abstract art came out of a critical practice that challenged traditional ideas of aesthetics and form, but has been re-appropriated within neoliberalism for corporate spaces and advertising.<sup>14</sup> Many of these corporate symbols of abstraction have no relation to the publics, spaces, or figures they claim to represent, reducing the anti-aesthetic mission of modernism to pure aestheticism.<sup>14</sup> The abstract art around Pueblo tends to fall into this depoliticized, purely aesthetic form where the narrative it is telling is often no narrative at all.



Polco News and Knowledge

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell.



James Ritchie Obituary

On the other hand, the proliferation of graffiti art in Pueblo speaks to a more critical, political narrative. Graffiti often directly challenge the public spaces they exist within and the laws and property rights that govern expression and spatial use.<sup>15</sup> When art is created and exhibited without permission from city authorities, it is used as a tool for communicating dissent and questioning existing systems of order.<sup>16</sup> This form of art is often a protest against the lack of democracy and public participation in cities, where profit is prioritized over serving the public.<sup>16</sup> The proliferation of graffiti art in Pueblo also speaks to a deeper need for people to express their stories and find representation within public space.

Other prominent themes in the artwork around Pueblo include animals, particularly those with Southwestern motifs including bison, mustangs, and bears. Animals are typically seen as having a fairly neutral narrative in the public sphere,



as most people tend to like them. However, they hold some deeper cultural contexts. The actual animals do not exist within Pueblo; only the representations of animals remain, allowing emotional and physical distance between the viewer and the subject.<sup>17</sup> Many of these animals have been connected to humans in relationships of domination and exploitation for profit, arrogance, vanity, or entertainment.<sup>17</sup> The history of bison in particular is one of extinction and is deeply tied to colonization and the genocide of indigenous people who relied upon it for food. The viewing of these animals is inauthentic and further exaggerates hierarchical differences between species and the use of animals for aesthetic purposes. Animals may also be used for symbolic purposes to convey ideas about moral values and power relations.



Pinterest

The last major theme within the public artwork of Pueblo is the use of human form. This category does not include human forms that signify a larger narrative about cultural identity. Instead,

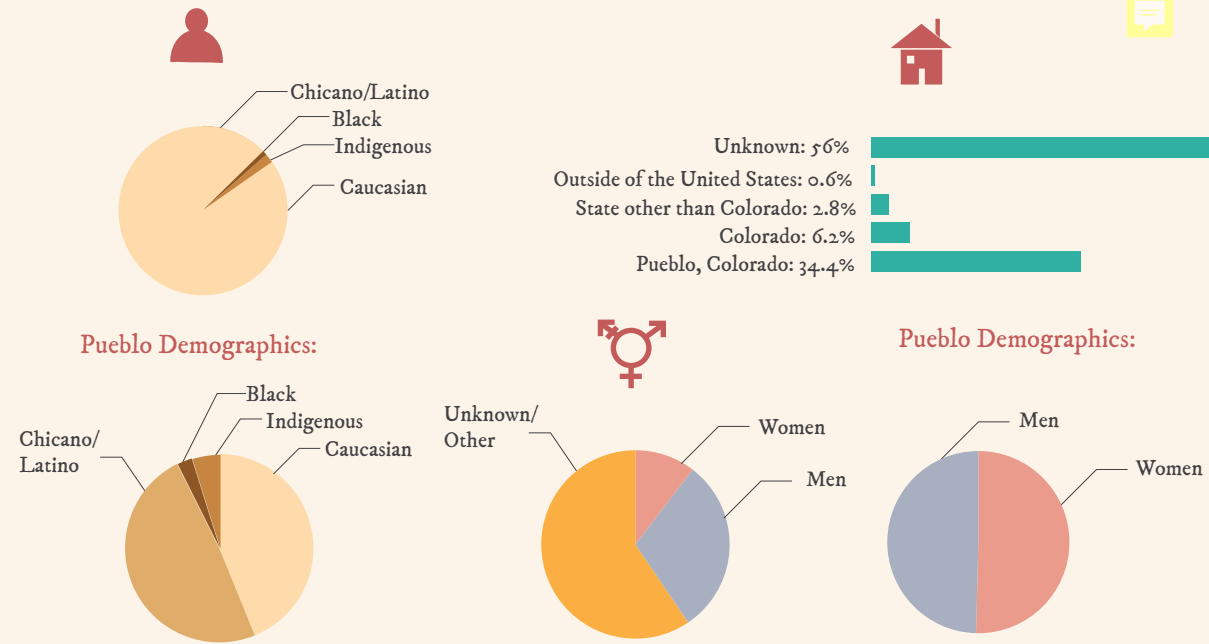
it is the portrayal of a bland, homogenized human figure or outline meant to represent the majority of people who view it. Despite this, perception and interpretation of the human form is inherently linked to cultural understandings of aesthetics where the Western perspective of the body as showing individuality or ideal beauty dominates.<sup>18</sup> Most of these forms uphold Western standards of beauty and subconsciously convey power differences between racial, ethnic, class, and gendered identities.

