

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: INVISIBLE MEN, INVISIBLE WOMEN: LABOR, RACE AND THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP IN NEW DEAL POST OFFICE MURALS

Grace Sayuri Yasumura, Doctor of Philosophy, 2019

Dissertation directed by: Professor Renee Ater  
Department of Art History and Archaeology  
Professor Steven Mansbach  
Department of Art History and Archaeology

*Invisible Men, Invisible Women: Labor, Race, and the (re)Construction of American Citizenship in New Deal Post Office Murals* is a meditation on the historical construction and persistent importance of race in the formation of American national identity and citizenship. Centering on an institutionally marginalized and academically neglected aspect of American art, this dissertation explores the depictions of non-white laborers, from images of African American sharecroppers to Mexican American migrant laborers that appear in scores of Treasury Section post office murals across the United States. Organized around three case studies, this work explores the different ways racialized identities were created, contested, and consolidated within the context of larger

debates surrounding the relationship between labor and citizenship in the 1930s. This dissertation reads the murals produced under the Treasury Section as part of the New Deal's epistemological regimes of intelligibility. In other words, these murals are to be understood as sites where collective identities are visualized and "correct" codes of social conduct are shaped in order to foster a particular vision of the citizens-subject. Treasury Section post office murals are therefore interpreted as part of a complex set of instruments deployed by the New Deal government as it sought to translate ideology into practice and thus actualize codes of racial and gendered conduct and ultimately modes of ideal citizenship.

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(RE)CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP IN NEW DEAL POST  
OFFICE MURALS

by

Grace Sayuri Yasumura

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Renee Ater, Co-Chair  
Professor Steven Mansbach, Co-Chair  
Professor Paul Landau  
Professor Abigail McEwen  
Professor Alicia Volk

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## Introduction: Towards a Democratic Visibility

At the most fundamental level *Invisible Men, Invisible Women: Labor, Race, and the (re)Construction of American Citizenship in New Deal Post Office Murals* is a meditation on art and its intersection with race— its historical construction and its persistent importance in the formation of American national identity and citizenship. My dissertation reconsiders the role of the racialized Other in New Deal post office murals in the formation of an American national identity, and bears witness to the historical construction of race and citizenship that undergird their representation. Created under the auspices of the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, these murals transformed public spaces into sites where culture and citizenship were created and consolidated. Despite decades of scholarly neglect, my study of the murals commissioned for the Washington, D.C. Postal Headquarters, the San Antonio Post Office and Court House, and the Jackson, Georgia Post Office is leveraged to explore the political dimensions of mural art and the various ways these murals became enmeshed within the institutions of national identity and citizenship formation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While the art and literature of the New Deal has enjoyed significant scholarly attention on the whole, comparatively little has been paid to the hundreds New Deal post office murals. In general In general, the literature on New Deal post office murals is limited to broad surveys with little to no historical analysis. These works include Robert L. Puschendorf, *Nebraska's Post Office Murals: Born of the Depression, Fostered by the New Deal* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 2012); Anita Price Davis, *New Deal Art in North Carolina: The Murals, Sculptures, Reliefs, Paintings, Oils and Frescoes and Their Creators* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2009); Philip Parisi, *The Texas Post Office Murals: Art for the People* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2004). To date there have only been three books which analytically treat postal mural, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (1982) by Karal Ann Marling; *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (1984) by Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz; and *Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction* (1989) by Sue Birdwell Beckham.

The title of my dissertation is indebted to Ralph Ellison's soaring and supreme *Invisible Man*, 1952. Ellison's extraordinary novel continues to act as a means of resistance, a challenge to the historical legacy of white supremacy that shapes and distorts the core of American national identity. His narrator, the invisible man, whose invisibility is a condition of society's refusal to see him, exists as a subject outside the bounds of history. However, Ellison's novel is more than just a quest for the narrator's visible selfhood. Rather, the persistent power of Ellison's novel lies, as the historian Jack Turner has argued, in its deep engagement with the question of democratic individuality. As Turner notes, democratic individuality is the moral and intellectual awakening which requires a forthright reckoning with the reality of race in America.<sup>2</sup> It demands that one possess the "self-directed freedom, critical reflection, and moral agency [to] acknowledge that what one claims for oneself as a right, one can claim only as an equal to everyone else ...."<sup>3</sup> Yet, how does one realize the prospect of a democratic individuality and by extension an inclusive, and expanded notion of citizenship, within a body politic organized around the pernicious legacy of white supremacy? Turner argues that Ellison's response to this question is to present his readers with a profound "color-conscious meditation— a determined effort to think one's way out of white supremacist assumptions, and to reckon with the ways historical white supremacy affected one's

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Turner, "Awakening to Race: Ralph Ellison and Democratic Individuality," *Political Theory* Vol. 36, no. 5 (Oct., 2008): 655.

<sup>3</sup> George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 5, cited in Jack Turner, "Awakening to Race: Ralph Ellison and Democratic Individuality," *Political Theory* Vol. 36, no. 5 (Oct., 2008): 656.

identity.”<sup>4</sup> Ellison’s novel grapples openly with issues of race and the legacy of white supremacy, offering his readers a vehicle for a true transformation of individual and national consciousness, a way out from under our colorblind, ahistorical understanding of our collective identity.<sup>5</sup>

I am certainly not the first or the last historian of art to confront issues of race and representation. Thanks in large part to Kymberly Pinder’s incisive essay *Black Representation and Western Survey*, we have for some time recognized that the historical legacy of black (and brown) bodies within the art historical canon has existed as predominately monolithic, racIALIZED Others, anemic stereotypes rooted in an essentialization of difference. Pinder calls our attention to the ways in which African Americans and by extension non-white Europeans were envisioned as objects of racial inferiority or exoticized fascination— imagined images that perpetuated racial stereotypes rather than visible or knowable subjects.<sup>6</sup> And yet, despite the increased visibility of racialized bodies within the art historical canon, the scholarship about federally funded art programs of the New Deal have largely been immune to this shift towards a more critical engagement with race. The raced subjects of the Federal Arts mural programs have remained largely invisible. Like the central protagonist in Ellison’s

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Turner, “Awakening to Race: Ralph Ellison and Democratic Individuality,” 658.

<sup>5</sup> The foundational myths that are apart of any nation-state’s origin narrative produce and sustain a collective sense of identity, by which I mean a shared notion of belonging. A collective identity produces continuity and unity in one’s individual experience within a nation, but can also engender social exclusion, depending on how one’s individual identities are related to national foundational myths. Collective identity often becomes a foundation of a larger social order, providing the basis for how society remembers its past and builds its future. Importantly, collective identity is not a static concept, but rather constantly negotiation and re-negotiation by differed actors in a society over time.

<sup>6</sup> Kymberly Pinder. “Black Representation and Western Survey Books,” *Art Bulletin* 81, no. 3 (September 1999): 533-538.

*Invisible Man*, the black and brown bodies in these murals exist but there has been a refusal by art historians, curators and the public to see them, to engage with the political and cultural ideologies which undergird their representation.

Why have these figures remained an invisible presence in art historical accounts when their actions, labors and fruitful presence dominate the walls of many post offices around the country? A critical engagement with the preponderance of non-white working figures would necessarily require a close examination of the material conditions of life and labor for nonwhite people in the 1930s and as such would complicate the belief that the New Deal and its artistic endeavors emerged from a tradition of American Liberalism. A tradition which assumes the institutions, values, and culture of America are at their core deeply liberal, broadly expansive, and inclusive.

Making visible the black and brown bodies and histories of the figures which embellished the walls of governmental space requires a critical reassessment of the New Deal in general and of the assumptions made about the expanded definition of citizenship in particular. Despite permanently expanding and altering the role of the federal government in the lives of its citizens, the New Deal was not principally intended as a radical transformation of the American political order. Instead, it was presented to the Congress and the American public as a cautious program, introducing reforms to the existing political system, rather than its wholesale alteration.

