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Don Quixote in America

Jacqueline Stevens^{1,2}

On Parables

Many complain that again and again the words of the wise are merely parables [Gleichnisse] but useless in daily life and this alone is all we have. When the wise man says: “Go across” [Gehe hinüber] he does not mean that one should go across to the other side, which one could accomplish without further ado if the result were worth the journey; but he means some fabulous beyond [sagefates Drüben], something unknown to us, something which even he cannot designate more precisely [näher], and which therefore cannot help us here at all. Actually, all these parables are merely saying that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and that we knew already. But what we have to struggle with every day, those are other things.

Thereupon someone said: Why do you resist? Should you follow the parables, then you would yourselves become parables and with that already free of your daily labors.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality; in parable you have lost.

—Franz Kafka, tr. Charles Bernheimer¹

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This essay reviews Michael Rogin's contribution to post-colonial studies, in particular to seeing America as of a piece with a much earlier story of dangerous European fixations and cathexes.² After establishing the rationale and insights emerging from Rogin's psychoanalytic method, I sketch another way to think about Rogin's Freudian insights about the nation, narrative, and America by putting these in conversation with insights of Miguel de Saavedra Cervantes, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Franz Kafka. The essay attends especially to the tone of whimsy and irony in Rogin's readings that might lead to a more bemused appreciation of America (and the Oedipal complex) as a European instantiation of the parable, a form that, as Charles Bernheimer points out, incites and depends on the pleasures of being lost and finding home.³ Instead of reducing America to the Oedipal complex, the following pages propose mapping Freud as another conquistador who, like Moses, Christopher Columbus, and Andrew Jackson, literalized the challenges of time and place along the lines Bernheimer describes in his essay on parables in Nietzsche and Kafka: "Language is a dissimulating in-between that makes any supposed 'knowledge' of self or other purely allusive and alien. The 'overly joyful hero' [of Nietzsche] celebrates this liberating ignorance by tearing apart the spatio-temporal continuities and the stable identities dear to the man of Eros."⁴ The rhetoric of the conquistadors, rooted in chivalric romances and ridiculed by Cervantes, exemplifies precisely the spatio-temporal (dis)continuities Bernheimer, above paraphrasing Nietzsche, describes.

The mystery of other lands and peoples is premised on a continuity—the reach of Spain to new territories—that requires difference—a world beyond the homeland. These are the premises of the chivalric romances, and reach back to literature's founding, from Homer's Odysseus to Marco Polo's stories, all of which partake of the magic of discoveries reported home. Cervantes and Nietzsche find this pathetic and humorous, while Kafka's response is melancholia.

Part I

Two problems drove Michael Rogin to formulate and explore the idea of political demonology. The first was the persistence of White men mobilizing state violence⁵ against everyone else on behalf of their material interests and their nativism: "To win, in the countersubservive tradition, is to be an English-speaking white man."⁶ And the second was the tendency of his colleagues to ignore or misrepresent the causes of the above and their remedies.⁷

Rogin's antidote was to apply the Freudian case study method to American political leaders.⁸ Rather than responding to their public and self-images as

great visionaries and saviors, Rogin put everyone from Cotton Mathers to Ronald Reagan on the couch. His aim was not to treat them, but to cure his contemporaries of the stupidity and paralysis occasioned by our leaders' interpellation of Americans in the idiom of demonology, an analysis by Rogin responsive to mainstream political science as well as left political-economic critiques and conspiracy theories advanced by the fringe right.⁹

As a teacher, Rogin modeled and supported curiosity and self-doubt, and invited alternative readings.¹⁰ As the author of *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* and *Ronald Reagan the Movie*, he was more didactic. Often through the theories of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, Rogin's texts offer quasi-foundationalist assessments of leaders' statements and actions in a world divided by "reality" and "fantasy," "truth" and "delusion."¹¹ Rogin understood the problems of such an approach. Unpersuaded by social science techniques that might test and thus confirm his causal story, nonetheless he needed a theoretical framework to explain his own critical possibility if nothing else.¹² Rogin tolerated the possibility that such psychoanalytic readings could appear reductive, but pursued them because that's what the texts said and the alternatives were less helpful.¹³