In addition to the themes of public art works, the identities of the artists who created them were also explored. Each artist was investigated via public records, social media, or practice websites to identify their home location, racial or ethnic identity, and gender identity. This process is undoubtedly fraught with error, as it relied on often subjective assessment that may not be aligned with the reality of an artist's identity. Wherever the identity could not be determined, the artist was assigned an 'unknown' value. While



Pueblo Convention Center

Public Artists:



these results are not indicative of the full reality of the public art scene in Pueblo, they start to give an idea towards who is putting stories into the public realm and whether that is equitable compared to citywide demographic trends.

From those that could be identified with online resources, the majority of artists whose work exists in the city's public sphere either work in Pueblo or have lived there for some period of time. It is ideal for a city to have public art produced by its residents to create an authentic narrative and identity of place. But although Pueblo could be considered successful in this factor, the narratives being told by local artists are not necessarily relevant to the history and culture of Pueblo itself. Some of these artists came to the Southwest after being inspired by artwork in Santa Fe and utilize similar motifs and themes that feel imported to a place where they are not relevant. Many of the local artists are also predominantly white and commissioned for multiple pieces across the city, resulting in a clear

divide between the racial demographics of public artists and the racial demographics of Pueblo as a whole. Similarly, the amount of women putting art into Pueblo is lower than citywide demographics, particularly within the graffiti scene, though gender is difficult to know based on web investigation alone.

The location of public art pieces was also analyzed to determine the predominant audience. Much of Pueblo's public art is concentrated around the downtown area, where there are higher levels of both diversity and poverty. The goal of art in this area is to convince people to linger, spend time, and eventually money in local shops and restaurants. Art themes in these areas tend to be more corporate and present narratives about the region that are stereotypical and from a western perspective. Local residents have to constantly see these pieces and may feel disconnected from them due to different lived experiences, resulting in further exclusion and alienation from the public sphere.

<sup>15</sup> Colucci.