While the New Deal was primarily justified as a concerted federal effort to create jobs nationwide, nine million remained unemployed. While it built public housing, the housing was racially segregated, and many were still left homeless. Its programs helped

large numbers of commercial farmers, yet tenant farmers did not enjoy the same benefits.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most egregiously, the poorest and most vulnerable— FDR’s “forgotten [men] at the bottom of the economic pyramid,”<sup>8</sup> who were disproportionately African American, Latino, Asian, and women, fell almost entirely through the cracks.<sup>9</sup> Although the New Deal expanded the social and economic dimensions of American citizenship, it only bestowed those privileges to some citizens, leaving many outside the American polity, not just as non-citizens, but as anti-citizens.<sup>10</sup>

Farm laborers, migrant workers, and domestics were ineligible to receive benefits from the newly created Social Security Act, Fair Labor Standards Act, or Agricultural Adjustment Act. By excluding certain subsets of the American work force from the social rights and protections of the New Deal, existing racial and gender hierarchies were further institutionalized. According to the 1930s census, only 20 percent of white workers were employed in agriculture and domestic service; however, half of all African Americans made their living in these fields; and in the Deep South (Mississippi,

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<sup>7</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004), 136-37.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “The ‘Forgotten Man’ Speech,” Radio Address From Albany, New York, April 7, 1932, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt vol 4*, 1935 New York City: Random House, 1938.

<sup>9</sup> The inequitable benefits of the New Deal State have been meticulously studied and theorized. Here are a few of the sources I am relaying on (for a more complete list, please see my bibliography): Robert C. Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998), 23-177; Suzanne Mettler, *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998), 53-196.

<sup>10</sup> Anti-citizen is a term coined by David Roediger in his 1991 book, *Wages of Whiteness*. Roediger uses the term describe to groups of people in a society who were seen as enemies rather than the members of the social compact and as such were excluded from civic affairs.

Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina)<sup>11</sup> the percentage jumped to 75.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the policies of the New Deal inequitably distributed the privileges of citizenship along racial lines, creating what Robert Lieberman calls a “political order in which configurations of power reflected and refined racial difference even without codifying them.”<sup>13</sup>

Attempts to define who qualified for American citizenship were not limited to public policy. In the years just preceding the New Deal, the United States Supreme Court played a significant role in defining the legal boundaries of Americanness, interpreting naturalization laws to include only white, Western Europeans as candidates to join the American political, cultural, and economic order. As the critical race theorist and legal scholar Ian Haney López has demonstrated, the Supreme Court ruled on laws that defined the boundaries of racial types, providing a metric for whiteness in America. Consequently, the law was deployed as a mechanism to institutionalize the racial hierarchies of white supremacy.<sup>14</sup>

This contentious cultural and political milieu, where normative definitions of social desirability, inclusion, and citizenship were vigorously debated, saturated every level of the federal government. The Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture proved

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<sup>11</sup> While the generally term “Deep South” should include the state of Louisiana, Lieberman was only able to obtain data for Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina.

<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998), 44.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 11. Of course, Lieberman is aware of the other ways in which Jim Crow laws had codified racial difference he is just speaking specifically about the New Deal.

<sup>14</sup> Ian F. Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York, New York University Press, 1996), 37-49.

no exception. Established within the Procurement Division of the Department of the Treasury's Public Works Branch in October 1934, the Treasury Section sought to embellish new federal buildings with murals and sculpture. The 1,100 murals and sculptures sponsored by the Treasury Section to adorn the walls and rooms of government buildings— post offices, court houses, schools, hospitals, and jails— were part of a larger effort to establish a new national culture and thus deeply engaged questions of American identity.<sup>15</sup> Treasury Section artists were instructed by federal and local officials overseeing the program to create works that would celebrate some aspect of American history or American ideals. Depictions of westward expansion and rural and industrial labor became popular themes. Ultimately, these murals participated in the visual codification of the myths— myths that privileged whiteness and masculinity and that created narratives of racialized otherness— that structured American national identity and persist into our present moment.

### **Why the Post Office?**

In this dissertation I examine the contentious debates over race and citizenship raised by the institutionalization of a national arts program, one in which significant resources were devoted to public murals. My focus on post office murals is neither arbitrary nor chosen merely because of a lack of art historical scholarship devoted to their history. Rather my motivation comes from a set of theoretical and political concerns that

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<sup>15</sup> See Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009). In her book, Grieve examines how the New Deal's Federal Art Project attempted to redefine American taste in the visual arts and in so doing, promulgate a particular view of American culture, one which, according to Grieve combined ideals of "genteel culture with the idea of [democratic] participation" (Grieve, 13).

undergird the historical conditions of the post office's role in American civic life. The post office, often a person's only regular contact with the federal government, has played an integral role in the construction of an American national consciousness. Although it is difficult to imagine, given the current congressional neglect of the US Postal Service, the post office has profoundly and inescapably shaped, both favorably and injuriously, American civic, political, and cultural life.<sup>16</sup> Two recent publications about the history of the postal service, Winifred Gallagher's *How the Post Office Created America* and Devin Leonard's *Neither Snow Nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service*, demonstrate that from its inception, the post office was inextricably linked to American political democracy. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and other 'Framers of the Constitution' argued that the post office was a vital institution. They envisioned it as a service that would connect citizens to both one another and the newly formed nation, thus engendering a collective sense of Americanness. According to Leonard, Washington "wanted the postal service to be a force that promoted enlightenment, circulating newspapers and political documents that would guard the public from tyrants and demagogues spreading misinformation."<sup>17</sup> The postal service acted in Gallagher's terms as a central nervous system for the newly emerging republic, binding not only its citizens but its cities and towns. The federal mandate to deliver mail to all citizens resulted in the vast expansion of roads and railways— in 1810 there were 2,300 post offices and 36,000 miles of postal roads in the US, by 1830 those numbers

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<sup>16</sup> Winifred Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016), 1-7.

<sup>17</sup> Devin Leonard, *Neither Snow nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service* (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 17.

swelled to 8,400 and 115,000, respectively.<sup>18</sup> Recognizing the central role of the rail system in the transportation of mail, the federal government, shortly after authorizing the use of trains to transport mail in 1832, began to encourage their development.<sup>19</sup> Not only did the continuous expansion of transportation infrastructure rapidly urbanize the previously occupied indigenous lands but also helped push the American economy from a primarily agrarian to an industrial one.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the transportation grid, not to mention America's continued westward colonization of indigenous land was enabled, in part, by the postal service.

While the post office's history is linked to the deleterious history of America's colonial expansion, the postal service, particularly after the Civil War, became an important means of class mobility and economic independence, especially among women and African Americans. The post office provided job security for generations of working class Americans striving to reap the benefits of economic citizenship and move into the middle-class. By the early 20th century, the post office became an important site for organized labor, especially among African American postal workers who leveraged their position as employees of the postal service to make fundamentally important contributions to the advancement of labor and civil rights.<sup>21</sup> The important role the post office played in the economic security of countless Americans continued through the

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<sup>18</sup> Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> The federal government both reduced the millions of dollars of protective tariffs on the raw material required to build railway tracks and allowed railway companies to seize the private lands required for their continued growth (Gallagher, 58).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 1-7.

<sup>21</sup> Philip F. Rubio, *There is always work at the post office: African American Postal Workers and the Fights for Jobs, Justice, and Equality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 16-74.

Great Depression. President Franklin Roosevelt, an avid philatelist, believed fervently in the potential of the post office to embody the democratic ideals of the ‘Founding Fathers.’<sup>22</sup> As part of his effort to create economic opportunity during the Depression, his administration built a record number of new post offices. The 1,731 post offices built during his presidency created many jobs, both in construction and post office employment, and extended the physical and aesthetic presence of the federal government.

