The Occupation of the INBA Theater: Contesting Hegemony and Challenging Urban Meaning in Ciudad Juárez, 1990–1991

On October 5th, 1990, the front page of *El Fronterizo*, one of the three most prominent local newspapers in Ciudad Juárez, featured a three-part article with a headline that read: "Resuelto el Problema del Pronaf: J.M."^{1,2} After over a year of local controversy and logistical setbacks,³ Ciudad Juárez municipal president Jesús Macías had finally solidified its sale of the 106 thousand square meters that comprised the Zona de la Programa Nacional Fronterizo (National Border Program Zone, Zona PRONAF), to former municipal treasurer and prominent Chihuahuan businessman Leopoldo Mares Paredes. After Mares finalized the evictions of the store-owners located inside the PRONAF Commercial Center,⁴ it seemed as though the only things that stood between him and the U.S.-inspired mall that he intended to build on his newlypurchased land were the Zona PRONAF's existing structures.⁵ On May 23, 1989, the Ciudad Juárez municipal government of Jaime Bermúdez Cuarón sold a majority of land in the Zona PRONAF to Leopoldo Mares at a price of 180 thousand pesos per square meter⁶—less than half its market value.⁷ Despite protests from the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Council for Culture and the Arts), the sale included both the INBA Museum and the INBA Theater. The municipal government justified its privatization of the Zona PRONAF by citing the commercial failure of the PRONAF commercial center and artisanal market, and by lauding Mares as the only investor qualified to achieve the desired economic development of the site.

The editorial section of the same issue of *El Fronterizo* featured an article entitled "La PRONAF y la comunidad." In it, an unnamed author urged readers to shift their focus from the storeowners that Mares pushed out of the Pronaf Commercial Center to what the sale would mean for the broader Ciudad Juárez community.⁸ Not only did the INBA Theater and the INBA Museum of art grant prestige to the often-denigrated border town of Ciudad Juárez.⁹ The buildings also provided a space for local artists to host galleries, for theater and dance troupes to host performances, for fiction writers to host workshops and readings, and for elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools to host their yearly graduation ceremonies.¹⁰

The INBA Convention Center and the artistic community that utilized it became thorns in the sides of both the Ciudad Juárez municipal government and Leopoldo Mares' investment group when, on Saturday, October 6, 1990, a group of artists chained themselves to the doors of the theater in opposition to the future that Mares imagined for their cherished space. That evening, the group of artists, eventually labelling themselves the Coalición de Artistas e Intelectuales (Coalition of Artists and Intellectuals, CAI), occupied the convention center itself, spending the night in its auditorium. They kept the theater under physical occupation until May of the following year.

Since the mid-1990s, Ciudad Juárez has become a popular object of academic study due to the conditions of its maquiladoras, the rampant feminicides that take place in its peripheries (and its centers), and the violence that drug trafficking organizations have brought to the city. Though a handful of works discuss local grassroots responses to these conditions, sociologists and anthropologists tend to situate these responses within national and transnational contexts, only rarely incorporating the actions of local political institutions into their analyses. Similarly, historians and geographers tend to focus on the role that urban governance and political economy play in the shaping of Ciudad Juárez's built environment. The ways in which local grassroots movements have influenced the built environment appear in the peripheries of their analyses, if they appear at all. Both bodies of literature have almost entirely neglected the long and complex history of cultural activism in that now-infamous border municipality.¹¹

This paper forms the first part of a research project that aims to fill these gaps in both bodies of literature. While recognizing Ciudad Juárez's place within the transnational network of inter-urban competition, I restrict my analysis to the way that the city's transnationality manifests itself in the context of interactions between the municipal government and local social movements. Likewise, by situating the occupation of the INBA Theater within the history of Ciudad Juárez's built environment, I aim to demonstrate that social movements deserve a place in that history. Using the oral histories of individuals affiliated with the occupation, newspaper articles from *El Fronterizo, El Norte,* and *Semanario Ahora,* and documents from the occupation itself, and a discussion of the limits of the politics of culture that the occupation espoused.