Despite a commitment to a framework that might seem rigid, Rogin's epistemology is provisional and his readings supple. His purpose is to point out how political demonology had become "political reality,"¹⁴ and thus produced "intolerable truths about regression, maturity, and death in liberal America."¹⁵ These insights have helped me to maintain my own sanity while conducting research in the last few years in the American Southeast. Rogin's work was an inspiration and guide for my research on the toponyms, that is, place namesakes, as I traced the actions that led to the unlawful deportation of U.S. citizen Mark Lyttle. Mr. Lyttle was born in North Carolina and deported to Mexico, despite speaking no Spanish and having no relatives there. Consider, for instance, Lumpkin, Georgia. The desolate town adjacent Fort Benning is where the federal government sited the deportation facility holding Mr. Lyttle, and in 1829 was named in honor of Wilson Lumpkin, the Georgia representative to Congress who in 1827 drafted the Indian Removal Act.

Lumpkin titled his two-volume memoir *The Removal of the Cherokee Indians from Georgia, 1827-1841, Together with a Sketch of his Life and Conduct while holding many Public Offices under the Government of Georgia and the United States prior to 1827, and after 1841*.¹⁶ Therein Lumpkin brags of his authorship not only of the words but also the underlying legal techniques in the Act. Many of the sentiments that appear in statements by

Andrew Jackson that Rogin quotes animate Lumpkin's texts as well.¹⁷ Recalling his efforts on behalf of the Act, Lumpkin writes:

I wished to place the Indians in a permanent home, where the missionary efforts of all pious and good men—Churches, Christian Associations—might have a permanent field of labor, to carry out their good designs of Christianizing and civilizing a most interesting heathen people.¹⁸

Lumpkin went on to become Georgia's governor in 1830 and to implement the Act, extricating Indians from Christian lands and ushering through the law banning Whites from entering Georgia's Indian territories without a license. In a famous Supreme Court case, *Worcester v. Georgia*, 31 U.S. 515 (1832) the Supreme Court overturned the ban, violated primarily by outraged Christian ministers and neighboring communities. Thus, President Jackson's decision not to enforce the Court's decision overruling the Georgia ban, which Rogin discusses,¹⁹ was closely coordinated with the man whose vision of purification and removal persists in today's Lumpkin, Georgia.

Rogin theorizes this continuity: "The paranoid style in American politics, as Richard Hofstadter has labeled it, goes back to responses to Indians. . . . The identity of a self-making people, engaged in a national, purifying mission, may be particularly vulnerable to threats of contamination and disintegration. The need to draw rigid boundaries between the alien and the self suggests fears of too dangerous an intimacy between them."²⁰ Governor Lumpkin's legacy was Georgia's forced removal and extermination of its Indian population, while Mr. Lyttle knew the town of Lumpkin as the place where his sworn statement of U.S. citizenship was ignored by the government agency supposedly devoted to his security and that had seen tens of thousands of its residents uprooted and sent to foreign lands.²¹

Part II

The possibility of finding unexpected traces of the past in current American narratives, to which Rogin's work attends, alerted me to think further about the longer history of which contemporary deportations are the latest chapters, and to keep my eyes open for figures such as Wilson Lumpkin. Perhaps the most important lesson was drawn from Rogin's appreciation of the imbrication of America's past with European history. America, he writes, needs to be seen "not simply as a fragment of Europe with delusions about dangerous differences it did not contain but as a European fragment whose history was formed by the encounter between Europeans and peoples of color already present in or brought to the New World."²² Rogin's materialist

analysis of the origins of European capitalism in the European colonization of the Americas, as well as his readings of the Biblical literature unifying this project, led me to search for more clues that would explain our present in this past, and eventually to move away from Rogin's Freudian metonyms for their elucidation.²³

Consider, albeit schematically, what it would look like to pursue these insights about demonology by considering America's conquest and settlement in the context of a political, economic, and, especially, literary history whose tropes (monsters, Amazons, treasure, magical islands, triumphant knights) resonate as powerfully in the tales of conquest as they do in tales of Freud's family romance. Instead of Freud and Marx, one might refer to the insights of Cervantes and Nietzsche, Cervantes for ridiculing in the character of Don Quixote the absurd narratives reported home from the conquistadors in the West Indies, and Nietzsche for telling us more about how this absurdity works.