And yet, despite the utopian aspirations that underpin the postal service’s founding, its history in the early 20th century is deeply tied to the Bureau of Investigation (later renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation), domestic surveillance, and the silencing of political speech. Shortly after the United States entered into World War I, a flurry of laws was passed by Congress that greatly curtailed the right to freedom of speech and expression. In 1917 Congress enacted the Espionage Act which made it a crime for any person to willfully “cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty in the military or naval forces of the United States” or purposefully “obstruct the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States.”<sup>23</sup> The Espionage Act along with the Trading with the Enemy Act of October 1917, ushered in the wartime collaboration between the Bureau of Investigation and the United States Post Office.<sup>24</sup> Under The Espionage Act every “publication, matter, or thing, of any kind, containing any matter advocating or urging treason, insurrection, or forcible resistance to

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<sup>22</sup> Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America*, 230.

<sup>23</sup> Espionage Act of 1917, ch. 30, tit. I, § 3, 40 Stat. 217, 219.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Conolly-Smith. “Reading Between the Lines”: The Bureau of Investigation, the United States Post Office, and Domestic Surveillance During World War I,” *Social Justice* Vol. 36, No. 1 (115): 7.

any law of the United States” was officially declared “nonmailable.”<sup>25</sup> The Postmaster General was given the power to decide what was “willful obstruction” without any approval from the courts. Violators of the law were liable to be fined up to \$5,000 and imprisoned for up to five years.<sup>26</sup> In a secret letter to local post masters across the country, the Postmaster General, Albert Sydney Burleson urged them to:

Keep a close watch on unsealed matters, newspapers, magazines containing matter which is calculated to interfere with the success of any Federal law or to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny or refusal of duty enlistment services or otherwise embarrasses or hampers the Government in its conduct of the war.<sup>27</sup>

Disturbingly, Burleson appears to have overstepped even the draconian reach of the Espionage Act by asking his employees to not only flag material that they deemed obstructionist and disloyal, but also embarrassing. Burleson’s efforts resulted in the suspension from the mail of dozens of publications, including *The Masses*, *The New York Call*, *The Milwaukee Leader* and Emma Goldman’s feminist, pro-birth control magazine *Earth Mother Bulletin*.<sup>28</sup>

The post office’s suppression of ‘suspect’ journals provided the Bureau of Investigation a black list of organizations to place under surveillance. Working closely with the American Protective League (APL), an organization of 250,000 volunteer vigilantes committed to helping discover so-called seditious activity, the Bureau was

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<sup>25</sup> Espionage Act of 1917, ch. 30, tit. XII, § 2, 40 Stat. 230.

<sup>26</sup> R.S sec 5336; March 4, 1909, c. 321, sec. 6, 35 Stat. 1089

<sup>27</sup> Albert Sidney Burleson to Postmasters of the First, Second, and Third Classes, June 16, 1917, in Post Office Department Files (National Archives), cited in Donald Johnson, “Wilson, Burleson, and Censorship in the First World War,” *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. 28, No. 1 (Feb., 1962): 48.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Johnson, “Wilson, Burleson, and Censorship in the First World War.” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Feb., 1962): 48.

responsible for the arrest of hundreds of innocent civilians.<sup>29</sup> While the APL's request to open and examine the mail of suspected seditious actors was denied by the post office, its Solicitor General, Judge William H. Lamar found a way to circumvent this problem. As the historian Peter Conolly-Smith observes, Lamar discreetly "let it be known that mail could be opened and read under the pretext that the letter had mistakenly been routed to the dead letter department."<sup>30</sup> By law dead letters could be opened and read freely. In this unnerving capacity, the post office worked closely with the government to police the boundaries of acceptable speech and curtail both public and private thought and discourse.

The federal government did not just use the post office to silence anti-war protestors and perceived radical socialists, but also the African American press. The ability of the African American press and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) to denounce the legal and extra-legal lynchings was vastly curtailed by the Espionage Act, as the law was used to not only prosecute those labeled "enemies of the Nation" but any group critical of American society. After the passage of the Espionage Act, the NAACP's once vocal opposition to the federal government's lack of anti-lynching policies diminished. In December 1917, shortly after the law's passage, the NAACP cancelled planned protests against increased press censorship and racial injustice. The following summer W.E.B Du Bois published "Closing Ranks" in the July 1918 issue of the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine. In his editorial he asked African Americans

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Conolly-Smith. "Reading Between the Lines": The Bureau of Investigation, the United States Post Office, and Domestic Surveillance During World War I," 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

to “forget their special grievances” and to stand in solidarity with white Americans in the fight against Germany.<sup>31</sup> Du Bois was far from the only civil rights leader to bend to pressure from the federal government. After receiving numerous warnings from the government, Robert Abbot, the editor of the *Chicago Defender* published an editorial arguing that the African American community should privilege the support of the wartime effort over the struggle for greater civil rights.<sup>32</sup> The consequence for ignoring the government’s threats was jail time, as A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, the editors of *The Messenger*, experienced after suspicion arose that their paper had been infiltrated by white socialists.<sup>33</sup>

In an exceedingly direct way the post office had the privilege of shaping national discourse and consciousness in a manner that few other governmental institutions could during the early 20th century. As such, I argue that the Treasury Section’s post office murals can be understood as a material manifestation of the federal government and as such are an ideal locus to examine the logic of the New Deal state and the attendant debates over nationalism, citizenship formation, and race.

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<sup>31</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “Close Ranks,” July 1918, in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal; An African American Anthology*, ed. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (New York: Bowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 242-243. However, in 1919 at the end of World War I, as African American soldier began to return home, Du Bois penned another editorial in *The Crisis*, “Returning Soldiers.” In the article, Du Bois, while lauding the achievements of the African American soldiers abroad, argued that they had to continue to fight for democracy at home. Noting America’s deep and fatal flaws — lynching, voter disfranchisement, systematic and profound racial segregation — Du Bois wrote: “We return. We return from fighting. We return from fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of American, or know the reason why” (W.E.B. Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers,” *The Crisis* 18/1 (May 1919): 14).

<sup>32</sup> Regin Schmidt. *Red Scare: FBI and the Origins of Anticommunism in the United States, 1919-1943* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2000), 66-67.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

The existing scholarship on Treasury Section post office art understands, for the most part, the murals as extensions of the democratic and progressive principles at the heart of the New Deal and its expanded notions of citizenship. In general, the literature on New Deal post office murals is limited to broad surveys. While these sweeping surveys are invaluable for their documentation of both extant and lost post office art, they often eschew deeper and more sustained historical analysis. Outside the handful of survey texts, only three books engage with a deeper historical interpretation of New Deal post office murals. These studies are generally celebratory in tone, affirming, a priori, that the New Deal and its artistic endeavors emerged from a tradition of American Liberalism. The assumption is that the institutions, values, and culture of the New Deal are, at their core, deeply liberal, broadly expansive, and inclusive. To date, there has not been a study of New Deal post office murals that scrutinizes the works through the lens where the socially constructed nature of race is acknowledged and the murals are read as an active locus in the production of race. Post office murals from California to North Carolina depict troubling images of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Indigenous Americans as dehumanized indigents or primitivized others. Unfortunately, the existing literature tends to sanitize these images as they disrupt the narrative that New Deal art is emblematic of a new democratized national culture.

