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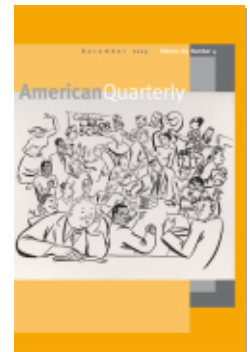
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## **Mexican Indigenismo, Choctaw Self-Determination, and Todd Downing's Detective Novels**

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## Mexican Indigenismo, Choctaw Self-Determination, and Todd Downing's Detective Novels

James H. Cox

Todd Downing, one of the most prolific and most neglected American Indian writers of the twentieth century, began his career as an author of detective fiction after working as a tour guide in Mexico during the summer months of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Downing traveled, like his contemporaries Will Rogers (Cherokee), John Joseph Mathews (Osage), Lynn Riggs (Cherokee), and D'Arcy McNickle (Confederated Salish and Kootenai), in a postrevolutionary Mexico that was in the process of incorporating indigeneity into a unified national identity. In eight of the ten novels that he published between 1933 and 1945, Downing appropriates and refigures this *indigenismo*—the official celebration of Mexico's indigenous history and culture—to reveal evidence of the modern indigenous people obscured by *indigenismo* discourse. These indigenous people thrive in a world in which two postcolonial settler governments, the United States and Mexico, are in conflict with each other while also maintaining against indigenous populations within their borders the colonial practices of the European empires from which they secured their own independence.<sup>1</sup> In his novels, Downing makes three extraordinary discoveries in the context of mid-twentieth-century American Indian literary and activist histories. He detects a persistent though enervated European colonial presence and a more potent neocolonial invasion of Mexico by U.S. tourists, academics, journalists, smugglers, drug addicts, kidnappers, and criminal venture capitalists. He also identifies a contested yet successful indigenous Mexican resistance to this invasion, as well as to the oppressive policies of the Mexican state. Finally, Downing's literary model of self-determination in novels such as *The Cat Screams* anticipates the anticolonial discourses of the American Indian civil rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the literary renaissance that attended it.

## Atoka, Norman, Ardmore: The Local Roots of Downing's Mexican Mysteries

George Todd Downing was born in 1902 in Atoka in the Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory, to Maude (Miller) Downing and Samuel Downing. In “A Choctaw’s Autobiography,” published in 1926 in a Tulsa periodical called *The American Indian*, Downing observes:

My father has always been a power among the Choctaws. During the Spanish-American war he was a member of Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders, serving the incomparable “Teddy” as interpreter with the Choctaw and Chickasaw members of this organization. He was a member of the statehood delegation to Washington that secured statehood for Oklahoma. At present he is a member of the Choctaw Tribal Council and is taking a leading part in the efforts to wrest from the United States government the fulfillment of promises which have never been fulfilled and to prevent further encroachment upon the rights of the Indians.<sup>2</sup>

Downing published this autobiography almost twenty years after the final stages of allotment culminated in Oklahoma statehood in 1907 and during an era characterized by what Choctaw anthropologist Valerie Lambert calls “the very high level of attenuation of Choctaw tribal relations and structures.”<sup>3</sup> Downing presents his father as a political activist working as a member of an official Choctaw government body to maintain those Choctaw tribal relations and structures and to defend all American Indians from a settler colonial government.

Downing took the legacy of his father’s political activities quite seriously. “A Choctaw’s Autobiography” includes the outline of a political platform that Downing develops in greater detail first in his novels and then in a history of Mexico called *The Mexican Earth* (1940). Downing begins the autobiography by providing what he calls a “brief summary of the history of the tribe of American Indians in which I am proud to claim membership—the Choctaws.”<sup>4</sup> After asserting himself as a Choctaw, Downing argues that American Indians should adopt a pan-Indian, anticolonial politics:

Their fatal fault and weakness in the past has been this inability to cement an effective union on racial, instead of tribal grounds, a consistent weakness which rendered unavailing their efforts to resist the encroachments of the white man. This still remains the hardest single obstacle in the path of those Indians who are not [*sic*] attempting to hold the United States government—a government dedicated to liberty and the proposition that all men are created equal—to the promises made to their fathers. It seems to the writer that it is indeed high time we Indians thought more of ourselves as Indians and less as representatives of a single tribe.<sup>5</sup>

Though Downing rejects tribal specificity as a political position in his autobiography, he still calls it a Choctaw's, rather than an American Indian's, life story and publishes it in a magazine edited by Lee F. Harkins, a Choctaw writer, printer, editor, publisher, and rare book collector.<sup>6</sup> He continues, too, to identify himself to a broad audience as Choctaw throughout his life.

Downing wrote "A Choctaw's Autobiography" while he was a twenty-four-year-old MA student at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. After graduating from high school in Atoka, he entered the university in 1920, earned his BA in 1924, and continued as a graduate student with his work in indigenous and colonial Latin American literature and history. By the time he completed a master's thesis on Florencio Sánchez, a Uruguayan dramatist, Downing was an accomplished intellectual who spoke five languages (Choctaw, English, French, Italian, and Spanish). After completing his graduate degree, he remained at the university as a Spanish instructor in the Department of Modern Languages. He was also a reviewer of books in French, Italian, and Spanish for *Books Abroad*, the forerunner of *World Literature Today*, for which he also served as advertising and then business manager from 1928 to 1934; a voracious reader of U.S., English, Mexican, and Latin American history and literature; and an equally avid reader of mystery novels by Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Dashiell Hammett, Dorothy Sayers, Ellery Queen, and Wilkie Collins, whose collected works are part of the library of more than fifteen hundred volumes that Downing donated to Southeastern Oklahoma State University.

Organized crime and murder in Mexico became Downing's specialties, but he began to write his first detective novel following a local act of violence that threatened the diplomatic ties between the United States and Mexico: the murder of two young Mexican college students by deputy sheriffs in Ardmore, Oklahoma, about seventy miles from Atoka, on June 8, 1931.<sup>7</sup> Emilio Cortes Rubio and Salvatore Cortes Rubio, both relatives of Mexico's president, and Manuel Garcia Gomez were traveling together from colleges in Atchison, Kansas, and Rolla, Missouri, to Mexico City when they stopped in Ardmore. The conflicting testimonies of the survivor, Salvatore Cortes Rubio, the law enforcement officers, and the eyewitnesses frustrate attempts to reconstruct the sequence of events that culminated in the murders. The men with badges had, however, the legal and cultural sanction to tell the most authoritative, if perhaps not the most plausible, narrative. After stopping to question the men, Deputy Sheriffs William E. Guess and Cecil Crosby claimed "that the shooting occurred after the two youths had drawn guns, although they did not fire;

that Crosby disarmed one youth; that the other emerged from the car with a gun protruding from a blanket thrown about his shoulders; that thereupon Guess fired, killing the student; that the first youth, who had been disarmed, produced a small pistol, and Guess fired on him.”<sup>8</sup> Representatives at the highest levels of the Oklahoma, U.S., and Mexican governments corresponded in a diplomatic language of earnest regret as opaque as the specific circumstances of the fatal confrontation that early summer morning.<sup>9</sup>