Such an approach favors conceptualizing a new relation to self-discovery. Instead of the Freudian Oedipal complex referencing an ontological and repetitious parent-child relation, why not read the Sophocles trilogy as a parable of the quest for identity and self-realization in a mortal condition paradigmatically defined by two universal, inescapable experiences? First, the Moebius strip of beginnings and endings, that is, the condition of after/before//before/after, the two terms analytically distinct and impossible without their pairing. Second, the world of (1) one's senses, and (2) somewhere else, again the two parts of the same condition of immediacy and foreignness instantiated by Bernheimer's parables. What if Freud, in the name of the *Wissenschaft* popular for his age, was so literal minded that he confused the stories about fathers and sons, mothers and sons, and brothers and sisters, with their causal role in human development? Bernheimer writes, "The struggles of Joseph K. in *The Trial* and K. in *The Castle* are not battles against overwhelming paternal authorities but rather futile efforts to construct such authorities so that confrontation and battle can take place. Both K.'s strive to invest unity, presence and unequivocal meaning in what is dispersed, fragmented, duplicitous."²⁴ What if tragedy is not the horrors and fears specific to the family romance, but rather the intergenerational community devised by law to be one (but not the only) medium through which people establish and dramatize their existential questions and discoveries? In other words, instead of a world in which parents and children are the substrate of our fantasies, what if the relations of authority between parents and children are one more metaphor in a metonymic chain whereby paternal authority is one and not the most important fantasy, much less the originary one (and likewise for the unity and individuation emblemized by the breast)?

This is not the place to explain, much less defend, the reasoning behind this suggestion. But I will explore how this alternative is hinted at in Rogin's work and where it leads. Rogin points out the importance for understanding contemporary politics of the colonial, largely English, chapters of American history. But the period of the Spanish empire is, I think, of equal importance to our self-knowledge today. The conquistadors were not discovering America, but materializing their fantasies in their encounters with the peoples they slaughtered, the landscapes and geography they shaped, and the letters and narratives they sent home.

Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is a testament to the above. Part One of *El Ingenioso Hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* was first published in 1605 and Part Two ten years later. Its relevance to understanding the self-referentiality and materialization of narrative and also America as part of European history cannot be overstated. The novel has been a favorite of numerous prominent writers, including Marx, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Freud, authors especially attentive to the interplay and synergies among fantasy, narrative, power, and violence. Cervantes was a tax collector and had himself applied for various posts in the America of the Spanish empire.²⁵ Familiar with the ways of the imperial court and the widely discussed travelogues of the conquistadors and governors, the popular romance chivalry novels they were channeling, and of course with the Inquisition, Cervantes performs the absurdity of our performances.

For instance, conceding his companion's observations that the man Don Quixote thought an emperor had crowns and sceptres of "tinsel and copper," Don Quixote elaborates,

nor is it fit the decorations of the stage should be real, but rather imitations, and the resemblance of the realities, as the plays themselves must be; which, by the way, I would have you love and esteem, Sancho, and consequently, those that write, and also those that act them; for they are all instrumental to the good of the common wealth, and set before our eyes those looking-glasses that reflect a lively representation of human life; nothing being able to give us a more just idea of nature, and what we are or ought to be, than comedians and comedies. . . . Just such a comedy . . . is acted on the great stage of the world, where some play the emperors, others the prelates, and, in short, all the parts can be brought into a dramatic piece; till death, which is the catastrophe, and the end of actions, strips the actors of all their marks of distinction, and levels the quality in the grave.²⁶

This fakeness Quixote initially references was not simply a result of the display of ostentatious items to impress and humble the public, but was of a piece with the literary images generated through the patronage of the nobility

and monarch, as they sought to keep up with the ideas of grandeur they and their stories helped create.