In this essay, I interrogate the ways in which the CAI's stances on culture and urban governance in Ciudad Juárez interacted with hegemony and urban meaning in the city. The paper is divided into four sections. Using the works of Antonio Gramsci and Manuel Castells, the first section outlines the theoretical framework that guides my analysis of municipal politics in Ciudad Juárez. The second section offers a brief history of the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (National Border Program, PRONAF) and the Programa de Industrialización Fronterizo (Border Industrialization Program, PIF), both of which established the maquiladora industry, tourism, and consumption as the three main aspects of 'urban meaning' and 'economic hegemony' in Ciudad Juárez. The third section examines the municipal controversy surrounding the 'Juárez Nuevo' project in 1989 and the PRI's subsequent decline in local public opinion in order to describe the state of local ideological and political hegemony in Ciudad Juárez in the years leading up to the occupation. The final section will offer a history of the CAI before examining the way that the occupiers navigated hegemony and urban meaning in its public statements.

Hegemony, urban meaning, and urban function

Italian communist and intellectual Antonio Gramsci's most significant contribution to Marxist thought is his conceptualization of the role of the state.¹² Instead of theorizing the state as a rigid mechanism of class domination, Gramsci suggested that the state's function was rather to organize the interests of the subordinate classes such that the dominant class could claim to represent the interests of all classes within a given nation-state and thus become a 'universal class.'¹³ However, while it must make concessions in order to maintain its status as a 'universal class,' the dominant class must not compromise its interests to such an extent that it loses its dominance. This process is what Gramsci calls hegemony.

In contrast with directly coercive means of class domination, hegemony is the process through which dominant classes create and maintain 'spontaneous consent' among subordinate classes. In other words, it is the process by which subordinate classes maintain their view of the dominant class as the 'universal class.' Hegemony manifests itself in terms of what Gramsci calls a 'historical bloc', which features economic, political, and ideological aspects.¹⁴ That is, the dominant class must lay claim to the interests of the subordinate classes in the fields of politics, economics, and ideology. At the center of this process is a culture — a term that Gramsci uses to refer to 'conceptions of the world'¹⁵ — that accepts the dominant class as a 'universal class.' I

use Gramsci's theory of hegemony in this paper because it is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between state and civil society.

Manuel Castells' theory of urban change allows us to examine the dynamics of hegemony at the level of the municipality. For Castells, urban change takes place when a transformation in 'urban meaning,' a term that he uses to refer to the structural goal assigned to the city by and through the conflict between historical actors with contradictory goals and interests,¹⁶ takes place.¹⁷ The organizational mechanisms through which the city performs the goals that its historically defined urban meaning assigns to it is called 'urban function.' Because a given city's role in the international network of inter-urban competition now determines its urban meaning,¹⁸ Castells' understanding of the city is useful for establishing a relationship between a city's political economy and its form of urban governance. While I don't intend to establish a mechanical relationship between economy and governance, it is nonetheless important to note that the economic functioning of a city sets limits and exerts pressures upon the decisions of the municipal government.

If we use these two frameworks as lenses through which to examine urban governance, we see that urban meaning functions as one of the mechanisms through which the state organizes hegemony. Because urban meaning requires a culture — a conception of the world — that views city projects and initiatives as congruent with the interests of all of a city's residents, urban meaning is one of the mechanisms that the municipal government uses to maintain ideological hegemony. Likewise, because urban meaning is often determined according to the city's political economy, it is also one of the mechanisms through which the municipal government may maintain economic hegemony. Urban function may be understood as a mechanism for maintaining political hegemony, for urban function relies upon the legitimacy of the institutions

tasked with carrying out a given city's urban meaning. As such, Castells' understanding of social change ought to be understood as a transformation in a historically determined structure of hegemony. The way that the CAI navigated these dynamics in its public statements is the focus of this paper.

The Programa Nacional Fronterizo, the Programa de Industrialización Fronterizo, and urban meaning in Ciudad Juárez

The 1960s saw the introduction of two federal programs that would radically alter the economic, political, and social dynamics of Ciudad Juárez: the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (National Border Program, PRONAF), and the Programa de Industrialización Fronterizo (Border Industrialization Program, PIF). Both programs emerged as part of Ciudad Juárez politician and real estate businessman Antonio J. Bermúdez's broader plan to 'nationalize' the Mexican border economy and to effect a 'just balance' of trade between Mexico and the United States. This section discusses the key components of these two programs and the impacts that they had on urban meaning in the city.