Following the murders in Ardmore, Downing wrote his first novel, *Murder on Tour* (1933). After its publication, Downing resigned from the university and moved to New York to become a professional writer. While he lived in New York and then Philadelphia in the 1930s and 1940s and worked for several advertising agencies, including the famous firm N. W. Ayer and Son, Inc., Downing achieved, as an American Indian fiction writer, a level of success matched only at the end of the twentieth century by writers such as Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) and Sherman Alexie (Spokane and Coeur d’Alene).<sup>10</sup> Downing had the powerful New York publisher Doubleday Doran promoting him as a Choctaw author to a broad, international audience that appears to have relished his novels.<sup>11</sup> Doubleday Doran published eight of his ten mysteries for its Crime Club and advertised his novels in the *New York Times*. The same newspaper reviewed at least eight of those novels and made announcements about Downing’s career.<sup>12</sup> Four of those novels were reprinted at least once in the United States, and at least thirteen editions or translations of Downing’s novels were published in European countries.<sup>13</sup>

Three novels were also reproduced in other popular or mass culture formats. Downing’s second novel, *The Cat Screams* (1934), was published in England by Methuen, translated into Italian, reprinted in the United States by the Popular Library, and adapted by Basil Beyea into a Broadway play, also called *The Cat Screams*, in 1942.<sup>14</sup> The *New York Times* reported on the play during every step from pre-production to its opening on June 16, 1942, at the Martin Beck Theatre and its closing on June 20, 1942, after seven shows.<sup>15</sup> Downing’s third novel, *Vultures in the Sky*, was printed in 1935 in four successive issues of *Short Stories Twice a Month*, a pulp magazine published by Doubleday Doran, then printed in its entirety on December 15, 1935, in newspapers such as the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as the featured Sunday novel of the week. It was then reprinted in England by Methuen (1936), in *2 Detective Mystery Novels* magazine in the spring of 1950, and in translation in Finnish, Spanish, and Italian. The Italian translation was reprinted as late as 1977. Downing’s fifth novel, *The Case of the Unconquered Sisters*, was reprinted in

*Detective Novel* magazine in August of 1943. Three of Downing's other novels were reprinted, and *The Lazy Lawrence Murders* earned mention in *Time*.<sup>16</sup>

Downing maintained a presence in local histories, such as Mary Marable and Elaine Boylen's *Handbook of Oklahoma Writers* (1939), fellow Choctaw Muriel Wright's *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* (1951), and *Tales of Atoka County Heritage* (1983); national publications such as Marion E. Gridley's *Indians of Today* (1936; 1947); and reference guides such as Bill Pronzini and Marcia Muller's *1001 Midnights: The Aficionado's Guide to Mystery and Detective Fiction* (1986). A. S. Burack even included an essay by Downing, along with contributions by such luminaries as Dorothy L. Sayers and S. S. Van Dine, in the edited collection *Writing Detective and Mystery Fiction* (1945). Following the reprinting of Downing's *The Mexican Earth* in 1996 by the University of Oklahoma Press, however, we have not assessed the place of his mystery novels in twentieth-century American Indian literary history. The scholarly neglect of Downing is at least curious in light of the critical scrutiny of popular culture productions about indigenous people by nonindigenous artists.

Downing's novels show an author interested in much more than mining incidents of lethal force by the local police for plot material.<sup>17</sup> The indictment of a culture of U.S. violence in these novels includes an unwavering indignation at the treatment of Mexican citizens, especially the indigenous population, and an incisive critique of the sustained, criminal abuse of Mexico by a U.S. neocolonizing force that augments and, Downing suggests, rivals the already present settler colonialism at work in Mexico for sheer brutality and contempt for indigenous life.<sup>18</sup> By also engaging Mexican national discourses of *indigenismo*, Downing sustains in his novels a two-pronged, binational reproach to settler-colonial aggression.

### **Postrevolutionary *Indigenismo*: The Mexican Context of Downing's Mysteries**

The family politics that Downing inherited from his father shaped his appropriation of these Mexican national discourses as well as indigenous Mexican history and culture. Following the end of the Mexican revolution in 1920, *indigenismo* made indigeneity a much more significant feature of national identity in Mexico than in the United States. Though according to most commentators the contribution of indigenous people to *indigenismo* was negligible, *indigenismo* as a Mexican national discourse provided Downing with a public space in which he could imagine indigenous people as modern political and

cultural actors.<sup>19</sup> Historians Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis describe the origins of *indigenismo*: “In 1921, on the heels of the twentieth century’s first social revolution, the Mexican government launched a nationalist movement celebrating the culture of Mexico’s *mestizo* and indigenous peoples and recasting national history as a popular struggle against invasion, subjugation, and want.”<sup>20</sup> While American Indians in the United States continued in the early twentieth century to experience the rejection of their place both in history and modernity, “the revolutionary version of history” in Mexico, assert Vaughan and Lewis, “placed great emphasis on Mexico’s indigenous foundations and contemporary cultures.”<sup>21</sup> In his study of two celebrations of independent Mexico’s centennial in 1921, Rick López provides a more dramatic reading of this context: “According to the emerging nationalist rhetoric first articulated by Manuel Gamio in 1916, to be truly Mexican, one had to be part indigenous or at least to embrace the idea that indigenosity was vital to the national consciousness. Rejection of Mexico’s contemporary indigenous peoples and cultures, *de rigueur* before the revolution, was now criticized as a mark of unpatriotic xenophilia.”<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, during the era of the Society of American Indians from 1911 to 1924, American Indians had a much more uncertain place in national U.S. discourses. At that time, explains Phil Deloria, “according to most American narratives, Indian people, corralled on isolated and impoverished reservations, missed out on modernity—indeed, almost dropped out of history itself. In such narratives, Native Americans would reemerge as largely insignificant political and cultural actors in the reform efforts of the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>23</sup> In the United States, as Shari Huhndorf demonstrates in her analysis of the racial politics of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle, the national ideal was white racial purity. Huhndorf assesses Chicago’s White City and Seattle’s Cascade Court as the spatial and material expressions of the whiteness that indigenous racial difference threatened to attenuate.<sup>24</sup> Postrevolutionary Mexico offered, therefore, an attractive alternative for American Indian authors such as Downing. Neither history nor modernity in Mexico had been settled, as it had according to dominant narratives in the United States, so decisively in favor of non-Native people.

