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### **The Other Conquest --- A Film for Generation Ñ**

The Other Conquest (La Otra Conquista) is a passionately directed, written and edited film by Salvador Carrasco and produced by Alvero Domingo (Placido's son). The story opens with the protagonist, Topiltzin, a blood relative of Emperor Moctezuma, having just witnessed the gruesome massacre of Aztec nobility at the hands of Spanish Conquerors. We follow his life as he, too, is captured by Spanish soldiers. Topiltzin is forcibly converted into an order of Monks, where he is renamed Tomas. Along the way, he befriends Dona Isabel, rightful (also renamed) daughter of Moctezuma. She has been "converted" and is being kept in marriage by Cortes. Isabel and Tomas depend upon each other, secretly, for spiritual survival and empathy. All the while, they strive to keep their cultural flames alive by however means necessary.

In his quest to unfold the beginnings of racism in Mexico today, Carrasco captures the nuances of prejudice and whispers of colonial oppression that speak to today's Latin-American in the same way that The Crucible and Roots spoke to their respective audiences. Indeed, much has been said concerning his astute reflection on today's society, and at a recent screening, Carrasco comments, "I know this is all still present, because I see it." Carrasco, Mexican born, schooled at NYU, and current resident of California, is destined to become a prominent voice of Generation Ñ, the Latin Gen-X population. (As defined by the *New Times Magazine*, if you grew up knowing the words to the theme song of Three's Company AND ¿Que Pasa USA?, you're generation Ñ). Characterized by paradox and duality, Carrasco is true to Gen-N in his eclectic vision, score, and central issues. So much so, in fact, those moments depicted in this 1520s art film ring poignantly true in my own modern day Newyorican experiences.

For instance, like many of my generation, I was at first raised bilingually. But, in kindergarten, children with a Spanish surname were funneled into "the bilingual program". It was a poorly concealed attempt to segregate the Latino children from the mainstream, grouping us instead with the "problem" children. It didn't matter that most of us spoke

English perfectly, or that some of us didn't know Spanish at all. My mother fought it, and she learned a valuable lesson in survival: If your brown face and accented name weren't "American" enough, your voice would have to be. And so, I learned to speak Spanish many years later, in a classroom with a direct view into ex-president Nixon's living room window across the street. In this mostly White, well-respected parochial high school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, I was both proud and embarrassed to finally be speaking Spanish. One day, as I sat in my itchy plaid skirt, mindlessly repeating words and watching Nixon's Latina maid vacuum the second floor, I was called upon to start the translation exercises. "Where is the bus stop?" Mrs. Hayne demanded. Caught off guard, I blurted "¿Donde se queda la parada de la guagua?" Mrs. Hayne, who had been educated in Spain, scrunched her face in disgust. "¿La guagua? Esa palabra es muy fea". Favor de usar "el autobus".

It was a thirty second exchange during an unremarkable class over fifteen years ago, and yet remembering it still causes pangs of rage that I hadn't felt since. That is, until I saw The Other Conquest.

What set me off, specifically, was the scene during which a beautifully "uniformed" Dona Isabela sits at the garden bench with Topiltzin, now successfully monkified. They chat in their native indigenous tongue, until the Spanish guards appear within earshot. Then they stiffen their movements and switch to Spanish. Isabela is confronted by one of the guardsmen, who comments, "I thought I heard barking". Mrs. Haines' scrunched up face flashed before me, along with all of the mixed emotions I had felt on that day. And, I felt better --- someone understands.

This film is froth with such resounding moments. Shortly thereafter, Dona Isabela schools the guard on the functions of the liver in response to his ill-referenced insult. She sites the organ as the seat of all passions, which was a common belief held, (referenced by Shakespeare in The Tempest, some hundred years after Isabela would have lived) The guard was unfamiliar with this information. In the hard world of dual living, the minority needs to know everything of their conqueror's culture, though it never applies vice versa. This makes for an unexpected advantage on the part of the oppressed, and therefore, a threat. We recognize this as fear clouds the Guard's face when Isabela

speaks, and we as an audience know that she will suffer for her wits.

This jarred memories of my days as a graduate student at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, where I taught "American Pronunciation". One of my students bounded into class one day, ecstatic at having landed a job in the luxurious El Conquistador (pure coincidence) Hotel. She expressed her sincere gratitude at all she'd gained from my class, because "The Native staff was not allowed to speak Spanish on the premises unless approached in Spanish", lest the mostly American clientele feel offended. Nor, she added, were they allowed to kiss or hug each other hello nor goodbye. And unruly hair was frowned upon. In other words, they couldn't be Puerto Rican, and their knowledge of another language, their comfort with human contact, their very sincerity was unwanted as they served their American guests in their own country. But she maintained a smile as she told me of her new job there.

That "square-peg" status is all too familiar for us. Seeing Topiltzin in his Monk garb for the first time is, initially, comically shocking, then sad. His long, flowing, beautiful hair has been shaven off. It becomes heart wrenching to hear this foreign language spewing from his lips. Even in seemingly total assimilation, even when it appears to give us an edge, we are not accepted in our own country, as, ironically, we cannot accept Topiltzin. We can feel the sting as Topiltzin is made to bow to a Virgin Mary that bares no resemblance to him, maybe recalling those parochial school days in that scratchy, drab uniform. But we can also recognize our collective Latino culture's obsession with the paradox of a Virgin Mother. Gang members spill each other's blood with total disregard, yet turn the corner and sign the cross to a spray-painted mural of La Virgen Maria. An uncomfortable insight, we can feel the turmoil Topiltzin is suppressing in the name of survival.

Then there are the issues around our names. Topiltzin is renamed "Tomas", and that incites the obvious jabs we silently bare when one of us is nick-named "Mr. J" because Jimenez is "too hard to pronounce". More complex is our Latino notion of a surname being a public sign of legitimacy and acceptance. Growing up in a poor minority community, I remember wondering why most of my classmates had different last names than their single mothers'. To

carry a father's last name, even if that were eventually to be the only thing he'd willingly give his offspring, was a badge of pride --- at least in the eyes of the mothers. In reality, it was, more often than not, the child's sole, imposed connection to a man he would never meet. When Cortes announces that his child would bare his last name, but that his wife does not, it speaks volumes -- he is claiming the future.

Also pulsing through the heart of The Other Conquest is that ever-present need to procreate within one's own race. This is a theme touched upon by many of our contemporary artists, crossing forms and cultural bridges from Toni Morrison's Beloved to John Legguizamo's Mambo Mouth. In one of the most artistically gripping scenes of the film, Topiltzin and Isabela consummate their relationship. Devoid of lust, this survival tactic will ironically begin a new race, a generation of Duality and Paradox.

Duality and paradox: again, my Generation Ñ. From the opening shot of the two faces of the Aztec Warrior, to the masterfully combined classical and primal musical score, to its different-yet-familiar format, our duality is reflected again and again in The Other Conquest. It seems that within a Generation defined and named for its very lack of commonality, we, Gen Ñ *still* don't fit in -- until we come together. There is no question in my mind why Isabela and Topiltzin had to connect.

But, ultimately in self-examination, when we play the steel drums, paint African Madonnas, and hang golden crosses from the necks of Gangsta rappers, we have to ask ourselves, "who's conquered whom?"

"That is", comments Carrasco, "the question at the heart of La Otra Conquista. I didn't mean to answer it... just ask it." True, far from a Strum and Drang approach, the question is presented with neither lecture, anger, nor judgment.

Like us, it just...is.

Diana Díaz

To view a trailer, and screening information, visit [www.theotherconquest.com](http://www.theotherconquest.com)