The PRONAF was initiated in 1960 as a means for 'nationalizing' both culture and consumption along Mexico's northern frontier by "increasing the sale of Mexican goods and reducing the flow of pesos to the American side."¹⁹ Those leading the program hoped to attract investment in tourism and manufacturing in order to stabilize 'the income' and 'the economy' of the border's inhabitants.²⁰ Those responsible for administering the PRONAF embedded these cultural and economic aspirations into the built environment of Ciudad Juárez by constructing infrastructure, beautifying key sectors of the city, and purchasing land that would be made available for the construction of industrial parks and commercial centers.

The most significant physical manifestation of the PRONAF's aspirations was the

construction of the Zona PRONAF, a kidney-shaped superblock located three kilometers east of the city's historic center. The Zona PRONAF featured an artisanal market, a supermarket, the INBA Museum of Art, and the INBA Convention Center, which was inaugurated on September 12, 1964.²¹ This hyper-modern building complex was intended to portray Ciudad Juárez as a modern 'shop window' into Mexico for U.S. tourists.²²

In his biannual Report to the Nation, Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz formally announced the inauguration of *Programa de Industrialización Fronteriza* (Border Industrialization Program, PIF) in September 1965.²³ The program, a response to alarmingly high levels of unemployment along its northern border, aimed to industrialize the area in question with the help of foreign investment. Toward this end, the PIF guaranteed foreign business firms complete ownership of its products and duty-free importation of machinery and raw materials on the condition that the products be exported from Mexico and that the assembly plants, referred to as *maquiladoras*, would hire exclusively Mexican labor.²⁴ Although the institutionalization of the BIP in the form of national law would not take place until 1971,²⁵ the construction of foreign assembly processing factories along Mexico's northern frontier began almost immediately after President Díaz Ordaz expressed his approval in 1965.

These two programs paved a new path for economic development in Ciudad Juárez, one that depended entirely upon the maquiladora industry and tourist consumption. By framing both the PRONAF and the PIF in terms of an economic development that they claimed would benefit all of the city's inhabitants, real estate businessmen such as Antonio J. Bermúdez were able to establish political and economic hegemony in the city. Furthermore, insofar as these two industries became integral parts of the city's economic base, they altered urban meaning in the city such that its 'goal' became to sustain and grow both the maquiladora and the tourist industries.

Juárez Nuevo and the sale of the PRONAF: a crisis of political hegemony

Ciudad Juárez saw an influx of multinational corporations and a spike in the construction of commercial centers in the mid-1980s due to the peso devaluation of 1983.^{26,27} In response, the municipal administration of Jaime Bermúdez Cuarón initiated the Juárez Nuevo project in order to accommodate this new period of growth. The project aimed to modernize the city's economy by beautifying key sectors of the city,²⁸ improving existing roads in the center and building new ones in the periphery,²⁹ and purchasing land in the city's southwestern periphery to make way for the construction of industrial parks.³⁰ In effect, the Juárez Nuevo project aimed to build an infrastructure with which to augment transnational investment in the city. The program was not without its set of controversies. Far from the "citizen participation and social cooperation" that President Miguel de la Madrid claimed "[awoke] this program,"³¹ the municipal government implemented these aspirations by means of forced evictions,³² coerced payments to the city,³³ and backdoor dealings between Bermúdez himself and local real estate businessmen.³⁴

Furthermore, as part of both the spike in the construction of commercial centers and the wider tourism promotion plan,³⁵ the Trust that the city tasked with overseeing the Zona PRONAF sold a majority of its land to former municipal treasurer and local businessman Leopoldo Mares in order to regenerate consumption in the area on May 23, 1989.³⁶ Mares bought the land at less than half its market value and intended to demolish the existing structures in order to build a U.S.-style mall in their place.³⁷ The Zona PRONAF, which a *Diario* journalist described as a 'wolf's mouth' in 1989,³⁸ was going through a long period of recession. According to shop-owner