Yet *indigenismo* in Mexico had U.S. roots. López argues of the centennial celebrations that “both reveal the extent to which the turn toward an ‘ethnicized’ or ‘Indianized’ definition of Mexico’s national culture did not flow inevitably out of Mexico’s historical experience, as is generally assumed, but

instead resulted from a distinct movement led by cosmopolitan nationalists inside and outside the government . . . in a profoundly transnational context.”<sup>25</sup> Two cosmopolitan nationalists, Adolfo Best Maugard and Manuel Gamio, were principal organizers of these celebrations: Best of the Noche Mexicana in Chapultepec Park and Gamio of the Exhibition of Popular Arts. Best and Gamio were influenced by the time they spent in the United States with Franz Boas, the anthropologist who launched a critique of evolutionary anthropology in the 1880s and 1890s while arguing that “race, language, and culture were not now and probably never had been closely correlated.”<sup>26</sup> In addition to his long affiliation with Columbia University and his influence on such American Indian intellectual-activists as Arthur C. Parker (Seneca), Archie Phinney (Nez Perce), and Ella Deloria (Yankton Dakota), Boas served in 1910 as the first director of the Escuela Internacional de Antropología in Mexico. Boas’s former student Gamio was “the founder of postrevolutionary *indigenismo*” and one of the leading *indigenistas*—a non-Native promoter of *indigenismo*.<sup>27</sup>

These centennial celebrations, the federal policies, and the national discourse of *indigenismo* were symptoms of the non-Native and *mestizo*-identified dominance of Mexico. Nonindigenous Mexican people were the primary actors in the creation of a postrevolutionary national identity. Put another way by historian Alan Knight: “The Indians themselves were the objects, not the authors, of *indigenismo*.”<sup>28</sup> The *indigenistas* argued among themselves about how to incorporate indigeneity into a unified Mexican national identity. For example, Best and the prominent intellectual and bureaucrat José Vasconcelos thought that Native material culture required interpretation and improvement by nonindigenous artists, while Gamio and Gerald Murillo, the painter, writer, and centennial celebration organizer known as Dr. Atl, wanted to maintain the “authenticity” of indigenous arts. Dr. Atl saw, observes López, “indigenous artisans as primitive producers isolated from modern commercialization.”<sup>29</sup> In this context, characterized by postrevolutionary nationalism and *indigenismo*, López explains, “the masses can contribute only passively to the nation, through their instincts and intuition, not through their self-determined cultural or political genius.”<sup>30</sup> In López’s assessment of the Mexican context, there is an echo of Deloria’s observation that Native people in the United States were “largely insignificant political and cultural actors” in the 1920s and ’30s.

Downing was most interested, however, in the distinct indigenous contexts in Mexico that *indigenismo* made part of public conversation. In Mexico, the Zapotec leader Benito Juárez was a national—Mexican—hero. Popular and official histories asserted that the Yaquis in Sonora, who are separated from



Yaquis in Arizona by the Mexico-U.S. border, had never been conquered. Though the Yaquis had experienced removal to Yucatan in 1908, a year after Oklahoma statehood, they were still resisting militarily in the 1920s. This history of military resistance led to the creation of an anomaly in indigenous Mexican life. There were no reservations in Mexico, but in the late 1930s President Cárdenas “recognized the authority of Yaqui governors and set aside 450,000 hectares as Mexico’s only tribal land grant.”<sup>31</sup> Cárdenas had also started his land reform program that involved the redistribution of land owned by the large haciendas to indigenous communities. Indigenous people were not silent in this era, either. Jan Rus describes assertive Maya politics and cultural revitalization in Chiapas in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He observes that, to distinguish this era from the revolution of the 1910s, “the years from 1936 to the beginning of the 1940s are sometimes referred to in Chiapas as ‘la revolución de los indios.’”<sup>32</sup> Thus, *indigenismo*, particularly in its most radical formulations in the 1930s, created a public space for indigenous Mexicans to make some political demands.<sup>33</sup> That public space was also available for appropriation by American Indian writers who witnessed the brief, less dramatic reform era in the U.S. that began with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934.

### **White Villains and Red Herrings: Indigenous Mexico in Todd Downing’s Novels**

From within the context of a politicized Choctaw history, Downing claims in his novels this public space created by indigenous Mexican history and culture and official Mexican *indigenismo*. A detective novel such as *The Cat Screams* becomes in Downing’s hands an investigation into both the disregard for Mexican lives represented by the deputy sheriffs of Ardmore and the strategies that indigenous Mexicans develop to resist or evade similar acts of state-sponsored violence. Many of Downing’s characters view indigenous Mexican people as superstitious and latently violent, even as frequently on the threshold of armed revolution, but Downing consistently exposes this figuration of indigenous people as a colonial red herring, as an alibi for non-Native people that draws the attention of readers away from the crimes that non-Natives are committing. Downing only once in his ten novels delivers to readers an indigenous criminal, a young man in “The Shadowless Hour” (1945) named Jesus, who kills both his mother’s drug dealer and a zealous Christian missionary who discovers evidence of his guilt. Instead, indigenous and nonindigenous Mexicans are the

frequent victims of crimes committed by visitors, immigrants, and expatriates from various European countries and north of the border; crime is the primary export to, rather than a product of, Mexico in Downing's novels.

In an era in the United States of menacing cinematic Indians, indigenous Mexican peons obstructing modernization, and anti-Mexican hysteria fed by the Great Depression, the novels represent an extraordinary public challenge to the dominant U.S. views of indigenous Americans and indigenous and nonindigenous Mexican nationals as well as to the contemporary (and still prevailing) narrative about the flow of violent crime in North America from the south toward the United States.<sup>34</sup> As two postcolonial settler nations vie for power—economically, politically, narratively—and the neocolonial agents of the United States descend on Mexico, Downing finds indigenous people in a vulnerable position but with resources available that help them to escape the fray. *Indigenismo* made indigenous Mexico part of a daily conversation in which indigenous Mexicans had a limited role. By identifying in a novel such as *The Cat Screams* the strategies that contemporary indigenous Mexicans use to maintain their communities as the battle rages around and against them, Downing appropriates *indigenismo* and forces Native voices, beliefs, and bodies into that conversation. This reconstituted Mexican national discourse, a Choctaw's *indigenismo*, anticipates the program of Choctaw self-determination that Downing embraces near the end of his life.

Criminality in *The Cat Screams* has the same European and U.S. origins as it does in his first and third novels, *Murder on Tour* (1933) and *Vultures in the Sky* (1935). In *Murder*, a U.S. couple smuggle indigenous Mexican artifacts into the United States and commit murders to hide their illicit business. This theft of indigenous Mexican cultural productions by U.S. criminals is an apt metaphor for *indigenismo*, the intellectual and bureaucratic theft of Mexican indigeneity by a predominantly nonindigenous and *mestizo* Mexican elite. In *Vultures*, a kidnapper flees south Texas on a train to Mexico in disguise as a businessman interested in purchasing mining leases from indigenous people. He hopes to escape prosecution in south Texas by participating in the sanctioned criminal activity of dispossessing Native people. The kidnapper murders several passengers and an indigenous porter to avoid detection, and he finds unexpected cover when a French citizen and dangerous Catholic militant also traveling to Mexico City consumes the attention of the authorities. A Yaqui platoon of soldiers eventually captures the militant, a Cristero aligned with the Catholic counterrevolutionaries who, in the Cristero War from 1926 to 1929, fought the Mexican government's efforts to curtail the Church's power. To any members

of a U.S. audience predisposed to see either dangerous Mexican immigrants undermining the U.S. economy or childlike Mexican peons, the image of Yaqui soldiers marching with a Catholic Cristero as their prisoner would likely have been disconcerting. It also might have pleased some American Indian readers experiencing the legacy of what Osage-Cherokee author George Tinker calls in his book of the same name the “missionary conquest” of North America. The image is a surprising reversal of the dominant representations of indigenous Mexicans in the United States and Mexico as well as an assertion that indigenous Mexicans have an active role to play in a modernizing Mexico.