Despite their ages, the 1982 publication *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* by Karal Ann Marling, the 1984 publication *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* by Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, and Sue Birdwell Beckham's 1989 *Depression Post Office*

*Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction*, remain the preeminent works on post office mural art. Taken together, these books are recovery projects. These texts attempt to secure the art historical and cultural importance of a body of work that had largely been ignored or critically assailed. Indeed, one must commend these authors for choosing projects that do not focus on the art historical canon or the singular genius of one artist in particular. Rather Marling, Markowitz, and Park attempt to celebrate the communal creativity of hundreds of lesser known artists. Park and Markowitz understand New Deal post office murals as vehicles of reassurance in a time of crisis. Agents of affirmation, post office murals were meant to inculcate a sense of hope in the “renewal of continual prosperity, and lasting order.”<sup>34</sup> They posit that because post office murals were created through a process of democratic negotiation and compromise, they constructed a sense of national culture built on consensus. Their model overlooks the unequal actors that shaped or were excluded from shaping the murals’ subject matter, style, and reception.

Marling’s publication, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression*, offers a more critical view of the Treasury Section murals, analyzing the conflicts that arose between federal administrators and local community members. However, taste, the organizing intellectual principle of Marling’s work, is insufficient to accommodate serious considerations of class, race, or gender. Beckham examines Depression era Southern culture, devoting a portion of her book to discussions of race. However, this discussion is incomplete. While briefly discussing Jim

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<sup>34</sup> Marlene Park and Gerald E Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 29.

Crow (something she mentions only twice in a book devoted to discussing Southern culture), she dismisses the dehumanizing and brutalizing policies as “the way of the world.”<sup>35</sup> She seems to excuse the institutional racism of the South by noting that racism was a fact of life everywhere in the United States. While not untrue, the refusal to engage with the legacy of slavery, reconstruction, and systematic oppression that shapes the history of the South prevents a deeper engagement with the meaning and significance of southern murals. Equally problematic is Beckham’s examination of representations of indigenous people which perpetuates the stereotype of the *Noble Savage*. When discussing the depiction of indigenous Americans in New Deal post office murals she refers to them as “noble and worthy of respect” or as “fighting bravely... and noble in the face of defeat.”<sup>36</sup>

The elevation of these forgotten artists inverts the usual hierarchy of art history which has often favored the masculine heroism of the Abstract Expressionist. In the early 1980s, at a time when realism drew scorn and abstraction reigned supreme, this was no small feat. However, in their attempts to argue for the importance of post office art, the authors often obfuscate the disquieting depictions of non-white people and women in favor of a unifying and celebratory narrative. While my dissertation is deeply indebted to the recovery projects of Park, Markowitz, and Marling, their broad surveys fostering my initial interest into the subject matter, my work engages with the more recent scholarship that has demonstrated the way that the various policies of the New Deal reinforced a

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<sup>35</sup> Sue Birdwell Beckham, *Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 126.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

colored and gendered line in American citizenship.<sup>37</sup> As such, my dissertation posits a meaningful relationship between the policies of the New Deal and images of laboring bodies, which became a popular subject in post office murals. I argue that not only do the post office murals reflect contemporary notions of race and racialized ideas of labor and citizenship; they also help to legitimize and normalize the discriminatory policies of the New Deal.

### **Disparate Bedfellows: A Few Notes on Methodology**

My dissertation will illuminate not only the manifold ways in which contemporaneous understandings of race informed discourses of labor, class, and citizenship, but also how these discourses helped to construct and shape the narrative of race and racism. To date, there has not been a study of New Deal post office murals which scrutinizes the works through the lens of Critical Race Theory, where the socially constructed nature of race is acknowledged and the murals are read as an active locus in the production of race. I argue that these murals are best understood by examining them through the lenses of both Critical Race Theory (CRT) and traditional Marxian thought. As a set of historical and theoretical concerns which emerged from contemporary American legal studies in the early 1990s, CRT is grounded in a progressive political struggle for racial justice. CRT scholars fuse their commitment to racial justice with a sustained questioning of standard legal and scholarly conventions that are themselves

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<sup>37</sup> See Robert C. Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Suzanne Mettler, *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

understood as part of the pernicious racial hierarchies and the attendant hierarchies of gender, class, and sexual orientation which must be overturned.<sup>38</sup>

At its most fundamental level, CRT aims to challenge the long-standing legal and cultural constructions of race and racial power. The legal scholars Kimberly Crenshaw and Derek Bell, central figures in the CRT movement, deconstruct the belief that the law is a neutral instrument designed to insure the constitutional guarantee of equal protection. Rather, Crenshaw's work exposes the way laws are purposefully constructed to disadvantage persons of color.<sup>39</sup> While CRT is a diverse and diffuse movement, the scholars associated with it are united in their desire to examine and explain the manifold ways in which regimes of white supremacy and privilege have been created, deployed, and maintained to subordinate people of color. Special attention is given to illuminating the relationship between racial hierarchies and professed ideals of equality under the law.<sup>40</sup> In other words, scholars of CRT believe that the law does not "passively adjudicate questions of social power; rather the law is an active instance of the power politics it purports to avoid and stand above."<sup>41</sup> One of the aims of CRT, then, is to understand how

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<sup>38</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas eds. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995), xiii.

<sup>39</sup> See Mari J. Matsuda, *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment. New perspectives on law, culture, and society* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993) and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law," *Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law,* *Harvard Law Review* 101, no. 7 (May, 1988): 1331-1387.

<sup>40</sup> Crenshaw et al. *Critical Race Theory : The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, xiv.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, xxiv.

the law was and is created by social power, thereby working to undermine the harmful relationship between the law and racial power.<sup>42</sup>

Although CRT emerged from contemporary legal studies, recently it has been leveraged by non-legal scholars, predominantly in the United States, as a vehicle to reevaluate the way race and racism is and has been negotiated within the American national consciousness. CRT offers art historians a compelling vehicle to investigate the discourse and material and cultural production of race, demanding that one take seriously the white and male bias that resides at the heart of our conceptions of democracy, rights, individuality, and citizenship. CRT demands a rigorous examination of the epistemological and moral construction of race, thus disposing of the belief that race is a pre-political concept, something accidental or a naturally occurring. While CRT has been principally concerned with the ways in which the law— the totality of the theory and praxis through which the notion of *the people* and *society* come into being— is used to construct race, objects' cultural production can be interpreted similarly. How have the regimes of white supremacy and privilege been created, deployed, and maintained in the realm of cultural production? Using CRT as a model we may begin to better understand the ways in which objects of cultural production are reflected in the belief and values of the people that created them. As Reiland Rabaka observes, cultures “extend and expand to not only make sense of the world but also to alter it in their own and others' best interests.”<sup>43</sup> The American art historian Jacqueline Francis is one of the first art historians

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<sup>42</sup> Reiland Rabaka, “The Souls of White Folk: W.E.B. Du Bois’s Critique of White Supremacy and Contributions to Critical White Studies,” *Journal of African American Studies* 11, no. 1 (June 2007):6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

to incorporate CRT into her work, employing the methodological approach to great effect in her 2012 book *Making Race: Modernism and “Racial Art” in America*.<sup>44</sup>

A holistic accounting of legal, historical, and cultural construction of art and its intersection with Treasury Section post office murals must necessarily examine the intersection between racism and capitalism. As such, my methodological approach will also draw on traditional Marxian interpretations of power structures and social domination. While often at loggerheads with CRT, Marxist theory offers a particularly useful framework for thinking through questions of alienation, oppression, and exploitation.<sup>45</sup> Marxism’s focus on the material conditions of life and production of goods is crucial to explaining the relationship between class and race. Indeed, mercantile capitalism and slavery — an ideology dependent on racism — developed and advanced in lockstep, as a unified and simultaneous phenomenon. As W. E. B. Du Bois astutely observed:

Despite desperate efforts to rewrite and distort this history, a few of us must recall that in 1776, when three million white Americans proclaimed equality of all men, they were at that very moment holding five hundred thousand black folk in slavery and classifying them not even as animals but real estate. Their prosperity had been built on the centuries of this slavery and the independence which they demanded was mainly freedom to pursue this exploitation of men in raw material and in trade.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Francis’s book, which centers upon a close examination of Malvin Gray Johnson, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Max Weber, argues that artworks by these artists and the art criticism that surrounded their works can be best interpreted as sites where race was actively produced. I am keenly interested in and indebted to the way she interprets the canvas as a highly mediated object, engaged in racialized performances.