While in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries there were many sources from which European adventurers in the New World might draw for their accounts, the most widely read and believed were the exploits of the knight Amadis de Gaul and his son Esplandian, as penned, though not entirely authored, by Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo.²⁷ The first paragraphs of *DQ* make clear Cervantes's view of these stories: "And observing that the valiant Amadis, not satisfied with the bare appellation of Amadis, added to it the name of his country, that it might grow more famous by his exploits, and styled himself Amadis de Gaul; so he, like a true lover of his native soil, resolved to call himself Don Quixote de la Mancha."²⁸ Through the protagonist of *Don Quixote*, who was mad because of literature, Cervantes mocked the knights of the Spanish realm and beyond.

The chivalry romances featuring Amadis de Gaul and similar characters are a mainstay of the medieval era across Europe.²⁹ These stories of false beginnings and unknown destinies invite us to reflect on their relation to Homeric tales and, in turn, to connect these with the wanderings of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, as well as the boundaries set and surpassed by consciousness and narrative, realizing Bernheimer's insights on the parable, as "for Kafka, both the inward, psychological realm and the metaphysical world beyond can only be intimated as an always-elsewhere to which one can never cross over and to which no comparative structure can be thrown across."³⁰ Rogin's insights on the American imagination, which in *Ronald Reagan, The Movie* he describes as having a "gothic sensibility," connect his world to that of Cervantes.³¹ The Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines "gothic" as "of or relating to a style of writing that describes strange or frightening events that take place in mysterious places." The definition seems apt for Rogin's description of Reagan's views of Armageddon: "Reagan has said more than once that he believes literally in scriptural forecasts of climactic struggle between the forces of light and darkness."³² Likewise, the cowboy films and roles Reagan relished also reproduce the world of knights and their chivalry tales.³³ As well, consider *Fathers and Children*: "Jackson believed that secret powerful forces corrupting the morals of the country had to be 'unmasked.' He attacked 'that vile hypocrisy, and deceit, that often lurks beneath a fair exterior which is cloathed with power.'"³⁴ The white knight in shining armor will sight and maim all malevolent forces across the land, even those pretending to be allies but in fact forces of darkness. Numerous similar examples of these tropes appear throughout Rogin's oeuvre. Perhaps the most dramatic is that of Albrecht Dürer's 1505 engraving "King Death on Horseback," an image of which is superimposed on the portrait of Andrew Jackson on the

Fathers and Children jacket cover, a direct acknowledgment of the connection between the world of the medieval knights and the story of America.

Conclusion

Kafka, too, was engaged by Don Quixote, and he wrote a short parable on Sancho Panza, one-upping Cervantes, by making Don Quixote a figment of Kafka's Sancho's imagination.³⁵ As a result, it is not through chivalric romances or even Cervantes's fiction, but through Kafka's reimagination that Don Quixote is (im)possible, and Sancho a creative genius who deploys his artistry to effect his own sanity and someone else's madness ("in so diverting from himself his [Sancho's] demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that this demon thereupon set out, uninhibited on the maddest exploits").³⁶ What holds true for parables, according to Cervantes, Nietzsche and Kafka may hold true for Freud as well, that is, that his symptoms may be symptomatic of something more interesting than an accidental Foucauldian epistemological break. Thus we might consider reading Freud's metonymic analyses of sexuality for their insights on history, literature, and language with the thought that they are but one narrative by which we materialize our self-knowledge and insecurities thereof, and not expressions of the symbolic in opposition to embodied drives.

Rather than the stability of the universal ego that persists across time and place, why not, with Nietzsche, recognize this phenomenon as held and developed by the narrative form itself? What if the characters and motifs in the travelogues are not metaphors for the Freudian psyche, but the Freudian psyche is instead one approximation of what it means to inhabit a world of borders, of boundaries that are not an externalization of internal ones but accidents of *Heimat* (home) and the *Unheimliche* (the uncanny) in a world that can never be seen and understood at once?