Downing writes a detailed story of a modern—and revolutionary—indigenous Mexico in *The Cat Screams*. In the novel, the suicides of several women haunt the U.S. colony in Taxco in the southwestern Mexican state of Guerrero. The deaths can be traced to the drug dealing of Madame Céleste Fournier, the daughter of French immigrants, including a father who was an administrator in Maximilian’s court during the French occupation of Mexico from 1862 to 1867.<sup>35</sup> Fournier’s home is an alien colonial space: “Madame Fournier during her occupancy installed modern plumbing and called the house a pension, so that the discriminating tourist might distinguish it from the many native *casas de huéspedes* in the town.”<sup>36</sup> Downing then confirms that we should read Fournier, one of the few non-U.S. villains in his canon, as the sign of an unassimilated European presence in Mexico, for “on Bastille Day she always hung out the Tricolor and invited her guests to drink champagne with her.”<sup>37</sup> Her current guests comprise a rogue’s gallery of U.S. citizens that includes Donald Shaul, a predatory tabloid journalist from New York; Dr. R. L. Parkyn, an archaeologist from Chicago looking for potentially lucrative jade deposits; and Gwendolyn Noon, a New York stage actress and drug addict. These visitors are the privileged beneficiaries of a caste system that structures a colonized indigenous Mexico dominated by Europeans and their descendants. While the guests at the pension are all non-Native visitors from the United States, the members of the staff are all indigenous Mexicans: Esteban, the *mozo*, or servant; Micaela Guerrero, the cook, who shares a name with the Mexican state in which she lives and works; and Maria, the *criada*, or waitress.

Yet Fournier is an infirm sign of French colonial aggression and European or nonindigenous dominance, and the recognition of her vulnerability is crucial to Downing’s search for possible sites of indigenous resistance. Benito Juárez, the Zapotec land reformer and president of Mexico, led the successful fight against the French and had Maximilian executed. Though the nonindigenous residents of Fournier’s fragile world fear indigenous Mexicans, they do not take seriously

the possibility of a similar assault on them by indigenous revolutionaries. *The Cat Screams* begins with a translation from the Spanish of an article from the Mexico City *Mundial*. The introductory headings to the newspaper article, which has a dateline of June 18, 193— from Taxco, announce “FOREIGNERS IN PANIC” and link the aforementioned suicides of U.S. citizens to a “*Revival of Primitive Practices*.” The author of the article foments anti-indigenous hysteria that could be read as a refraction of the anti-Mexican hysteria in the United States in the 1930s: “Queer rumors were current about the plaza. That native witch doctors still ply their trade among the ignorant persons of Taxco is a well-established fact, and one of these, a woman famous in her trade, is being sought by the police. These *curanderas*, the ignorant ones believe, can injure or drive insane any person, provided they possess an article of his clothing.”<sup>38</sup> As in *Murder on Tour* and *Vultures*, Downing uses indigenous Mexican beliefs and practices in *The Cat Screams* to imbue the atmosphere with fear and to suggest a possible source of the crimes.<sup>39</sup> Readers soon learn that Micaela Guerrero, the aforementioned cook, is the “woman famous in her trade,” but the close proximity of these “primitive practices” to the colonial center never manifests as a dramatic display of anticolonial or domestic revolution. Instead, again as in *Murder on Tour* and *Vultures*, the threat of indigenous violence with origins in those revived “primitive practices” is a red herring, and the gravest threat to Fournier is her own involvement in the criminal underworld sustained by visiting U.S. nationals.

Indigeneity, however, does threaten Fournier’s world, though less sensation-ally and more strategically than the newspaper article suggests. The novel’s title alludes to the practice of *nagualism* by many indigenous groups in Mesoamerica. Antonio de Herrera and Bernardino de Sahagún refer to nagualism in their sixteenth-century *historias*, while Daniel G. Brinton’s *Nagualism: A Study in Native American Folk-lore and History* (1894) is the first attempt to produce a comprehensive study.<sup>40</sup> The *nanahualtin* (singular *naualli* with alternate spellings such as *nagual*, *nahual*, *nauaal*, and *nawal*) are either animal guardians or “masters of mystic knowledge, dealers in the black arts, wizards or sorcerers” who have the power to transform into animals.<sup>41</sup> Though often brutally suppressed by the Catholic Church, *nagualism* was still common when Brinton wrote his study.

Indigenous revolution is a real possibility in *The Cat Screams*, though the simulation of hysteria in the discourse of sensational journalism about a revival of primitive magic helps to keep *nagualism*, the potential driving force of the revolution, hidden in plain sight. The newspaper article foments anxiety while

disparaging the source of it and discouraging critical investigation. Downing introduces *nagualism* as part of the narrative thread about Esteban, the *mozo* who begins the novel bedridden and hidden from the view of readers and the other characters. Madame Fournier describes Esteban's mysterious illness to Hugh Rennert, a customs agent for the Department of the Treasury and the primary detective in eight of Downing's ten novels. In her description of the illness, Fournier mentions that the screaming of the titular Siamese cat, Mura, frightens Esteban. She tells Rennert that after the cat screamed, "He said something in a low voice, something that I could not understand. Then he turned his face to the wall."<sup>42</sup> When the local government places the pension under quarantine in response to Esteban's undiagnosed illness, the novel begins to function as a pseudo-captivity narrative with Esteban and his mysterious illness as the figurative captors of the visitors from the United States. Throughout the novel, Esteban's illness then shadows the central mystery: the deaths that start at the pension soon after Rennert's arrival.

The solution to the mystery of what Esteban says to himself requires knowledge of indigenous languages that only Professor Parkyn has. Parkyn represents a recurring character type in Downing's novels: an academic with some appreciation for indigenous history and culture but with a concomitant belief in his superiority. He is not overtly villainous, but he is a U.S. *indigenista*: he values indigenous history and material culture rather than indigenous people. Parkyn consults Aztec manuscripts for clues that will lead him to jade deposits, but he views indigenous religious beliefs as superstition. Downing's cast of academics from the United States studying and at times exploiting indigenous Mexico includes Dr. Xavier Radisson, a linguist of indigenous languages and the murderer in Downing's sixth novel, *The Last Trumpet: Murder in a Mexican Bull Ring* (1937).<sup>43</sup> Radisson's Mexican counterpart is the drug dealer and former university professor of Mesoamerican studies Don Evaristo Montellano in "The Shadowless Hour." The representations of Radisson, the linguist-cum-murderer, and Montellano, the professor-cum-drug dealer, make legible the violence of intellectual *indigenismo*.