<sup>45</sup> Marxist scholars generally concentrate on the material conditions of life and production, arguing that they are essential to explain the relationship between race and class. Critical race theories often criticize Marxist scholars for what they believe is their reductionist economism, which they believe fails to account for the ideological differences between and within class formations.

<sup>46</sup> Philip S. Foner, eds., *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1920-1963* (New York, Pathfinder, 1970), 192-3.

Du Bois' account points to the ways in which racist ideology was embedded in the social and economic structure not only of the South, but also in Northern manufacturing and commercial industry. Indeed, recent scholarship has demonstrated how Southern plantation theories of managing slaves were translated into theories of racialized management in early twentieth-century northern industry and commerce. As the historians Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger argue, "Race hovered over and permeated the processes through which U.S. labor was chosen and bossed."<sup>47</sup> They demonstrate how race management (a term they use to describe the theory of management employed in antebellum plantations) and scientific management were deployed as complementary strategies of industrial management, playing races off each other as a strategy to maximize capitalist profits. Given the extent to which recent historical accounts of American modernism have traced the complex and interdependent relationship between race and American capitalist expansion, I am wary of subsuming the oppression of the racialized other under a general rubric of working class oppression and exploitation, which often elides and eludes the specificity of oppression outside the workforce. Employing the insights of racial justice theorists such as Eddie Glaude and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, I hope to avoid the tendency of Marxist scholars to isolate labor from the specific bodies and histories of those laborers. I am explicitly uninterested in a purely economic theory of oppression that reduces human suffering to one specific type of

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<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger, "Race and the Management of Labour in the United States History," in *Theorizing Anti-Racism: Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories*, eds., Abigail B. Bakan and Enakshi Dua (Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2014), 343.

difference. Rather, I am interested in a more complete history of difference, one which is attendant to the construction of many types of alterity and exclusion.

### **Chapter Organization and Content**

My dissertation is organized around a series of three case studies, each aiming to explore the different ways racialized identities were created and contested and forged within the context of a larger debate around the relationship between labor and citizenship. My case studies are drawn from geographically diverse regions of the United States and are organized principally around one mural (or cycle) but with other murals, prints, and photographs to support my argument.

My first case study centers on a discussion of the mural cycle in the Washington D.C. Post Office Building (now the Environmental Protection Agency's Headquarters), which at the time of its construction in 1932 served as the United States Postal Service Headquarters. Although twelve artists contributed to the Washington D.C. Post Office Building cycle, this case study will focus on the works of Alexander Brook (1898-1980), Alfred D. Crimi (1900-1994), Doris Lee (1905-1983), and Reginald Marsh (1898-1954) who, unlike their colleagues, explored themes of contemporary urban and rural labor. Their murals will serve as a vehicle to discuss the importance of both the post office and visual representations of labor to the ideological core of American identity. I will argue that these murals present an idealized version of the American citizen as heroic, masculine, and white. I will be especially sensitive to the discourse around labor and poverty during the Great Depression, examining the distinctions made between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. How and why was poverty equated with moral

failings in mural painting? Conversely, why was gainful employment elevated as a civic duty? How do historical understandings of poverty and labor intersect with race and how are these ideas visualized in the murals? Taken collectively, the Washington D.C. Post Office Building mural cycle presents the viewer with a visual rhetoric of citizenship, depicting an idealized model of Americanness.<sup>48</sup> Insofar as these murals are engaged with the historical production of visible citizenship, they will act as a foil against which the remainder of my case studies will be measured.

My second case study will be organized around a close examination of Philip Evergood's *Cotton—From Field to Mill* (1939), a work created for the Jackson, Georgia post office. Using Evergood's mural as a vehicle to explore the social dimensions of New Deal citizenship, I will focus this chapter on the experiences of African Americans in the Deep South. I will argue that Evergood's work exposes the racial divisions in New Deal conceptions of social citizenship<sup>49</sup> and reflects the repressive labor practices that dominated southern political and cultural life. Reading his image against the lived experience of African American southern laborers in the 1930s will provide an important context for understanding the goals and motivations of the federal government, local government, and Philip Evergood that lie at the heart of *Cotton—From Field to Mill*.

My last case study will examine the representation of Mexican migrant labor in New Deal post office murals in the American Southwest. This case study will center on

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<sup>48</sup> While I have not spoken about the viewers at great length in this proposal, their experience of the space and reaction to the works will be of vital importance.

<sup>49</sup> The term "social citizenship" is derived principally from the writing of the British sociologist, T.H. Marshall and, in particular, his 1950 essay, "Citizenship and Social Class" in T.H. *Marshall, Citizenship and Social Class and other Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

the cotton farmers who occupy a marginalized position in Howard Cook's *San Antonio's Importance in Texas History* (1939), which was created for the San Antonio Post Office and Federal Courthouse. While my previous case study is an exploration of how New Deal social policies were used to construct the archetypal non-citizen, this case study examines how the legal system was used as another instrument to create the non-citizen through visual means.

Taken together, these case studies explore how the federal government strove to find legal and social justifications to circumvent the imperatives of racial equalities established under the 14th Amendment. I discuss the intersection of the racialized discourse of labor and the laws that established the divisions of race and the content of racial identities. Cook's frescos serve as a vehicle to explore the image of Mexican and Mexican American laborers that begin to appear not only in federally funded post office murals throughout the Southwest, but in the popular imagination of white America. Importantly, these images began to circulate in the same decade when an estimated 400,000 Mexican and Mexican American citizens were deported from the United States.<sup>50</sup> I argue that when considered within their historical context, Cook's frescos reflect the construction of Mexican Americans as a foreign commodity, rendering their labor and presence in the United States disposable and distant from the white American ideal. By exploring the complexities of Cook's murals in relation to the history of New Deal immigration policy, citizenship, and labor, I examine an aspect of New Deal post

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<sup>50</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, 135.

office art that has received scant attention: the depiction of Mexican Americans and their (dis)placement within the fabric of the American body politic.

I understand the Treasury Section post office murals as highly mediated aesthetic objects that were not only shaped by contemporaneous debates over whiteness and blackness, Americanness and alienness, but also actively contributed to shaping those discourses. My work addresses the depictions of racialized labor. I aim to disrupt the celebratory and unified narratives of the New Deal in favor of one which sees the depictions of raced figures as a vehicle to illuminate shifting understandings of citizenship, labor, and race in 1930s American culture.

## Chapter One: Painting America, The Washington D.C. Post Office Building Murals and the Articulation of Citizenship

In a 1939 radio address on the eve of the Museum of Modern Art's public unveiling of the its newly constructed building at 11 West 53rd Street, President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the building to peace and its pursuit, noting that "conditions for democracy and for art are one and the same ... In encouraging the creation and enjoyment of beautiful things we are furthering democracy itself."<sup>51</sup> While reflecting on

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<sup>51</sup> "Only Where Men Are Free Can the Arts Flourish and the Civilization of National Culture Reach Full Flower." Radio Dedication of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, May 10, 1939, cited in *The public papers and addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt. 1939 volume, War-and neutrality: with a special introduction and explanatory notes by President Roosevelt*. Franklin Roosevelt. New York : Macmillan, 1941, 336.

the museum's potential for fostering democratic enlightenment, FDR pointed to the federal government's own cultural projects as a model:

Art in America has always belonged to the people and has never been the property of an academy or a class. The great Treasury Projects, through which our public buildings are being decorated, are an excellent example of the continuity of this tradition. The Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration [WPA] is a practical relief project which also emphasizes the best tradition of the democratic spirit. The WPA artist, in rendering his own impression of things, speaks also for the spirit of his fellow countrymen everywhere. I think the WPA artist exemplifies with great force the essential place which the arts have in a democratic society such as ours.<sup>52</sup>

FDR's remarks bind cultural production to the larger aims of the New Deal's national renewal projects. The symbiotic relationship between art making, democracy, and national culture would become a recurring theme in a number of his speeches and personal correspondence of the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in his 1941 address at the dedication of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., FDR would more explicitly link artistic production and national culture. He observed that Americans, through the concerted efforts of the federal arts programs, had seen a wide range of arts that reflected their lived experiences and histories as Americans:

Rooms full of painting and sculpture by Americans, walls covered with painting by Americans— some of it good, some of it not so good, but all of it native, human, eager, and alive—all of it painted by their own kind in their own country, and painted about things that they know and look at often and have touched and loved.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 337.