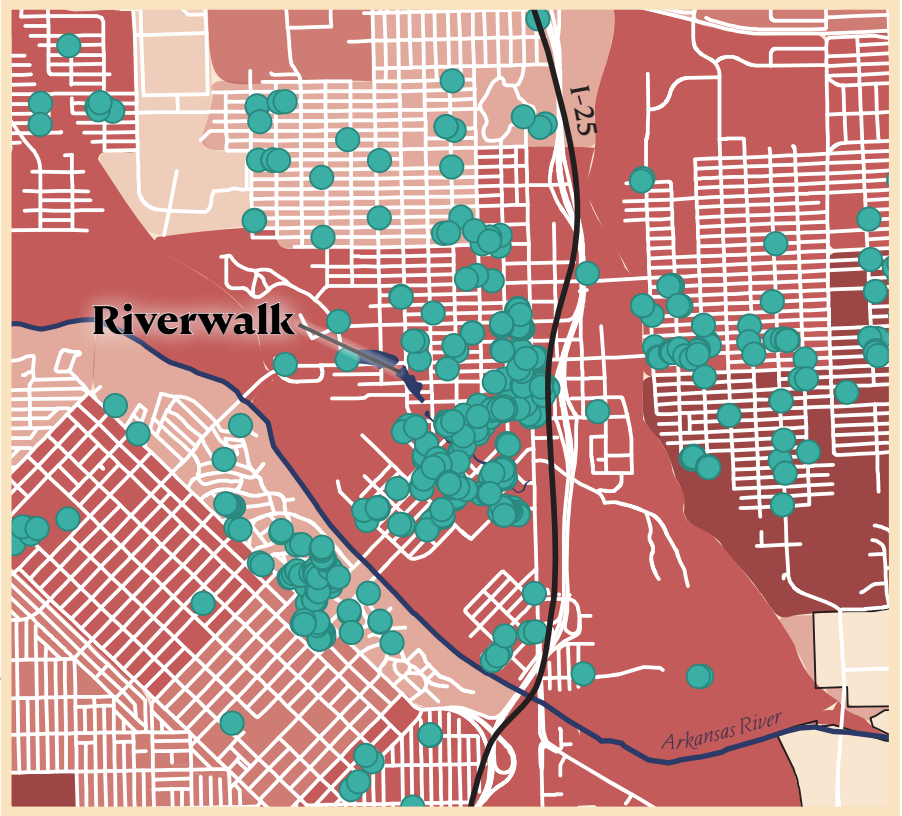
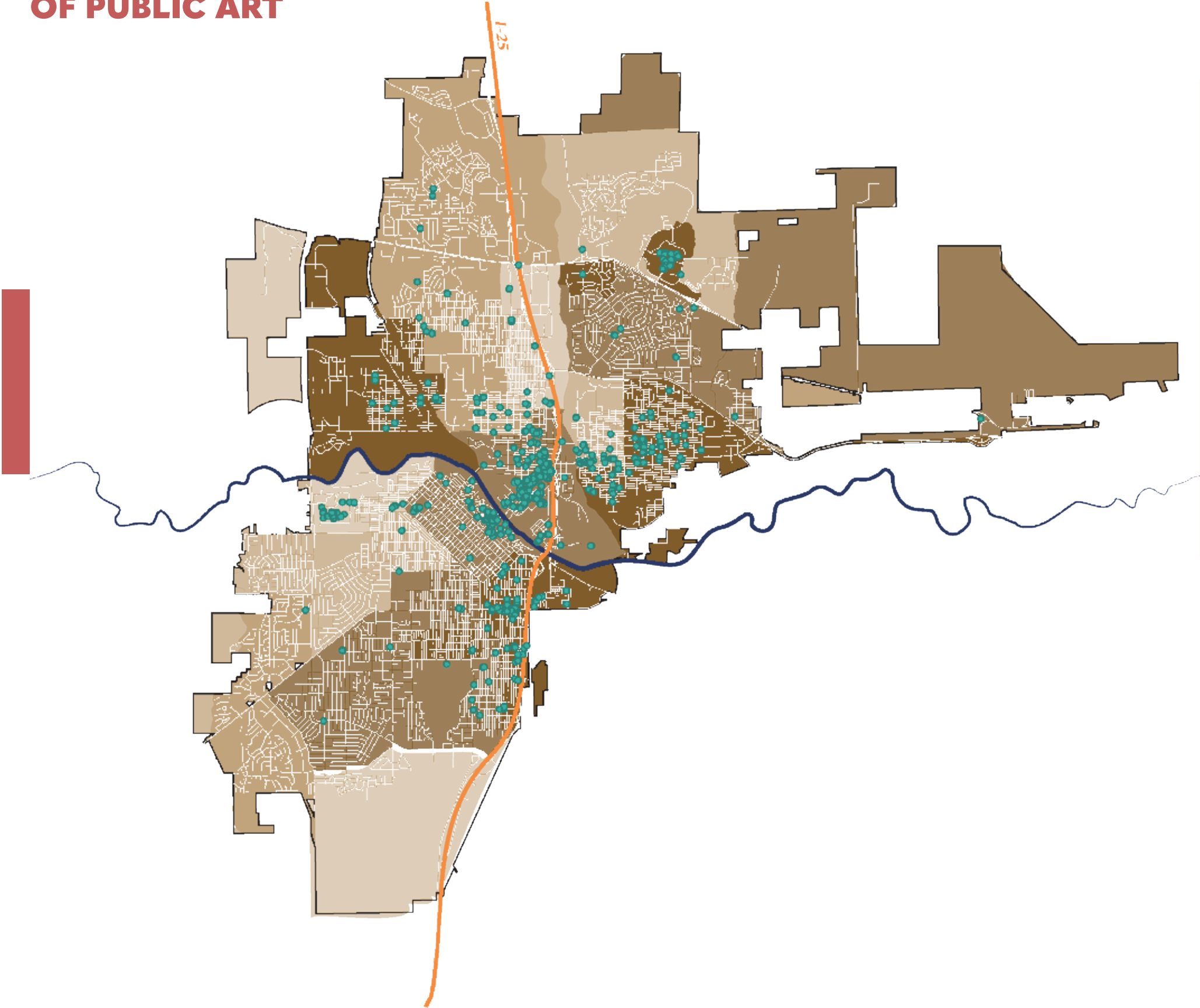
<sup>16</sup> Jordan.

<sup>17</sup> Bierne.

<sup>18</sup> Encyclopedia.



# SPATIAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF PUBLIC ART



Public Art Locations

### Percentage of White Residents

- 15-30%
- 31-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-58%
- 59-72%

### Percentage of Residents in Poverty

- 1-10%
- 11-17%
- 18-26%
- 27-34%
- 35-43%



0 1 2 Miles



# 03

## The Historic Arkansas Riverwalk: *Art Analysis in a Key Destination*



Pueblo Riverwalk.

One of the key destinations in Pueblo is the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk located right in the downtown area. Built in the 1980s, the Riverwalk claims to be the “cultural cornerstone” of the city and the “gem of Pueblo”.<sup>19</sup> Due to its proclaimed prominence and cultural history, an analysis of public art on the Riverwalk alone was conducted.