Enrique Savignon, sales in the PRONAF Commercial Center fell drastically in 1975 and had yet to improve.³⁹

The sale of the PRONAF was met with its own sets of controversies: claims that the municipal government made decisions without consulting the people that they would affect;⁴⁰ store-owners protesting their eviction from the PRONAF Commercial Center;⁴¹ and speculations that the sale was Bermúdez Cuarón's way of paying back a debt owed to Leopoldo Mares.⁴² These controversies — in addition to those surrounding the Juárez Nuevo project and the 1986 and 1988 elections at local, state, and national levels — put the local Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) in a precarious political position. Its ability to represent the interests of all of its constituencies — all of the subordinate classes — was failing. Thus, when activists chained themselves to the doors of the INBA Theater in the Zona PRONAF, its range of possible responses was severely constricted. Both the Juárez Nuevo project and the sale of the Zona PRONAF ought to be understood as attempts to promote the growth of the three most significant aspects of urban meaning in Ciudad Juárez: tourism, commerce, and the maquiladora industry.

La INBAsión: an 'explosive situation'

Despite protests from the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Council for Culture and the Arts), the sale of the Zona PRONAF included the INBA Theater. The nascent community of local cultural producers in Ciudad Juárez, however, had other aspirations for the space. In the weeks leading up to the theater's final scheduled event, writer Willivaldo Delgadillo and artist Francisco Alberto Hernández, prominent members of the Ciudad Juárez cultural community, put together a plan to gather a crowd to chain itself to the theater's doors on October 6, 1990. They planned to repeat this 'symbolic' occupation weekly in order to bring attention and

amass opposition to the theater's demolition. On the day of the action, however, those present decided to take this plan further, and occupied the theater indefinitely. By the end of the day, what began with five protesters chained to the theater's doors grew to a crowd of about a hundred. The occupiers refused to evacuate the theater until it was formally declared cultural patrimony of the city, and thus exempt from privatization schemes.⁴³

The demonstrators quickly put together artistic and social events that they held at the Theater in order to maintain momentum and community support. After the first month of the occupation, they also constructed a decision-making body through which to administer the occupation, which they called the Coalición de Artistas e Intelectuales. It consisted of a popular assembly that voted on organizational decisions, which a small, democratically-elected central committee called the Consejo de la Toma Pacífical del INBA (Council of the Peaceful Occupation of the INBA, CoToPaI) was tasked with carrying out. The first popular assembly meeting took place on Wednesday, November 21st, 1990.⁴⁴ At the height of the occupation, popular assembly meetings drew a crowd as large as 150 artists and community members.

On November 19th, 1990, the CAI decided to organize the Foro 'Cultura Para Todos' (Forum 'Culture for Everyone') in order to incorporate demands from the broader Ciudad Juárez community into their movement. The forum took place on February 5th, 1991. In attendance were historians, writers, artists, intellectuals and representatives from local cultural and academic, and political institutions. However, due to the internal conflict that brought the occupation to an end in May 1991, the demands formulated at the forum did not materialize. Nonetheless, the city agreed to reverse the sale of the INBA Theater and created the Consejo Municipal para la Cultura y las Artes (Municipal Committee for Culture and the Arts) — though without consulting the occupiers — in January 1990.

As one political cartoon featured in *El Norte* put it, the occupation of the theater was an 'explosive situation.'⁴⁵ That the municipal government responded to the occupation with a concession instead of with a forced eviction is telling. As such, the municipal government's response ought to be viewed as a shift in its hegemony. The rest of this paper will deal with the way that artists affiliated with the occupation navigated the political terrain described above in order to challenge urban meaning and effect this shift in hegemony.