Bernheimer says that Kafka reveals the enticements and frustrations of the unknown and impossible by parable.³⁷ But perhaps a more specific account would be to focus on the character of his parables as paradoxes, indicating Kafka's experience of being trapped by clichés imposed on us by language's inevitable metaphors. Don Quixote, then, can be seen as exemplifying different possibilities of truth or sincerity, discovery, and legend(arity). And indeed Kafka personally voiced a version of this fantasy for himself. He writes, "If I'd been given the choice to be what I wanted, then I'd have chosen to be a small Eastern Jewish boy in the corner of the room, without a trace of worry, the father in the centre discussing with other men, the mother, heavily wrapped, is rummaging in the traveling bundles . . . and in a few weeks one will be in America."³⁸

The phrases and ideas above appearing in this essay are by no means original but a synthesis of numerous writers, from Plato to Heidegger and many contemporary sources not usually put in conversation with an ontologizing Freud. This alternative seems worth considering for three reasons. First it provides a means of moving away from the rhetoric of institutionalized psychiatry, which itself rationalizes state violence, to wit Freud's concept of a "death wish" responsive to World War One (1920) and his exchange with Albert Einstein.³⁹ Working through the human condition paradigmatically expressed in the riddle posed by the Sphinx to Oedipus—the answer embodying the self-identity of a creature conscious of her beginnings and demise—suggests moving beyond the professional therapeutic context and situating our communities directly in the complexities of story-telling, that is, discouraging the Freudian scene's individual-level normalizing and deadening dyad, be it in the context of psychoanalytic or social work, and inviting a range of encounters exploring exploration—from the Latin *explōrāre*, "to cry (*plōrāre*) out (*ex*) at, e.g., the sight of land or enemy."⁴⁰

Second, a more expansive, Nietzschean, engagement with narratives thematizing the self's borders in time and space recognizes the obvious benefits from new possibilities of a queer home (instead of family, including non-heterosexist family alternatives), and empowering those who are continuing to destroy the old ones. This broader terrain of inquiry decenters the Freudian family. Rather than redress confusions arising from a structure unaware of its compensatory origins,⁴¹ this new terrain allows for an understanding of individual-level frustrations clearly situated in narratives of kinship, country, and religion. And third, thematizing self-discovery beyond the family romance eases the burdens of a totalizing narrative but encourages notice of those bearings of a consciousness alert to its specific limits of our stories and our senses. The recognition of universally shared limits, albeit experienced individually, enables a communicable meta-structure for orienting us as to how we orient ourselves, thus providing a theoretical or therapeutic vocabulary for sharing thoughts, feelings, and artistic or technological responses.

While Freud himself would doubtless prefer to remain Moses to his people, he might not be surprised by a new reading of his adventures. Freud learned Spanish so that he could read *Don Quijote* in the original, and thereafter communicated jokes and puns in the vocabulary of Cervantes with "an old school friend, Silberstein."⁴² One might wonder, if Freud had developed the private language for studying the Oedipus drama with Silberstein and set up a society for the study of *Don Quijote*, would our parables be better? Or would parable become dogma and be overtaken by the disciplines of truth? Rogin writes, "The more one ascribes power to dominant political and cultural forms, the more one requires a place to stand outside them."⁴³ But the lessons of Don

Quixote are somewhat different, suggesting the impossibility of their escape, and the possibility of not just an author brilliant enough to turn tragedy into comedy but that of an audience that would incite this and play along.