As he fights his illness, Esteban refuses to speak in Spanish and, therefore, constantly reminds readers of the indigenous presence at the spatial center of the pension. Strategic linguistic separatism and bilingualism are the primary tools of cultural preservation and anticolonial resistance in the novel: the indigenous characters speak colonial languages, Spanish, English, and French, but only one nonindigenous character speaks Nahuatl. Fournier finally identifies the word—*nagual*—that she failed to hear earlier but that Esteban repeats

frequently in his conversations with Micaela. Fournier shares the information with Rennert, who plans to take the word to Parkyn for translation. Downing defers for many chapters the meeting between Rennert and Parkyn, but in those chapters he consistently references *nagualism* and the connection between *nagualism* and the screaming cat. Rennert attempts, for example, to secure the guests' fingerprints by writing *nagual* on a sheet of paper then asking each guest about the word with the expectation that they will hold the paper while they ponder his question. Downing stages two mysteries simultaneously in this scene: as Rennert tries to solve the overt mystery of who is killing the guests, Downing considers the covert mystery of how indigenous people can survive and thrive in the twentieth century. They can thrive, Downing proposes, by exploiting the settler colonial state's inability to control indigenous knowledge. As the only character who can translate the word *nagual* or understand the implications of Esteban's use of it, Parkyn is also the only character whom the settler colonial state could use to infiltrate the indigenous world. He is, however, interested only in jade.

To extend the life of the mystery, Downing obstructs Rennert's attempts to discuss *nagualism* with Parkyn until two-thirds of the way through the novel. At that point, Parkyn gives Rennert a lecture that reads like a condensed version of Brinton's study and provides an authoritative guide for reading the indigenous knowledge—and the indigenous resistance to linguistic and religious domination—that structures the novel. Parker concludes his history of the levitating, shape-shifting *naualli* who protect their communities from sorcerers and natural disasters by observing: "Under torture, many of the natives confessed to such practices and the Spaniards had great difficulty in stamping out the cult, which had for its avowed object the elimination of Christianity in Mexico."<sup>44</sup> Like an orthodox *indigenista*, Parkyn dismisses these indigenous beliefs as superstition and indigenous people as primitive. Yet the three members of the indigenous staff seize upon the possibility that a malevolent *nagual* has attacked Esteban after the doctor who practices Western medicine fails to diagnose his illness accurately. Despite Parkyn and Rennert's doubts about *nagualism*, the failure of Western medicine creates a fissure in the empirical and rational foundation of the detective novel genre and opens a space for the application of indigenous religious knowledge to the mystery.<sup>45</sup>

Through that fissure emerges the covert mystery that Downing is investigating: the status of internally colonized indigenous people in the twentieth century and the strategies available to them to maintain or revitalize their communities. Esteban's ravaged body represents the state of this dominated

indigenous world; to identify the disease, however, is to begin the process of finding a cure. Left with the mystery of why Esteban is dying, Micaela, a healer or *curandera*, applies her religio-medico knowledge to the case and offers a diagnosis of witchcraft.<sup>46</sup> This diagnosis introduces other mysteries: has a *nagual* transformed into Mura to attack Esteban, and what are the motives for the attack? The violence directed against Esteban initially appears to have indigenous origins: the native witch doctors to which the journalist refers in the prologue are *nanahualtin*, practitioners of *nagualism*, and, therefore, the most obvious suspects. Yet the possibility of indigenous against indigenous violence is another red herring; the indigenous characters are too marginal to be the villains. As S. S. Van Dine insists in his influential essay “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories,” one of the rules that govern modern detective novels requires that the culprit plays a prominent role in the story.<sup>47</sup> Downing cites Van Dine in his own essay about writing detective novels and suggests to beginning authors that “there is a premium for originality in tales of crime . . . [b]ut this originality must lie within certain prescribed bounds, and until the writer is familiar with these he is venturing among pitfalls if he gets off the beaten path.”<sup>48</sup> Charles Rzepka elaborates on this unique characteristic of detective fiction: “The concept of fairness is alien to nearly every other form of literary realism, where we rarely assume the author to be ethically delinquent when he or she withholds certain facts, feeds us misinformation, or is mistaken him- or herself.”<sup>49</sup> Downing strategically leaves the *nanahualtin* at the margins of the narrative; they are not the practitioners of the mystic arts that have attacked Esteban and threaten to destroy Fournier’s carefully arranged domestic colonial space.

Downing provides many suspects who might be the witch attacking Esteban and the indigenous world that he embodies. The most obvious suspects include the drug-dealing Fournier, who murders to cover her tracks, or the neglectful doctor who misdiagnoses Esteban, or even Parkyn, the condescending, opportunistic archaeologist. However, Downing most explicitly connects Gwendolyn Noon to the cat, the *nagual’s* familiar in the context of Micaela’s diagnosis of Esteban’s illness. Noon sets the violence in motion by deciding not to marry Stephen Riddle, the son of an Oklahoma oil man, and instead comes to Taxco to get a quick divorce from her secret first husband, and her drug use leads to two murders. She also shares physical characteristics with her familiar. Downing describes Noon as explicitly white—her fingers, dress, face—offset only with the red of her fingernails. When Rennert approaches Noon with the intention of confronting her about a chloroform attack on Fournier, he

watches her carefully: "As if conscious of his scrutiny she quickly let her hand fall to her side and her fingers clenched themselves with a febrile movement. Their crimson nails seemed to be digging into the white skin. *Curiously*, he thought, *like the painted claws of a cat*."<sup>50</sup> When he finally confronts Noon, her eyes begin to twitch like a cat, and, "incredibly, her white face seemed to have grown whiter."<sup>51</sup> The screaming cat is a *nagual*, the avatar of malevolent magic—the tabloid journalism and celebrity obsession that worships whiteness, the morphine addiction that leads to suicide and murder—that originates with and is most clearly exemplified by Noon.<sup>52</sup>

Fournier's illicit drug trade and the rampant drug addiction fed by her dealing reinforce *nagualism* as a key to a covert mystery and to Downing's search for evidence of indigenous Mexican resistance. Brinton's study includes an overview of the intoxicants used by practitioners for spiritual insights: *peyotl* or peyote; the seeds of the *ololiuhqui* or *coaxihuitl*; and the bark of the *baal-che* that makes a drink called by the Mayas *yax ha*, first water, and by the Spanish *pitarilla*. While the use of intoxicants can produce spiritual insight, the potential abuse of the power gained from these insights makes *nanahuatlín* dangerous. The drug use by bourgeois Anglo American and French Mexican women is, too, an abuse of privilege that makes them dangerous to themselves as well as to others: Fournier murders Shaul and Riddle to prevent them from exposing her other criminal activities; Noon chloroforms Fournier and leaves her to suffocate to death while she searches desperately for Fournier's morphine stash, and then she pulls a gun on Rennert; and drug addicts continue to commit suicide when the quarantine on Fournier's pension obstructs access to their supply. Most dramatically, a young indigenous man of the Mexican class of working poor lies dying throughout the novel while members of the U.S. privileged class self-destruct.