'INBAción se escribe con V'

On October 24th, nearly three weeks after the occupation began, an article appeared in *El Norte* in which José Diego Lizárraga, director of the INBA Museum, claimed that the occupiers' demand that the theater be turned into a 'popular art academy' detracted from the movement to save the theater. Instead, he suggested, the occupiers ought to demand that the old municipal president's office be used for that purpose. He suggested that this demand stemmed from personal desires instead of political ones:

"Lizárraga highlighted also that the movement is detracting from its objective ... because [its leaders] are seeking to achieve personal gains, such as the desire to create an art academy."⁴⁶

On October 27th, Willivaldo Degadillo, writer and one of the leaders of the movement, responded to Lizárraga in a letter to the editor. He attributes Lizárraga's claim to the "divorce that exists … between institutional criteria and the diffusion of culture and the needs of our community."⁴⁷ He legitimizes this claim by citing that the desire for a popular art academy came from "those citizens who [had] given their signature of support" for the movement. He then highlights that artistic and literary workshops had already been taking place inside the INBA Theater's basement and in rooms in the theater's second floor, all of which were administered for free. As

such, he claims that in contrast to the 'personal gains' that Lizárraga suggested motivated the movement's demands:

"The occupation of the INBA has shown, not only an irregular sale, but also the lack of democratic mechanisms with which citizens may participate in the making of decisions that affect their patrimony."⁴⁸

In so doing, Delgadillo attacked not only Lizárraga's claims, but also the political hegemony of the Ciudad Juárez municipal government. By claiming that there existed a lack of mechanisms for citizen participation in municipal decision-making, Delgadillo attacked municipal government's legitimacy and its ability to represent its constituency.

While some artists wrote articles suggesting that the theater be used to promote the development of 'popular' culture, most focused on the importance and the success of already-existing cultural institutions.⁴⁹ Furthermore, while most emphasized the support that the occupation had garnered from the broader Ciudad Juárez community,⁵⁰ not one conceptualized culture as anything other than artistic production.

Take, for example, an op-ed in *El Norte* that claimed that the development of culture ought to be as prioritized as the development of commerce, tourism, and the maquiladora industry.⁵¹ The author claims that a modern society is one in which there exist participatory civil societies that are informed and prepared for civil discussion, and that the only way to create such a society is to promote culture in the form of artistic production. Otherwise, he notes, Ciudad Juárez's "backwardness and barbarism would be the principal characteristics" of its civil society.⁵² As such, not only does the author propose that culture become integrated into the urban meaning of Ciudad Juárez, but also that such participation in civil society did not yet exist.

Likewise, in an article entitled "¿qué no hay teatro?," playwright Juan Manuel Izquierdo

critiques the then-popular claim that there exists no theater in Ciudad Juárez.⁵³ Toward this end, Izquierdo outlines the successes that theater troupes such as the UACJ group, the Experimental Theater Workshop 1939, and Tetic-Tedart have had in "promoting the reputation of [Ciudad Juárez] at the national level."⁵⁴ He also emphasizes the numerous obstacles that the municipal government places before the realization of any sort of cultural performance, such as high fines and fees. In so doing, Izquierdo highlights a community that have adopted an alternative urban meaning for the city — namely, one that prioritizes the production of art over the production of a profit.

Although such an urban meaning was the primary goal of the occupation, painter Francisco Alberto Hernández made it apparent in his article, "INBAsión se escribe con V," that its ultimate aspirations were much broader. The aspirations that the occupants held entailed a collective undertaking with the purpose of improving the overall quality of living in Ciudad Juárez through artistic production.⁵⁵ Hernández described this aspiration thus:

"One can't think of bettering the quality of life through the reification of the human being; instead, we must seek the integration of all into a great common effort. The development and the growth of communities requires the strengthening of their cultural roots and the strengthening of the arts."⁵⁶

Here, Hernández relates an urban meaning that extends past culture as artistic production. It is one that views the city as a potential site for egalitarian collaboration, participation, and development.

Unfortunately, however, these radical aspirations did not make their way into the occupiers' concrete demands. The CoToPaI's manifesto, drafted shortly after the occupation began, was premised on two simple claims: first, that there existed a sizable cultural community

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in Ciudad Juárez whom the municipal government had failed to serve, and second, that the general population of Ciudad Juárez was largely excluded from participating in cultural production and consumption.⁵⁷ It attributed the first claim to what it called the 'elitism' that it claimed the municipal government practiced in its treatment of local artistic production. However, in its elaboration of the second claim, the CAI claimed that:

"The mass of the population does not participate in culture, and such is its ignorance of it that it even rejects those pieces of art that everyone acknowledges as the highest cultural and artistic manifestations."⁵⁸

As such, while the CoToPaI condemned the 'elitism' of the municipal government, it nevertheless engaged in a similar practice. It did not acknowledge that 'the masses of the population', or 'the people', practiced culture in their everyday lives. Rather, the CoToPaI established culture as a fixed ideal that only the local artistic intelligentsia was capable of distributing to the masses.