<sup>53</sup> See Letters to Edward Bruce from Franklin Roosevelt Edward Bruce Papers, 1902-1960, Box 4 folders 49-55, Archives of American Art.

<sup>54</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Freedom of the Human Spirit Shall Go On: Address at the Dedication of the National Gallery of Art," March 17, 1941, cited in *The public papers and addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt. 1939 volume, War-and neutrality: With a special introduction and explanatory notes by President Roosevelt* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 73.

Cultural production not only became a signifier of, but also a locus for ordinary citizens to express and codify ideas of Americanness.<sup>55</sup> Taken together, his 1937 and 1941 remarks are revelatory, illuminating the intersection between national identity formation, state sponsored cultural policies, and New Deal political culture.<sup>56</sup> FDR conceived of art as both a symbolic ritual of governing, and an expressive mechanism, shaping the way in which the body politic approaches, defines, and manifests national political discourse.

In this chapter, I examine the complex history of one of the most successful iterations of federal arts patronage, the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (the Section). I will be particularly attentive to the complex ways that the Section became enveloped in a mythology of Americanness, situating the program within the national debates surrounding the definition of citizenship, the role of labor in national and political culture, and the acceptable relationship between art, politics, and government institutions. In order to reconstruct this history, I focus on the cycle of murals created for the Washington D.C. Post Office Building, demonstrating how these murals seized on a visual rhetoric of citizenship to depict an ideal model of Americanness sought by the federal government.

### **Federal Arts, Power, and Symbolic Form**

Before considering how the Washington D.C. Post Office Building murals transformed into a site for the production of American political values and the attendant

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<sup>55</sup> The federal government sponsored wide ranging artistic endeavors, including, easel paintings, public murals, sculpture, community theater programs, as well as an extensive cataloging projects which resulted in 18,00 watercolor renderings of American decorative arts objects from the colonial period through the Nineteenth century.

<sup>56</sup> By political culture I am referring to the set of political ideals and normative practices.

myths of American national identity, it is worth clarifying the complex relationship between national identity formation, political institutions, and federally sponsored art. My aim here is to examine the structural relationship between the Section, the nature of governmental power, and the logic of the state institutions, practices, and ideas which governed the polity during the New Deal.

### *Creating the Section*

On October 16, 1934, the Treasury Section of Fine Arts was created by order of the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau Jr. The Section was part of the larger network of artistic patronage programs of the New Deal, which included two distinct initiatives aimed at mitigating the worst effects of the Great Depression. These initiatives included the public works programs which consisted of the Treasury Section of Fine Art and its forerunner, the Public Works of Art Projects (WAP-FAP), 1933-1934; and the works relief programs, which included the Works Progress Administration— Federal Art Project, 1935-1943 and the Treasury Relief Art Program, 1935-1938. While the stated task of the Section was the embellishment of federal buildings, its administrators envisioned the program as a great “civilizing force,” a program that would create a “panorama of American triumph.”<sup>57</sup> Operating in cities and towns throughout the country, and more specifically in their post office buildings, affectionately referred to by the Section Administrator Edward Rowan, as “those little cultural centers,” the mural and

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<sup>57</sup> Speech delivered by Edward Bruce on the occasion of the opening of the Section of Fine Art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, November 2, 1939. Reprinted in the Section of Fine Art Bulletin, No. 20, November, 1939 (Washington D.C.: Section of Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, Federal Works Agency), 9. In Section of Fine Arts selected administrative records and correspondence, 1934-1943. Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

sculptural decorations commissioned by the federal government were meant to “raise the taste of [the] country and help develop native arts.”<sup>58</sup> Through exposure to art that at once avoided the academism of National Academy of Design and the imported European modernism of the Museum of Modern Art, Americans, Rowan believed, would develop a taste for an authentic, refined, and wholly American art grounded in supposedly *authentic* depictions of American life.

While Morgenthau Jr. signed the department into existence, it was the artist and administrator Edward Bruce who was the driving force behind the department’s creation. It was Bruce who had initially proposed that the Treasury Section be funded by a Presidential Executive Order which would earmark one percent of the total cost of all new federal buildings for their embellishment. Like FDR, Bruce was intensely interested in democratizing Americans’ access to art, noting in 1934 that:

I think the mere fact that the government has organized this Section and undertaken this work is bound to have a very beneficial effect on the whole art movement in this country and especially along the lines of taking the snobbery out of art and making it the daily food of the average citizen.<sup>59</sup>

Bruce, who always envisioned the Section as a permanent fixture of the Treasury Department, led the program with help from the Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins (the first woman to ever hold a Cabinet-level position),<sup>60</sup> the federal relief administrator Harry

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Edward Bruce to Admiral Peoples, November 14, 1934, Bruce MSS, Reel D 89, Archives of American Art.

<sup>60</sup> Frances Perkins, a social worker and economist by training, first worked in Roosevelt’s gubernatorial administration as his Industrial Commissioner and in 1933 became Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor, servicing in that position until the end of his Presidency. A consummate advocate for worker’s rights, Perkins played an integral role in shaping the Civilian Conservation Corps, National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, and Federal Emergency Relief Act.

Hopkins, the painter and sculptor Edward Rowan, and the art critic Forbes Watson.

Unlike WPA-FAP artists who were employed from the relief rolls and often worked collectively under the supervision of so-called ‘master-artists,’ the artists selected for Treasury Section commissions rarely worked collaboratively and were selected through blind competitions.

For Section administrators, the blind competitions were the crucial feature of the selection process. As FDR noted in a letter to Edward Bruce, “the decoration of our Federal buildings with painting and sculpture, under a democratic system of competition which gives to all American artists an equal opportunity and which awards commissions on the sole basis of quality, is in keeping with our highest democratic ideals.”<sup>61</sup> After a federal building had been selected by the Section to be embellished with a mural or sculpture, Section administrators would seek out prominent local artists, architects, or political figures to chair the competition. The chairperson would then be in charge of identifying a committee to jury the selection process. The Treasury Section worked with the local juries to solicit ideas for a commission’s subject matter and would announce the competition in its quarterly bulletin, encouraging only local or regional artists to submit works for consideration. The jury would review the anonymous submissions, and would pass along their recommendations to the Treasury Section, whose administrators would then review all the submitted entries. If they believed the jury’s selection aligned with the

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<sup>61</sup> Undated letter from Roosevelt to Bruce. Reprinted in the *Section of Fine Art Bulletin*, No. 20, November, 1939 (Washington D.C.: Section of Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, Federal Works Agency), 9. In Section of Fine Arts selected administrative records and correspondence, 1934-1943. Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

Section's "standard of quality" Section administrators would generally follow the jury's recommendation.<sup>62</sup>

### ***The Treasury Section and the Limits of Hegemony***

Past interpretations of the New Deal's federally sponsored art programs have leveraged Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to explain the federal arts projects as a function of state policy, viewing the federal government as a unitary fulcrum of power or as a vehicle for class interest. In *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America*, Jonathan Harris was one of the first art historians to examine the relationship between federal arts projects and New Deal state policies. His analysis turns on what he calls a "hegemonizing discourse" articulated through the federal arts projects, that worked to support FDR's reformist policies. According to Harris, New Deal reforms, and by extension the art it produced, were limited and served in the long term only "to preserve and entrench the power of monopoly capital in the US."<sup>63</sup> For Harris, the New Deal state, organized around the interests of the ruling class, did not respond to pressure from below— from labor unions or other social or political organizations. Harris argues that the social welfare legislation of the New Deal should not be interpreted as gains made by the working class, but as a form of manipulation by the hegemonic social stratum. This scholar's primary concern is to provide a framework to understand how the federal arts programs can be interpreted as "an ideological encoder of

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<sup>62</sup> Admiral C.J Peoples. "Forward," *Section of Fine Art Bulletin*, No. 1, March 1, 1935 (Washington D.C.: Section of Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, Federal Works Agency), 5-6. In Section of Fine Arts selected administrative records and correspondence, 1934-1943. Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7-8.