A scene in which Downing parodies what Phil Deloria calls "playing Indian" in his study of the same name confirms the connection that Downing encourages readers to draw between Noon and the neocolonial U.S. presence in Mexico figured as a dangerous supernatural power. After Noon chloroforms Fournier but fails to find the morphine, she disguises herself behind a jade mask of the Aztec god Xipe as she returns to her room. Parkyn identifies Xipe as "the god of sacrifice by flaying," which, in turn, explains the fright of the waitress, Maria, when she witnesses Noon holding the mask in front of her face.<sup>53</sup> Noon's travesty of indigenous religious belief is a compelling representation of a long history of colonial criminality that in *The Cat Screams* culminates in the absurdity of a drug addict disguising her identity behind a tiny mask.



The mask carries another meaning equally germane to the mystery of Esteban's illness and revelatory of the anticolonial resistance at the heart of the mystery. Parkyn explains that "those who were suffering from diseases of the skin were believed to be under the protection of Xipe."<sup>54</sup> Prior to Noon's appropriation of Xipe in order to hide her criminal activities, Micaela takes the mask in an effort to draw on Xipe's power to protect Esteban. Micaela's theft of the mask potentially implicates her in the murders. As he summarizes the case, however, Rennert exonerates her: "The cook had nothing to do with these deaths. . . . She escaped at the first opportunity, knowing that she would be under surveillance and not wanting to run the risk of another encounter with the police. Further than this, however, she has no connection with this case."<sup>55</sup> Micaela Guerrero, whose last name translates as "warrior" and who takes her first name from the archangel who leads the Christian heaven's armies, evades the authorities like one of her *curandera* ancestors, Maria Candelaria, described by Brinton as a famous *nagual* who led an indigenous revolution in Chiapas in 1713 and escaped after the revolution failed.<sup>56</sup> This indigenous woman is not a suspect in the murders at the pension, though the police consider her responsible for several deaths linked to her medical practice as a *curandera*. Downing suggests that indigenous people and their cultural beliefs and practices are always under surveillance. In the case of *The Cat Screams*, however, a powerful indigenous woman whose name invokes sacred warfare maintains those beliefs and practices while Western medicine surveys the repercussions of its failures: Esteban's death and the other deaths made possible by the misdiagnosis that trapped Fournier's guests in a quarantine.

Downing does not foreground indigenous epistemologies, as many of his literary descendants do, but *nagualism* becomes for him a means of conveying an anticolonial critique of the U.S. presence in Mexico and identifying indigenous languages and spiritual traditions as a resource for resisting that presence. Downing asks readers to recognize *nagualism's* crucial presence in his literary practice and in indigenous Mexican communities; *nagualism* as Downing presents it in the novel has unequivocal literary, ideological, and political value. *Nagualism* is a sign of untranslatable indigenous difference and a separatist indigenous cultural and political position. When Esteban first whispers the word *nagual* to Micaela, Downing reveals a separate indigenous religious world still inaccessible to colonial, neocolonial, and settler colonial authorities. Fournier overhears but cannot understand. This indigenous difference is inflected by modernity: Downing presents Micaela, Maria, and Esteban as members of a servant class that uses indigenous Mexican spiritual traditions to navigate an

international tourist industry. The adaptation of *nagualism* to this world is unsuccessful in the case of Esteban, who dies of acute appendicitis. Yet as the nonindigenous world feeds on itself with drug abuse, suicide, and murder, and the infirm colonial agent, Madame Fournier, kills herself with arsenic to avoid arrest, the indigenous archangel warrior, Micaela Guerrero, escapes, survives, and lives to continue her fight. She is an unfamiliar figure in the discourse of *indigenismo*: an indigenous actor adapted to the modern world as well as living in and interpreting it through an indigenous religious worldview.

Downing's focus on Mexico is unusual but not anomalous in American Indian literary history. Will Rogers, who was born into a prominent Cherokee family in 1879, was the most famous celebrity in the world in the 1920s and 1930s. He traveled frequently to Mexico, too. Though he rarely mentions indigenous Mexicans, he consistently condemned the United States for interfering in the affairs of its southern neighbor. John Joseph Mathews and D'Arcy McNickle also visited Mexico. From October 1939 to August 1940, Mathews spent a year in Mexico on a Guggenheim Fellowship, and Mathews and McNickle attended the first Inter-American Congress on Indian Life in Patzcuaro, Michoacán, Mexico, in 1940. McNickle's 1954 novel *Runner in the Sun* is a reimagined Inter-American Congress on Indian Life with indigenous people exclusively as the actors. In addition to a narrative model of the peaceful establishment of new, healthy American Indian nations, it is an emphatic appropriation of *indigenismo* and an equally emphatic assertion of autonomous indigenous political expression. Cherokee dramatist Lynn Riggs, also a frequent traveler to Mexico, stages in *The Year of Pilar* (c. 1935–1938) the contemporary indigenous Mexican, or, more specifically, Mayan revolution that exists as a covert but real threat in Downing's *The Cat Screams*. His satire of a failed counterrevolution by *hacendados* in *A World Elsewhere* (c. 1935–1939), a companion play or sequel to *Pilar*, confirms that the possibility of armed anticolonial resistance and dramatic social change for indigenous peoples in Mexico was quite real for Riggs.<sup>57</sup>

Todd Downing sustained in his writing, with the exception of his eighth and ninth novels, an explicit condemnation of colonial and neocolonial practices in Mexico. For American Indian writers, the 1930s immediately preceded what Chad Allen characterizes as “an important preparatory period of indirect opposition to dominant discourses that attempted to direct an indigenous minority ‘self-determination’ on nonindigenous terms.” Of the authors deploying these “relatively quiet” narrative strategies, Allen asserts that “they questioned the assimilationist orthodoxy of the day and prepared the way for the more

explosive tactics of the indigenous minority renaissance of the late 1960s and 1970s.”<sup>58</sup> Like the narrative strategies used by the authors under Allen’s consideration, such as Ruth Muskrat Bronson (Cherokee) and Ella Deloria, the challenges to colonial dominance in Downing’s novels are quiet and indirect. Yet between his ninth and tenth novels, he published *The Mexican Earth*, a well-reviewed history that celebrates Mexico as an unconquered collection of indigenous nations, posits explicit connections between those nations, the Choctaws, and other indigenous nations in the United States, and makes frequent and far more direct assertions of indigenous Mexican strength in the present.<sup>59</sup> By writing the history of Mexico as a statement of the continuous centrality of indigenous people to the life of that nation, Downing produces another articulation of Native-centric writing that clearly anticipates the work of civil rights-era writers.