Conclusion

As noted above, the occupation of the INBA Theater ended due to internal conflict in May 1991. While some wanted to focus the CAI's efforts on putting the demands generated by the Foro 'Cultura para Todos' into action, others wanted to consolidate the theater before expanding. Though ultimately unsuccessful, the form that the CAI used to formulate their demands had the potential to create a form of urban self-governance that city residents had rarely seen in the context of political decision-making in Ciudad Juárez. Far from the corporatism, elitism, and corruption that dictated the actions of the Ciudad Juárez municipal government, the Foro "Cultura para Todos" provided a space in which anyone, at least theoretically, could take part in making decisions that affected their own lives. As Kerry Doyle demonstrates in her paper, "Pacto por la Cultura: The Power and Possibility of Cultural Activism in Ciudad Juárez," successive movements that aimed to address the question of cultural policy in Ciudad Juárez took advantage of the precedent that the CAI set in their own organizing. ⁵⁹ As such, despite its shortcomings, the occupation of the INBA Theater and the CAI formed the basis for a long history of grassroots cultural movements, most notably the Pacto por la Cultura movement of the early 2000's, that continue to this day.⁶⁰ In further research, I aim to establish and to explore the concrete connections between the CoToPaI and successive movements.

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Notes

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2 "The Problem of the Pronaf [Zone] is Resolved: Jesús Macías." Translation mine.

3 Juan Carlos M. Prado, "El avalúa al Pronaf, un regalo para Mares," *Semanario Ahora* (Cd. Juárez, Chih.), no. 139 (August 11–18, 1989), 3.

4 Rubén Villalpando, "'Los Sacaron, no se Salieron,' dice Hayen," *El Fronterizo* (Cd. Juárez, Chih.), October 5, 1990.

5 Osvaldo Hernández, "Solo dos en contra del Acuerdo del Fideicomiso," *El Fronterizo* (Cd. Juárez, Chih.), October 5, 1990.

6 M. Prado, "El avalúo al Pronaf," 3.

7 Francisco Cruz Jiménez, "El precio de venta del Pronaf es ridículo," *Semanario Ahora* (Cd. Juárez, Chih.), no. 126 (May 12–19, 1989).

8 "El Pronaf y la Comunidad." *El Fronterizo* (Cd. Juárez, Chih.), October 5, 1990. Translation mine.

9 For a history of Ciudad Juárez's notoriety in national and international discourse, see García Pereyra, Rutilio, *Ciudad Juárez la Fea: tradición de una ciudad estigmatizada* (Cd. Juárez, Chih.: Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, 2010).

10 Willivaldo Delgadillo, interview with author, Sanborns Café in Cd. Juárez, August 16, 2016.

11 There are very few exceptions to this trend. In English-language literature, see Kerry Doyle, "PACTO POR LA CULTURA: THE POWER AND POSSIBILITY OF CULTURAL ACTIVISM IN CIUDAD JUÁREZ" (Master's thesis, The University of Texas at El Paso, 2011).

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18 David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism, *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human* 71, no. 1 (1989), page number?

19 Óscar J. Martínez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez since 1848* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 117–119.

20 Antonio J. Bermúdez, *Recovering Our Frontier Market: A Task In The Service of Mexico* (México: [s.n.], 1968), 27.

21 Óscar J. Martínez, Border Boom Town, 117.

22 George F. Flaherty, "Consuming Desires: Beautification and Repatriation at Mexico's Northern Border," in *U.S./Mexico Border Spaces: Arts, Built Environments, and Landscapes*, ed. Katherine G. Morrissey and John-Michael H. Warner (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, forthcoming), 2.

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33 Castillo, "El verdadero Juárez Juevo," 4.

34 Castillo, "Bermúdez: un gobierno," 4.

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