The Arkansas River holds great significance to the region as the former border to Mexico and reason for Pueblo’s conception. Pueblo was built along the confluence of the Arkansas River and Fountain Creek, allowing water to be diverted for agriculture, industry, and the growing city. In 1921, increased snow melt and rain caused the river to rise above the city’s levees and thunder through the downtown streets, killing hundreds of people and destroying prominent buildings and property.<sup>20</sup> In the aftermath, the river was diverted away from downtown to the local reservoir to prevent future flood devastation from occurring. The Pueblo Conservancy District

was formed to oversee the river’s realignment. Meanwhile the corridor through downtown where the river had once flowed became neglected for decades, filled with weeds and debris and surrounded by asphalt parking lots.

In the mid-1980s, the Pueblo Conservancy District began to consider beautifying the cooling ponds fed by the Arkansas River. Frank Childress, a local dentist, began a citizen’s initiative to implement a river walk inspired by one he had seen in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>21</sup> Pueblo residents banded together with various city departments to create a plan for relocating the river back through central Pueblo. They formed the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk of Pueblo (HARP) Commission which began fundraising efforts, land and water rights acquisition, and plan implementation.

The river walk project aimed to capture the significance of the Arkansas River in providing

<sup>19</sup> Uncover Colorado.

<sup>20</sup> Colorado Public Radio.

<sup>21</sup> Kochevar.



# PUBLIC ART

on the Pueblo Riverwalk



### Art Piece Themes:

- American Patriotism
- Americana Nostalgia
- Western Frontier
- Common Animals
- Mystic and Spiritual
- Other



0 60 120 Feet



“life blood” to the residents of Pueblo and the city’s economy.<sup>22</sup> The goals of the river walk project were to increase economic activity, improve quality of life for all residents, create a pedestrian network through downtown Pueblo, preserve the history of central Pueblo, and pull downtown Pueblo out of an economic slump.

In achieving these goals, commission members along with city employees made site visits to various locations exemplifying parks and river stabilization. These sites included Estes Park, Boulder’s Pearl Street Mall, Cherry Creek Mall, 16th Street Mall and the San Antonio Riverwalk itself, the only site selected not within Colorado’s unique landscape. Within San Antonio, the commission members met with city representatives and gained information on how to create an economy around river boats, financing, flood protection measures, and what types of businesses could be best suited to the location.

In order to understand the impact and aesthetics of Pueblo’s Riverwalk, it is important to understand the history of San Antonio’s

Riverwalk. In strangely similar circumstances to Pueblo, San Antonio was hit by a hurricane in 1921 causing historic flooding and significant destruction. A dam was subsequently constructed north of the downtown while solutions were proposed for minimizing flooding in the downtown area. Robert H. H. Hugman, a young architect, gained traction for his idea of a walkable river corridor through word-of-mouth support between upper class San Antonio elites. Hugman was inspired aesthetically by the time he spent in New Orleans and the French heritage and believed that San Antonio should try to preserve the old Spanish heritage through the Riverwalk.<sup>23</sup> Buildings were created with Spanish revival influences following the theme of City Beautiful improvements happening around the same time.

In 1961, Marco Engineering Company of California were paid to create a plan to increase the commercial potential of the river. They recommended that all buildings alongside the river should have an early Texas or Mexican colonial style and that businesses should spill

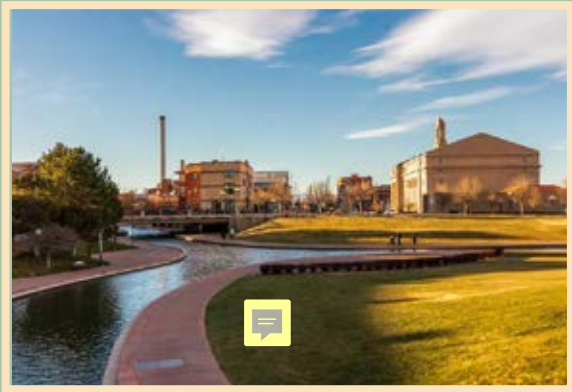


San Antonio Riverwalk- Marriot Bonvoy Traveler.

<sup>22</sup> Kochevar.  
<sup>23</sup> San Antonio Riverwalk.

out along the riverbanks in a carnival-like atmosphere. Marco Engineering made their living by focusing development of theme parks and other attractions and was founded by Cornelius Vanderbilt Wood, the chief developer and first employee of Disneyland.<sup>24</sup> This connection to Disney is evident in the deliberate artificiality of the river corridor, reminiscent of Disneyland’s Jungle Cruise ride with the tropical vegetation, sterile stone corridor, and old-time river boats. Riverboat operators wear wide-brimmed straw hats and white button-down shirts, evoking picturesque images of the old South while the paths lining the river became a modern promenade of wealth and power.