New Deal statism,” which he ultimately argues became a repressive and homogenizing form of Americanism.<sup>64</sup> In his Gramscian framework, the state works to inculcate beliefs and secure consent by creating a relationship between the government and the people based on a false consciousness. For Harris, the state systematically mystifies the experiences of the oppressed, thus a person’s recognition of his or her own interests is systematically distorted, thus producing a false consciousness. Harris looks at the state through its function as a vehicle for class interests. He roots its power in the economy and thereby stripping not only working-class agency from his interpretation of New Deal policy, but also the role of race from his interpretation of the relationship between state power, institutions, and official culture.

While the federal arts projects were indeed a function of state policy, neither the federal arts programs nor the New Deal state operated as a unified system of power. The relationship between political institutions and official culture was diffuse and decentralized, encompassing the ideological beliefs and assumptions of a wide swath of local and federal administrators and elected officials, who responded to pressures from both the federal government and their local constituency. As will become increasingly clear through the following chapters, governmental power and authority, rather than radiating from an overly rigid and centralized structure was dispersed and facilitative, and, through the creation of the federal arts projects, omnipresent. The Treasury Section alone commissioned murals or sculptures in over 1,000 cities throughout the United

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 108.

States and its colonial possessions, such as Puerto Rico.<sup>65</sup> By the late 1930s, increasing numbers of Americans had some contact with the federal government either by participating in its various relief programs or coming into contact with the art they sponsored. As such, Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality is an instructive corrective to the overly deterministic, uni-directional nature of Harris's Gramscian approach. Governmentality offers a framework to articulate the various ways in which federally sponsored murals intersected with and helped to shape governmental power and American identity formation.<sup>66</sup>

### ***Governmentality and the Federal Arts***

Foucault's concept of governmentality emerged from a series of lectures entitled *Security, Territory, Population and the Birth of Biopolitics* which he delivered between 1978 and 1979. His theory sets forth an alternative way to conceive of the relationship between power and government, rethinking notions of political rule by moving away from models that foreground ideas of sovereignty and power, towards one which centers

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<sup>65</sup> My use of the word colony is intentional. Despite becoming a Commonwealth in 1952, Puerto Rico exists in a colonial relationship with the United States. Since acquiring the territory in 1898, Puerto Rico, the largest overseas territory that remains under the Sovereign control of the United States government, has generated extraordinary wealth and profit for the American government and corporations through its vast natural resources, including sugar and tobacco is source of cheap labor, and acts as a tax haven. Despite being made a US Commonwealth in 1952, which ostensibly meant it was a self-governing territory, US federal agencies still control the island's currency, banking system, international trade, foreign relations, shipping and maritime laws, TV, radio, postal system, immigration, Social Security, customs, transportation, military, import-export regulations, environmental controls, coastal operations, air space, civil and criminal appeals, and judicial code. Any possible argument for self-governance evaporated with the 2017 bankruptcy crisis. A Washington-appointed board now oversees the island's economy, and in the 2016 *Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, v. Luis M. Sanchez Valle, et al.* Supreme Court's ruling affirmed that Congress continues to exercise sovereign power over Puerto Rico.

<sup>66</sup> I am not the first to employ Foucault's theory of governmentality to public art. I find Mary Coffey's use of Foucault's theory of governmentality particularly instructive as a model for its application to public works and monuments. See Mary Coffey's *How Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 17-18.

upon examining the art of governing itself.<sup>67</sup> Foucault distances himself from the idea that power is ultimately located in a determined body, such as a monarch, a dictator, or even the people. According to Foucault, political rule must not be analyzed as a sovereign's monopoly control over a territory and by extension its inhabitants, but rather "power must be analyzed as something which circulates...It is not localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth."<sup>68</sup> The consequences rather than the source of power should therefore guide one's analysis—how is power exercised and practiced and what are the strategies and technologies of governance?

What emerges from Foucault's lecture is a theory that demands a rigorous investigation of the regulation of behavior, which encompasses the various strategies that a government employs in its attempt to regulate or mold the behavior, thought, and action of individuals or groups towards a specific political, social, or cultural end. As the political historian Colin Gordon defines it, governmentality is the "practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed), capable of making some form of activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practiced."<sup>69</sup> If the practice and exercise of governmental power are concerned primarily with the regulation of comportment, state agents and intellectuals

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<sup>67</sup> See Michel Foucault, Michel Senellart, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Michel Foucault, and Colin Gordon, *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98.

<sup>69</sup> Colin Gordon, "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction," in *The Foucault Effect*, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2-3.

must have the means to construct particular *regimes of truth* that shape individual and group identity.<sup>70</sup> Thus, central to Foucault's construction of power and governing practices is the concept of *truth telling technologies*. These technologies and instruments of government are the tools "through which government seeks to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct and thought, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve objectives they [the government] considered desirable."<sup>71</sup> Governmentality is necessarily interwoven with specific regimes of truth and with particular epistemologies of intelligibility that make the activities of governing possible.

This dissertation reads the murals produced under the Treasury Section as part of the New Deal's epistemological regimes of intelligibility. These murals are to be understood as sites where collective identities are visualized and "correct" codes of social conduct and comportment are shaped in order to foster a particular vision of the citizen-subject. Post office murals can best be interpreted as part of a complex set of instruments deployed by the New Deal government as it sought to translate ideology into practice and thus actualize codes of racial and gendered conduct and ultimately modes of ideal citizenship. Seen in this light, the Treasury Section's dogged insistence on the

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<sup>70</sup> In *The Order of Discourse* Foucault, in describing how scientific discourse is governed, using the term "regimes of truth." According to Foucault, "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true." In other words, Foucault argues that a "regime of truth" is the outcome of discourse and institutions, reinforced through the education system, political, cultural, and economic ideology as well as through mass media. Regimes of truth is not a search for an absolute truth that is discovered and accepted but rather produced through specific power relations. It is rather a struggle over the rules which govern truths and falsehoods.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Miller and Nikolas S Rose, *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), 32.

competitive selection process, and its attendant rhetoric touting the merit based selection process function to confer both believability and reliability not only onto the program itself but on the truth content of each mural. The murals need not be and were not necessarily a transcription of a historical reality or true event; rather they represented a way of acting and participating in a ritual of governing. As part of the federally sponsored art programs, post office murals were continuously engaged in the work of representation. They were commissioned and created to construct a particular vision of the world. As instruments of knowledge and communication murals were employed by the federal government to create consensus around the meaning of a particular social and cultural order. Operating as part of a symbolic system of representation, murals can be understood, to borrow a term from Pierre Bourdieu, as the “instrument par excellence of social integration.”<sup>72</sup> The post office murals made possible bonds of social solidarity which, undergirded by both the reliability and believability of the social institutions that commissioned them, functioned as a device to legitimize a particular social system, acting as a bridge between the state and the ‘people.’