### Downing Detected

The investigation of the murders on June 8, 1931, yielded conflicting testimony about what happened between the moment that Deputy Sheriffs Guess and Crosby emerged from their car and the fatal shooting of Emilio Rubio and Manual Gomez. The newspaper articles conveyed the details of an enduring mystery to the reading public: the deputy sheriffs claimed to have identified themselves as officers of the law and even to have displayed their badges, while the survivor, Salvatore Rubio, asserted that they did not; the young men were reported to have mistaken the deputy sheriffs for bandits, while Deputy Sheriff Guess, according to an Associated Press story on the front page of the *New York Times*, “believed he had encountered desperadoes”;<sup>60</sup> an eyewitness gave testimony that Deputy Sheriff Crosby pointed to Emilio Rubio and said, “I got that boy,” while Crosby called the accusation a “falsehood.”<sup>61</sup> The trial did not reconcile any of these discrepancies, but the basic outline of events remains clear: the deputy sheriffs killed two men and were arrested, charged, tried, and acquitted. The United States then sent thirty thousand dollars as reparation to the victims’ families in Mexico. This dissatisfying but perhaps unsurprising outcome motivated Todd Downing to write novels in which he investigates the place of indigenous people in a world in which the international relationship of two postcolonial settler nations evokes the long history of conflict between the U.S. settler government and the indigenous domestic dependent nations within its borders. Downing’s detective, however, always reconstructs the specific details of the mystery, and the U.S. citizens who per-

petrate crimes against Mexican nationals—indigenous and nonindigenous—always face punishment.<sup>62</sup>

During this difficult era for the Choctaw Nation, Downing followed what Lambert identifies as one of four typical patterns of Choctaw urban migration: following birth in the Choctaw Nation, this type of migrant goes to an urban area or a series of urban areas before returning permanently to the Nation.<sup>63</sup> While Downing lived abroad from the Choctaw homeland, he looked to Mexico for examples of indigenous strategies to resist settler governments as well as to maintain and revitalize tribal nation traditions. He was still thinking of the murders in Ardmore when he wrote *Murder on the Tropic* (1935), in which a young man named Esteban Flores returns to his family's old hacienda in Mexico from the college that he attends in Kansas. In the same novel, an indigenous mother, Maria Montemayor, covertly uses the hacienda's water supply to sustain the flowers in the plaza under which her son has been buried. As he contemplates Montemayor's devotion to the flowers and her son, Hugh Rennert thoughtfully observes:

The flowers . . . were here before men. . . . [Maria] stood, the embodiment of the Mexico that stands self-sufficient by the side of the road while conquering armies pass by, to be replaced in days or years or centuries (it doesn't matter) by other armies under other banners. *Along the paved highway to the east*, Rennert thought, *will come another, more dreadful army, with billboards and refreshment stands and blatant automobile horns, but Maria and her kind will stand when they have passed by.*<sup>64</sup>

*The Mexican Earth* is a celebration of this self-sufficient and explicitly indigenous Mexico. Downing was also a model of this patient self-sufficiency, which N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) characterizes in *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the novel that initiated the American Indian literary renaissance, as the “long outwaiting” of the residents of the Jemez Pueblo.<sup>65</sup>

His detection of this indigenous world in Mexico had a strong impact on his own contributions to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Downing returned permanently to his homeland in 1951 after teaching one year as an assistant professor of Spanish at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland.<sup>66</sup> He cared for his parents and lived with his fellow Choctaw citizens more than a decade under the threat of the termination of their tribal nation.<sup>67</sup> In the early 1970s, Downing published his last two works: *Chabta Anompa: An Introduction to the Choctaw Language* (1971) and *Cultural Traits of the Choctaws* (1973). Both works were assigned as part of the Choctaw Bilingual Education Program (CBEP) to which Downing devoted the last years of his life. This program was

in part the product of his ability to see through the many strata of internal and U.S. neocolonial oppression in Mexico and to detect a thriving indigenous world there. The goals of the program were:

- (1) to help each child to develop a positive self-concept—to be proud of himself and his heritage, and to have a positive attitude toward the language or languages familiar to him;
- (2) to help each child to progress rapidly toward mastering standard English as well as the other tool subjects;
- (3) to encourage teachers to learn to recognize individual differences, particularly those rooted in language and culture, and to make these differences contribute to the total learning process.<sup>68</sup>

Downing's participation in the CBEP as an administrative assistant and "writer, translator, and professor" coincided with a moment of activism that galvanized the resurgence of the Choctaw Nation.<sup>69</sup> The federal government responded to the resistance of culturally and politically invigorated Choctaws by repealing the Choctaw termination act one day before it would have ended the federal trust relationship between the United States and the Choctaw Nation on August 25, 1970.<sup>70</sup>

## Notes

1. The United States and Mexico are postcolonial in the most orthodox use of the term by first-generation postcolonial theorists such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, the coauthors of *The Empire Writes Back* (New York: Routledge, 1989). See Chadwick Allen, *Blood Narrative* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 28–36, for a critique of orthodox postcolonial theory's failure to account for indigenous people.
2. Todd Downing, "A Choctaw's Autobiography," in *The American Indian*, December 1926, 10, in *The American Indian, 1926–1931*, ed. J. M. Carroll and Lee F. Harkins (New York: Liveright, 1970).
3. Valerie Lambert, *Choctaw Nation: A Story of American Indian Resurgence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 60.
4. Downing, "Choctaw's Autobiography."
5. *Ibid.* "Not" is a troubling word in the context of what Downing is saying. "Now" is more consistent with the message of this passage and the entire text.
6. *The American Indian* also had a predominantly American Indian staff.
7. Charles J. Rzepka makes a distinction between detective fiction, "any story that contains a major character undertaking the investigation of a mysterious crime or similar transgression," and a story of detection, "in which the puzzle element directly engages the reader's attention and powers of inference." Downing's mysteries are both detective novels and novels of detection. This genre, Rzepka explains, "[dominated] . . . the interwar best-seller lists." See Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2005), 12 and 154.
8. L. H. Woolsey, "The Shooting of Two Mexican Students," *American Journal of International Law* 25.3 (1931): 514.
9. For documents from the Hoover administration related to the case, see *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=22701> and <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=23149> (accessed February 25, 2010).