The Riverwalk has been hugely successful for the city of San Antonio as an economic driver and landmark destination for tourism. In seeking to emulate the same success, Pueblo has copied the strategies of San Antonio’s Riverwalk as directly as possible, leading to the same sterile, Disney-like environment landscape of consumption. The artificial spectacle of these Disneyfied environments is designed to divert people away from their everyday lives and to enter a place of subtle commodification. While attempting to convey cultural pluralism, it sterilizes and homogenizes into a single corporate industrial-commercial style.<sup>25</sup> Histories are commodified and sold to visitors until they actually become



Dreamstime.

<sup>24</sup> San Antonio Riverwalk.  
<sup>25</sup> Berleant.

ahistorical. Arnold Berleant calls this process a new “corporate colonialism”, where the interests of technology and industry erase and appropriate past stories and cultures.<sup>24</sup>

The problem with Pueblo’s Riverwalk is that it was designed to be San Antonio, not Pueblo. The scale is slightly off, with largely horizontal spaces made up of expansive turf grass that overwhelms the visitor and reminds them of a grand, European manor within an arid landscape. The surrounding architecture celebrates modern box buildings which, when paired with the linear curb holding back the river corridor and the vast, empty ground plane evokes an eerily sterile feel in a city proud of its grit. The Riverwalk is an ode to colonization, homogenization, and the capitalist consumer culture of the era.



Pueblo Riverwalk.

The public art along the Riverwalk increases the Disneyfication of the space but controls the narrative into more Colorado-centric perspectives. There are currently 60 pieces of public art along the Riverwalk, most of which are realistic bronze sculptures of humans and animals. The sculptures emphasize narratives of the Western frontier with realistic depictions of cowboys, frontiersmen, and plains animals including elk, bison, mustangs, jackrabbits, and prairie dogs. Other sculptures exemplify the Colorado mountain narrative with statues of a



Other traditional bronze figures invoke a nostalgia for older, 'simpler' times, relying on motifs of childhood and from the early twentieth century. The statues are most often young children with traditional clothing choices of young girls in flouncy dresses and young boys in shorts and barefoot. The children play with miniature sailboats, old fishing rods, or take part in Americanized sports with traditional uniforms. The figures are bronze and in their vagueness are meant to be representative of all people but have unmistakably Caucasian features and hair texture.



There are two sculptures of indigenous people along the Riverwalk, one of which was created by Dave McGary, a Caucasian man, and the other created by Deon Duncan, a Caucasian woman. The figures are clad in traditional clothing, with their bodies either in a stoic, mystic pose or animal-like crouch. These pieces are less

The use of bronze sculptures also tends to fall into the uncanny valley of human form, where figures are not quite human enough to be accurate representations but humanoid enough to be alarming.

of all veterans in Pueblo are homeless, higher than the national rate of 0.21%, but this is not being told.



The patriotic artwork on the Riverwalk can be linked to the presence of the Center for American Values, a non-profit organization that spreads information about groups and individuals that “relate directly to the values this great country was founded on”.<sup>27</sup> While the Center may not be overtly partisan, there is a flyer for Patriot Front, a violent white supremacist group, directly in front of the entrance for all to see. Much of the art displayed along the Riverwalk has been donated by local foundations who want to share fine art by nationally recognized artists with the residents of Pueblo. While this sounds like a good idea, as public art tends to be expensive to

If the artwork on the Riverwalk doesn't represent Pueblo, then why can't it change? Many local activists and community organizers have been lobbying for a more inclusive Riverwalk, and spoke to an ongoing and frustrating effort to change Riverwalk leadership. People have tried to change decision-making from within the board by becoming board members themselves, or attend board meetings and try to push for different directions. These efforts are not well-



American Patriotism	Americana Nostalgia	Western Frontier	Mystic and Spiritual
Veterans	Childhood	Plains animals	Indigenous figures
World Trade Center	Sports	Mountain animals	Christian idols
Eagles	Historic Motifs	Cowboys and Indians	
Flags		European explorers	

<sup>27</sup> Center for American Values

15



documented in city documents, activist networks, or by the media. Overall, community organizers have not been able to make changes due to the political power and exclusive nature of the Riverwalk’s governing body. The Riverwalk is maintained by the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk of Pueblo Foundation, a non-profit organization that partners with sponsors including Pueblo Water, real estate companies, car dealerships, the local university, and a local landscaping company to take care of the grass and plantings. The foundation is run by the authority board, a group of 9 members including a chairman, vice-chairman, treasurer and secretary. It is unclear whether the board chair positions are self-assigned, appointed, or elected. The other five members of the board are appointed by Pueblo County, the Conservancy District, and the Urban Renewal Authority. It seems unlikely that the general public is involved in the process of appointing board members. Demographic information on the current board members was not readily available but the names on the website sound overwhelmingly male and white.