Notes

1. Bernheimer offers an excellent translation, in "Crossing Over: Kafka's Metatextual Parable," *Comparative Literature* 95 (1980), 1256.
2. For suggestions on a prior draft many thanks to Laura Green, James Martel, and Keally McBride, and to the Guggenheim Foundation for supporting in 2013–14 the larger project of which this is a part.
3. Bernheimer, "Crossing Over."
4. *Ibid.*
5. For references to "state violence," see *Ronald Reagan, The Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), 51, 65, 66 and throughout.
6. *Ibid.*, 279.
7. *Ibid.*, 75.
8. *Ibid.*, 285, 293.
9. *Ibid.*, 274.
10. After expressing his objection to my dissertation chapter asserting that sex roles are a symptom of pregnancy envy, Rogin added, "I think you're wrong to say it's the womb, but everyone thinks I'm crazy for talking about the breast." He was not backing down on his position. I understood him to be acknowledging his tolerance of what he took as my error and allowing me to persist in it, no doubt hoping I would figure this out myself and sooner rather than later.
11. *Ibid.*, 27, 138, 277 and throughout.
12. *Ibid.*, 282.
13. "Liberal Society and the Indian Question," *Ronald Reagan*, 140–41; "The more one ascribes power to dominant political and cultural forms, the more one requires a place to stand outside them" (282).
14. *Ibid.*, 134.
15. *Ibid.*, 135.
16. 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1907).
17. Rogin has a reference to Lumpkin, from his correspondence with Andrew Jackson, from a collection of the latter. In the essay "Liberal Society and the Indian Question" in *Ronald Reagan, The Movie*, Lumpkin's name is misspelled and Rogin seems not to have pursued research on him. When reading Lumpkin's memoir I was so disappointed not to be able to share with Rogin my appreciation of the history to which he had alerted me, including the passage in which Lumpkin complains that Jackson, toward the end of his presidency, was insufficiently zealous in executing the removal policy.
18. Lumpkin, *Removal*, vol. I, 44.
19. *Fathers and Children*, 223.
20. "Ronald Reagan," 50.

21. For more on the facts and law on the deportation of U.S. citizens, see Jacqueline Stevens, "U.S. Government Unlawfully Deporting U.S. Citizens as Aliens," *Virginia Journal of Law and Social Policy* 18, no. 3 (2011).
22. Rogin, "American Political Demonology: A Retrospective," 277.
23. The framework Rogin uses relies on foundational paradigms, but largely as illustrative and without much investment in proving them correct. Rogin wants to stand outside the system he critiques but he also recognizes the hubris and relies on these theories more out of pragmatism—they seem to explain stuff—than a commitment to a transcendent metaphysics along the line Freud himself pursued.
24. Bernheimer, "Crossing Over," 1263.
25. Donald McCrory, *No Ordinary Man: The Life and Times of Miguel de Cervantes* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006).
26. Trans. P.A. Motteux, *Don Quixote* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Press, 1993), 429.
27. For details on their publication history, see Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo, *The Labour of the Very Brave Knight Esplandian*, series Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Introduction by Thomas Little, 20 and notes.
28. *Ibid.*, 12.
29. Jennifer Goodman, *Chivalry and Exploration, 1298-1630* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer); and see also Stephen Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Raleigh; the Renaissance Man and his Roles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).
30. Bernheimer, "Crossing Over," 1265.
31. "Ronald Reagan," 36.
32. *Ibid.*, 36–37.
33. *Ibid.*, 38.
34. *Fathers and Children*, 258.
35. Kafka, "The Truth about Sancho Panza," in *The Complete Stories and Parables* (New York: Schocken Books, 2012).
36. *Ibid.*, 430.
37. For a complementary reading of Kafka's "textual conspiracies," see James Martel, *Textual Conspiracies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
38. Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, ed. Willi Haas (New York, 1962), 196, quoted in Mark Harman, Translator's Preface, *Amerika The Missing Person* (New York: Schocken Books, 2008), xvi.
39. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," [1920], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey vol. 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 7–64; Albert Einstein and Freud, "Why War?" in the S.E., vol. 22 (1933), 197–215.
40. Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: MacMillan, 1958).
41. Jacqueline Stevens, "Pregnancy Envy and the Politics of Compensatory Masculinities," *Gender and Politics*, 1 (2005): 265–96; Stevens, *States Without Nations: Citizenship for Mortals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 152–74.

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42. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 1 (New York: Basic Books, 1953), 164. Jones writes, “No one in Freud’s family knew how he came to have such a good knowledge of Spanish,” *Ibid.*
 43. “American Political Demonology: A Retrospective,” 282.

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