10. After his stint at N. W. Ayer and Son, Inc., Downing took a position in 1947 on the copy staff of the advertising firm Gray and Rogers. The *New York Times* reported in 1949 that Downing then secured an appointment as a “special consultant on Latin American advertising” at Weightman Advertising in Philadelphia. He was, simultaneously, the editor of *Panamericanismo*, which was published by the Pan American Association in the same city. See “Advertising News and Notes,” *New York Times*, Mar. 28, 1947, 39; and “Advertising News and Notes,” *New York Times*, June 8, 1949, 44.
11. The *New York Times* mentions that Downing was Choctaw at least three times. See “Books-Authors,” *New York Times*, Mar. 5, 1940, 26; “Napoleon’s Letters,” *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1934, BR17; “Book Notes,” *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1934, 7. The Popular Library reprint of *The Cat Screams* (New York: Popular Library, 1945) also identifies him as Choctaw on the back cover.
12. See “Book Notes,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1935, 11.
13. The translations of Downing’s work include Dutch, Finnish, Italian, and Spanish editions. The British publisher Methuen published editions of six Downing novels.
14. Wolfgang Hochbruck indicates that *The Cat Screams* was also translated into Swedish and German. I have not been able to find these editions of the novel. See Hochbruck, “Mystery Novels to Choctaw Pageant: Todd Downing and Native American Literature(s)” in *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*, ed. Arnold Krupat, 205–21 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1993).
15. For a review of *The Cat Screams*, see Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930–1969* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 215.
16. “Murder in May,” *Time*, June 9, 1941, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,795384,00.html> (accessed February 25, 2010).
17. This cursory view is reproduced in Marion Gridley, ed., *Indians of Today* (Chicago: Millar, 1936), 43, and *New York Times*, March 17, 1940, 95.
18. See Allen, *Blood Narrative*, 7–10, for a discussion of the distinctions among kinds of indigeneity and colonial practice.
19. See Lucy Maddox, *Citizen Indians: Native American Intellectuals, Race and Reform* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), for the main influence on this argument about Downing claiming a public space from which to speak.
20. Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, introduction to *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940*, ed. Vaughan and Lewis (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 1. *Mestizos* are people of indigenous and Spanish heritage. The identification has specific social and political connotations in Mexico, too.
21. Vaughan and Lewis, *Eagle and the Virgin*, 8. As Maureen Konkle demonstrates in *Writing Indian Nations: Native Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827–1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), nineteenth-century American Indian leaders were already challenging the exile of their people from history by writing American Indians into it.
22. Rick A. López, “The Noche Mexicana and the Exhibition of Popular Arts: Two Ways of Exalting Indianness,” in *The Eagle and the Virgin*, ed. Vaughan and Lewis, 36.
23. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 6. The SAI was the first reform organization founded and run by American Indians.
24. See Shari M. Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), 46–70.
25. López, *Noche Mexicana*, 23–24.
26. George W. Stocking Jr., ed., *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911: A Franz Boas Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 4.
27. Stephen E. Lewis, “The Nation, Education, and the ‘Indian Problem’ in Mexico, 1920–1940,” in *The Eagle and the Virgin*, ed. Vaughan and Lewis, 177.
28. Alan Knight, “Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910–1940,” in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 77. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin discuss the appropriation of indigeneity by settler colonists in *The Empire Writes Back*.
29. López, *Noche Mexicana*, 38.
30. *Ibid.*, 41.
31. Lewis, “Nation, Education,” 190.
32. Jan Rus, “The ‘Comunidad Revolucionaria Institucional’: The Subversion of Native Government in Highland Chiapas, 1936–1968,” in *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham, N.C.: Duke University

- Press, 1994), 266–67. However, Rus argues that the policies of the Cárdenas administration ultimately “led to a more intimate form of domination” (267). See also Rus, 270–72, for a description of some of the cultural revitalization efforts and for specific examples of Maya resistance to interference by outsiders.
33. See Knight, “Racism, Revolution,” 85 and 92.
  34. See Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), for an account of the hysteria and deportations. Gilbert G. González explains that the peon was for U.S. authors “synonymous for Indian,” and the peon as an obstacle to modernization became “conventional wisdom” by 1930. See González, *Culture of Empire: American Writers, Mexico, and Mexican Immigrants, 1880–1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 80–81.
  35. See Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 387–401.
  36. *The Cat Screams*, 12. *A casa de huésped* (guest house) consists of a room in a private home.
  37. *Ibid.*, 12.
  38. *Ibid.*, 3.
  39. See, for example, *Murder on Tour* (New York: Putnam’s, 1933), 73; and *Vultures in the Sky* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1935), 66–67.
  40. Downing owned *Rig Veda Americanus: Sacred Songs of the Ancient Mexicans, with a Gloss in Nahuatl* (1890). For the references in Herrera and Sahagun, see Daniel G. Brinton, *Nagualism: A Study in Native American Folk-lore and History* (Philadelphia: MacCalla & Company, 1894), 4–5 and 5–6.
  41. Brinton, *Nagualism*, 5.
  42. Downing, *The Cat Screams*, 20.
  43. Other academics include Professor Horace Starns Bymaster in *Murder on Tour*; Professor Garnett Voice, Professor Fogarty, and the archaeological students Karl Weikel and John Clay Biggerstaff in *The Case of the Unconquered Sisters* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1936); and Professor Gulliver Damson in *Night Over Mexico* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1937).
  44. Downing, *The Cat Screams*, 210.
  45. See Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, specifically 15, for an assessment of the detective genre’s debt to the modern sciences.
  46. The assessment of colonialism as witchcraft anticipates Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1977) in which a contest between witches leads to the creation of brutal European colonizers.
  47. S. S. Van Dine, “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories,” in *Writing Detective and Mystery Fiction*, ed. A. S. Burack (Boston: The Writer, 1945), 198.
  48. Downing, “Murder Is a Rather Serious Business,” in *Writing Detective and Mystery Fiction*, 182.
  49. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 15.
  50. Downing, *The Cat Screams*, 251 (italics in original).
  51. *Ibid.*, 252.
  52. While Noon is the primary locus of *nagualism*, the colonial avarice that motivates Parkyn’s attempted pillaging of indigenous Mexican wealth also feeds the malevolent magic that is attacking Esteban. Indeed, *The Cat Screams* was inspired by Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), a detective novel that is, according to John R. Reed, an indictment of the crimes of British imperialism. Reed, “English Imperialism and the Unacknowledged Crime of *The Moonstone*,” *Clio* 2.3 (1973): 281–90.
  53. Downing, *The Cat Screams*, 206.
  54. *Ibid.*, 207.
  55. *Ibid.*, 294.
  56. Brinton, *Nagualism*, 35–36.
  57. D’Arcy McNickle, *Runner in the Sun: A Story of Indian Maize* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1954); for *The Year of Pilar* and *A World Elsewhere*, see Lynn Riggs, *4 Plays* (New York: Samuel French, 1947).
  58. Allen, *Blood Narrative*, 42.
  59. See James H. Cox, “Indigenous Nationhood and Intertribal Kinship in Todd Downing’s *The Mexican Earth*,” *MELUS* 33.1 (Spring 2008): 75–92, and the laudatory review of Downing’s book by the archaeologist and historian Philip Ainsworth Means, “Mexico, Its Land and Its People: A Notable History from Earliest Times with a Sympathetic and Convincing Analysis of the Problems of Today,” *New York Times*, March 31, 1940, 89.

60. "Oklahoma Deputy Kills Two Mexican Students, One Kin of Ortiz Rubio; Hoover Sends Regret," *New York Times*, June 9, 1931, 1.
61. "Two Held for Trial in Mexican Deaths," *New York Times*, June 11, 1931, 16.
62. The detective's reconstruction of the crime by analepsis is a convention of classical detective fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. See Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 19.
63. See Lambert, *Choctaw Nation*, 137–38.
64. Downing, *Murder on the Tropic* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1935), 191–92 (italics in original).
65. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 58.
66. Thank you to Maria Rose Hynson, executive secretary to the provost and dean of the college, for finding Todd Downing in the 1950–1951 *Washington College Catalog* and the 1951 Washington College yearbook, *Pegasus*.
67. See Hochbruck, "Mystery Novels," 212, for the explanation that Downing returned to Atoka to take care of his mother and father.
68. The quoted passage is from a pamphlet titled "Choctaw Bilingual Education Program." My gratitude belongs to Charles Rzepka for sharing these materials.
69. *Ibid.*
70. See Lambert, *Choctaw Nation*, 3.