The authority board has been notoriously reluctant to engage the public in making decisions about the Riverwalk. Their board meetings are technically open to the public, but residents have to contact the office the week before the meeting in order to attend and are not allowed more than five minutes to talk and will be thrown out if they insult or accuse the board members. This is particularly problematic because the board is planning significant expansion and development in the area surrounding the Riverwalk that will likely affect the lives of most Pueblo citizens. Early conceptual images include the construction of a new boathouse with rooftop deck for private events and a channel extension. The design looks like it will fit in with the rest of the Riverwalk



Conceptual Design for Boathouse-Pueblo Riverwalk.

in a bland, modern style devoid of any cultural references or Pueblo history.

If any real change were to happen within the Riverwalk, there would need to be a change to the existing authority board first, either through the appointment of a new board member who is passionate about diversifying public art or through a complete remaking of the governing structure. At the present, nine people are responsible for the design and function of a public space that claims to represent the best parts of Pueblo to outsiders and residents alike. This has contributed to significant erasure of cultural identities and historical narratives. There is not a single piece of art on the Riverwalk that speaks to Chicano heritage although Hispanic people make up over half of Pueblo’s population. The lack of representation in public artwork is inexcusable and contributes to decreased feelings of belonging within public space and the political systems of Pueblo as a whole. This study has led to renewed conversations around further diversifying public art across the city and particularly along the Riverwalk. Hopefully, these efforts will continue to take place into the future.

# 04

## Discussion: *Rethinking Pueblo’s Public Art*

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<sup>26</sup> Center for American Values.



One of the traditional conceptions of public art is that it is not art that exists within public space, but is art that establishes public space through action.<sup>29</sup> In this instance, public space can be understood through Jurgen Habermas’s description of the public sphere; not as a spatial concept or a body of people, but as a processual, performative arrangement where the public produces and reproduces itself through politicized acts of cultural exchange.<sup>30</sup> When art is made public, it transforms places and spaces, infusing them with public life.

The problem with this idea and with traditional ideas of public art is that they are driven by a rationalist approach that believes in order as a tool for organizing society and minimizing conflict.<sup>29</sup> The pieces of artwork displayed in public settings uphold a narrative that is easily digestible and understandable for viewers but also suppress the ability to portray the plurality of stories and conflicting identities within society. In attempting to homogenize difference into a single narrative, frameworks of public art depoliticize and antagonize.<sup>29</sup> The creation of identity always implies the establishment of differences, which are frequently hierarchical and relational. It becomes impossible to understand an identity without looking at its difference from another identity and the perception of an ‘other’, which can turn antagonistic if the idea of the ‘other’ is threatening to the existence of the personal identity.<sup>29</sup> As such, traditional frameworks of public art can never lead to equitable outcomes for communities as they falsely purport a lack of conflict and difference between identities.

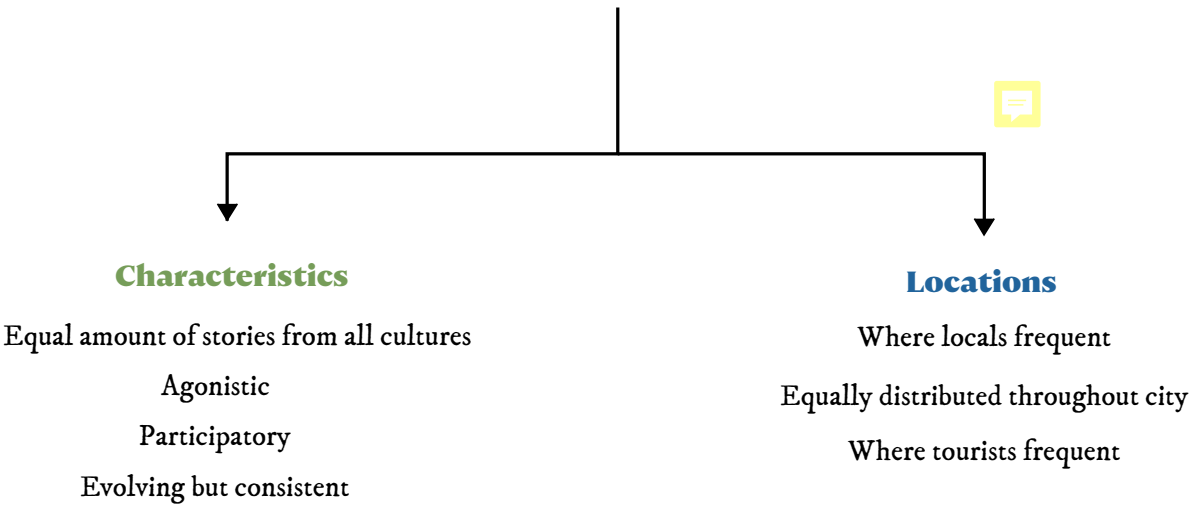
Critical art practice is often used to make a more equitable public art framework. Critical art can be understood as a direct challenge to the idea of public space as a “smooth image

more equitable public art framework. Critical art can be understood as a direct challenge to the idea of public space as a “smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread” and instead promotes public art as political and participatory.<sup>31</sup> Artists can be viewed as educators who are teaching the public about connections between public space, cultural identity, and private interests. Their artwork challenges the cultural maintenance of the status quo, opening up dialogue for people passing through to reflect and develop their own opinions and politics.<sup>32</sup> Art becomes a tangible expression of dissent that makes alternative narratives visible when they have been suppressed by consensus. However, this view of art is not necessarily fully equitable. Even if a piece of artwork is critical to the dominant narrative, it does not necessarily open up the possibility of plurality but suppresses conflict again by reducing narratives into one cohesive story.<sup>22</sup> It can never ‘fix’ the antagonism surrounding that identity or narrative unless it opens up conversation for confrontation.<sup>33</sup>



DisTerrMem.

WHAT DOES AN EQUITABLE PUBLIC ART FRAMEWORK LOOK LIKE?



In order for Pueblo to develop a more equitable public art framework, several key components are needed within themes and characteristics of the art itself. One of the most important factors is to utilize agonistic approaches as outlined by Chantal Mouffe. In an agonistic art framework, artwork with a multitude of stories are allowed to exist simultaneously within public space even when they directly conflict with each other. Artwork is allowed to respectfully confront both the space it exists within and the artwork that surrounds it in order to challenge users to think critically about the narratives they consume.

Another key aspect of an equitable public art framework is public participation. Cities often introduce artwork without surveying residents about their opinions on it, and the art pieces are subsequently devoid of narrative in an effort to appeal to everybody. Residents are rarely part of the design or construction process even though the practice of creating art has long been known to be therapeutic to cultural trauma and builds social relationships and trust. There are



The New York Times.

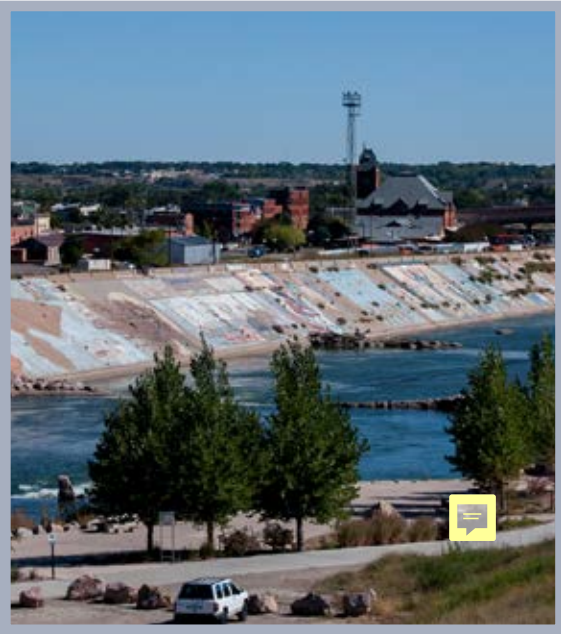
various public art-making efforts taking place around Pueblo, including some of the projects spearheaded by Matte Refic in which residents are encouraged to come out and take part in mural-painting or other art processes. The accessibility

<sup>29</sup> Desai and Darts.  
<sup>33</sup> Mouffe.

<sup>29</sup> Mouffe.  
<sup>30</sup> Jordan.  
<sup>31</sup> Desai and Darts.



of these projects is unclear, as many people whose stories should be told in public space may not have the time to participate. It is a good start towards a more participatory art framework, but needs to expand to include more artists from diverse backgrounds and at locations spread throughout the city.



Shanna Lewis.

One of the most significant public art processes in the city is the Pueblo Levee Mural Project along the Arkansas River. The levee mural started in the 1970s when students from Colorado State University-Pueblo began coming to the site at night to paint over existing graffiti. Initial paintings grew and were added onto by other students, and eventually the murals expanded to a three mile stretch, the longest piece of artwork in the world.<sup>34</sup> Over 1,000 different artists have contributed to the project, making it the most collaborative and participatory art piece in the city. The mural tells a diverse range of narratives that are traditionally overlooked in other spaces. The levee began to degrade in the years to follow, and structural improvements were made that destroyed the existing murals. Artists are currently

working to reinvigorate the new levee walls but generations of stories have been lost.

There are many more components to a more equitable public art framework, but the last one this project will speak to is having evolving artwork while still preserving a strong foundation of representation. Matte Refic, a local artist in Pueblo, spoke to the importance of evolving public artwork, saying that art can become stagnant and divorced from the present reality of Pueblo residents if it does not change. Simultaneously Dawn DiPrince spoke to the importance of having public art pieces fixed in spaces to represent each person’s history as an expression of memory and ancestry. If those pieces were erased and replaced with something else, the significance of these stories would be lost. As a result, there needs to be a good balance between having artwork evolve to meet changing needs of storytelling while preserving artwork to highlight Pueblo’s history.

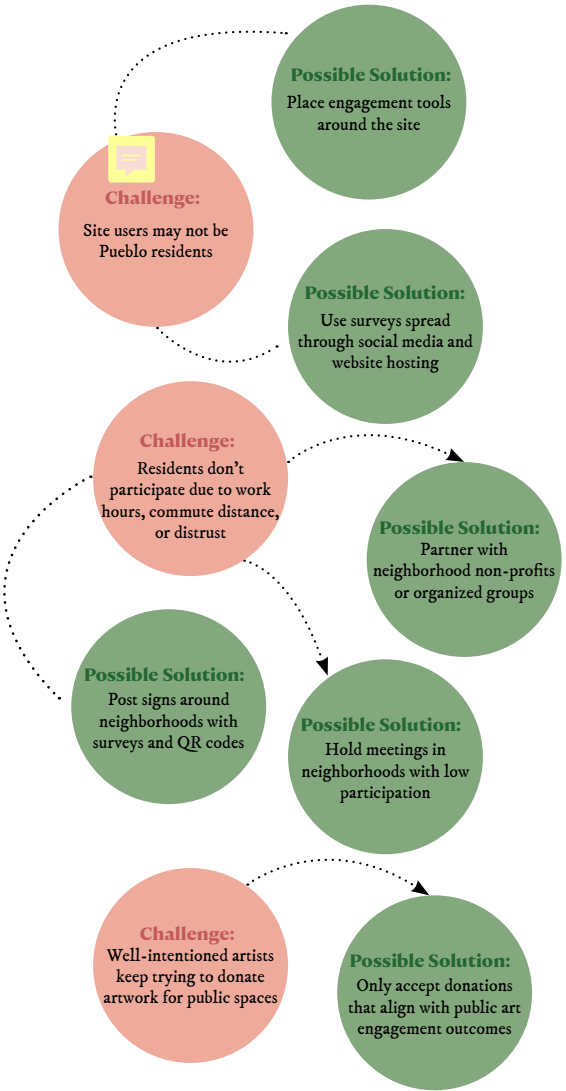
***What stories are currently missing?***

- Chicano heritage and movement
- Indigenous heritage
- Industrial legacy and pride (steel, rail)
- Labor history and union significance
- Agriculture
- Importance of water

***How can public art be participatory?***

**Guidelines for engagement:**

- Multiple stages for all ages and abilities
- Resident involvement in all stages of public art inception: planning, selecting theme, and voting on artist
- Resident involvement in creation of artwork itself
- Placemaking over place
- Unfinished solutions: temporary and revisited over time





What might more equitable public art look like?



Labor, Unions, and Steel

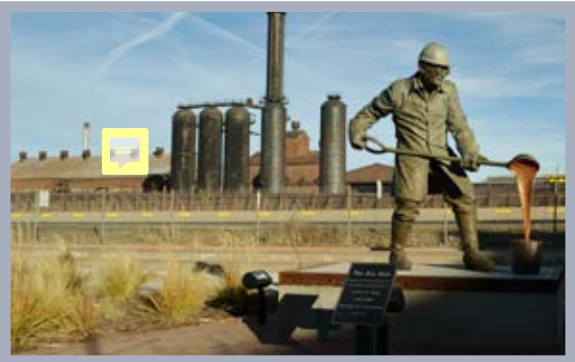


Chicano Heritage



Western Settlement

This project is a beginning; an exploration into how cultural representation might be improved within a city using public art and the Riverwalk as a starting point. As Pueblo grows and develops into the future, there may be more immediately pressing needs for equity such as housing supply, economic drivers, and other factors. In the long-term, it is also crucial to consider how residents of Pueblo find representation in public space based on their cultural identities as it leads to participation within local politics, increased empathy, and feelings of belonging within the city as a whole. There have been generations of trauma surrounding the representation of cultural identities that manifest in conflict and anger as people are denied the ability to heal and move forward. If Pueblo continues to grow without addressing these underlying issues, they will be carried into the future and will become more significant and complex with each additional generation.



C. Bakunas Art.



CVL Sites.

Research around Pueblo’s public spaces could be expanded into the future, both within the realm of public artwork and in other forms of cultural representation. Similar analyses could be done at other critical sites around the city, including the levee mural project. Other forms of art and storytelling within space could be examined, including various landscapes around the city that project specific values and stories about Pueblo. It would also be interesting to analyze which stories have been preserved and shared over time, and which have been erased or allowed to vanish. This could be carried out through an analysis of place names, language, or historic preservation patterns across the city.

Future Research:

- Analysis of public art in other important sites around Pueblo
- Analysis of place names and their cultural origins
- Analysis of historical properties that have been preserved compared to historical properties that have not



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