Foucault was notoriously silent on issues of race and its intersection with power and discourse; however, his theoretical insights have proven foundational to the postcolonial analysis of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak among others. Foucault’s concept of governmentality, his persuasive triangulation between discourse, power, and government, makes it possible to examine the systematic way that the New Deal state was able to produce politically, ideologically, and culturally

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<sup>72</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, and John B Thompson, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 166.

specific concepts of race and citizenship. His theory of governmentality, which illuminates the material and political aspects of relations of power and their attendant regimes of truth, makes categories of difference such as race and gender thinkable, livable, and actionable. As Critical Race Theory reminds us, race is not a pre-political construct; it demands a rigorous examination of its epistemological and moral import. If Foucault's theory of governmentality can be leveraged in the service of such an examination, it might explain how notions of *the people* and *society* are created, practiced, and ultimately deployed in the constructions of race in New Deal art. Thus, while governmentality can facilitate an understanding of the spatial dynamics of governing<sup>73</sup> through post office murals, its power ultimately lies in its ability to correct the overemphasis that past interpretations of the federal arts programs have placed on class interests to the exclusion of race and its role in shaping the visual cultural sponsored by the federal government.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Visualizing Official Culture***

Federally sponsored murals became part of a larger effort aimed at visualizing an official culture. Indeed, the personal correspondence of Treasury Section administrators reveals a keen interest in developing a 'native' art. Moreover, the administrators made considerable effort through public exhibitions and lectures, newspaper editorials, and other publications to bolster the importance of federal arts projects, framing them as

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<sup>73</sup> That is the various ways the federal employees of the Treasury Section acted at a distance (that from Washington D.C.) to create post offices as sites of power and expression of authority thus linking center with periphery.

<sup>74</sup> For example, while Harris acknowledges that the Roosevelt administration did not challenge existing conditions of legal racial segregation, Harris eschew any substantive or sustained examination of race and the role it played in shaping national identity.

incubators of American art and by extension Americanness.<sup>75</sup> In an effort to promote the work of the Treasury Section, Edward Bruce and Forbes Watson published *Art in the Federal Buildings: An Illustrated Record of the Treasury Department's New Program in Painting and Sculpture, Volume 1, Mural Designs, 1934-1936*. The publication was well received among artists, art professors, and the general public and was even delivered to dozens of embassies, including the Soviet, British, and French.<sup>76</sup> The book was not merely an instrument of aggrandizement aimed at a domestic audience. It became an instrument of cultural persuasion, helping to spread notions of Americanness and its 'native' arts around the world. The archival records reveal the extent to which the government understood its arts programs as an important function of government.

This urge to subsume the function of art within the function of government is perhaps best illustrated in the 1937 Federal Arts Project's survey, *Art as a Function of Government*.<sup>77</sup> The survey featured brief summaries of government sponsorship and support of arts programs in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and Russia. The survey's goal was to bolster the growing demands for increased federal support for the arts by revealing the lack of federal arts patronage in the United States compared to

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<sup>75</sup> See the *National Exhibition of Art by the Public Work Project*, an exhibition held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1934; Forbes Watson delivered scores of public lecture extolling the virtues of federally sponsored art, see "The People and Their Art," 1935; 1936-1938 (At Howard University and Worcester Museum of Art); Lecture at American Association of University Women, 1939; Lecture at National Mural Painters Society, 1940, etc; Other members of the Treasury Section took the print media to spread the propagandize the federal arts: Bruce's editorial in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 1938; *Art in the Federal Buildings: An Illustrated Record of the Treasury Department's New Program in Painting and Sculpture, Volume 1, Mural Designs, 1934-1936*.

<sup>76</sup> See Box 3 folder 16 in Forbes Watson Papers, 1840-1967 for the letters sent from various embassies to Forbes Watson thanking him for sending them copies of *Art in the Federal Buildings: An Illustrated Record of the Treasury Department's New Program in Painting and Sculpture, Volume 1*.

<sup>77</sup> Federal Art Project, *Art As a Function of Government: A Survey* (New York: Supervisors Association of the WPA Federal Art Project, 1937).

other countries. As the American printmaker John Taylor Arms noted in the survey's forward, the report was "not an attempt to offer a definite plan [for a federal arts project]," but rather its purpose was to "provide information for individuals and organizations interested in the adoption of a permanent art program."<sup>78</sup> The survey provides important insights into the rhetorical strategies adopted by the federal arts programs as the administrators worked to frame the government's role in shaping a national cultural identity.

As fascism threatened to upend the existing socio-political order across the European continent and its proponents demonstrated an adroit skill at weaponizing art for their own political agendas, the authors of the survey were careful, at least rhetorically, to distance themselves from the propagandizing overtones of an "official art:"

And here the Federal Art Project has functioned, has done what never before the American government, with all its far reaching influence and its unlimited resources, as been able to do. Without introducing the element of officialdom— for the experience of other countries has taught us that "official art: has its great dangers— its has brought relief to vast numbers of artists who lacked the public support to which they were entitled, it has given them the means and the opportunity to produce that beauty which is their contribution to civilization, and it has bought countless thousands of people works of art of unquestioned quality which constitutes their just heritage.<sup>79</sup>

Yet, the rhetorical distancing from "official art" belies a different reality that emerged, not only in the text of the survey, but that runs through the ideological structure of the federal arts programs writ large. The act of creating art in the context of federal patronage is inseparable from state institutions. Moreover, administrators involved in the process of

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

orchestrating federally funded art projects were continuously participating in a labor of representation; that is, they were engaged in creating the visual appearance of a particular social order. As the report argued, “Government sponsorship of art is a selection of the government itself. The political ideal of any arrangement is mirrored in the form of its art encouragement takes.”<sup>80</sup> The New Deal state understood that culture and political power could be combined and leveraged to create art programs that would foster broad support for the New Deal state policies and its attendant mythologies of citizenship.

The federal government’s role in the production of art was not only championed by the administrators who ran the federal arts programs, but also by members of Congress. On April 15, 1935, the House of Representatives’ Committee on Patents, presided over by Congressman William I. Sirovich, a Democrat from New York, convened a hearing to debate the merits of establishing a new executive department to be known as the Department of Science, Art, and Literature. The department, whose head would have been a permanent member of the President’s Cabinet, was meant to “foster the growing artistic consciousness of the American people” and to “enable American art to proceed along the democratic lines that are kindred to the structure of American life.”<sup>81</sup> Representative’s Sirovich’s report gathered the testimony of a diverse collection of people including poet laureates, members of the National Symphony Orchestra, and Harvard University professors, all of whom testified to the importance of federal support

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>81</sup> United States Congress, House Committee on Patents, *Department of Science, Art And Literature-- April 15, 16, 23-25, 1935* (Washington: U. S. Govt. print. off., 1935), 2.

for the arts. What emerges from the pages of testimony from 34 “experts” is a nearly unanimous enthusiasm for the department’s creation.

Edward Bruce spoke to the committee on two separate occasions, delivering testimony that extolled the virtues of federally sponsored art programs as a way to “raise the standard of living, not in the dollar and cents which they have to spend, but on what they are to receive in the development of a richer and fuller life.”<sup>82</sup> While much of his testimony mirrored the rhetoric he employed in other publications and speeches,<sup>83</sup> his comments also suggested that federally sponsored art be deployed in a regressive way, as an instrument of discipline and control. His testimony is enlightening and worth quoting in full.

Boredom is one of the worst ills of humanity, and the thing that breeds most discontent. With the movement toward shorter working hours we will have more leisure, and I am an ardent believer in the need for the Government to assume leadership in supplying interest and activities which will fill this leisure, and add to people's happiness.... I think that especial thought should be given to this problem in connection with the rising generation of this country. None of us who are more or less in contact with the youth of the country can fail to realize the bewilderment and almost despair of the young man or woman of today who, after their school or college, goes out into the world to carve out a career and find the world does not want them, and that there no place for them, that opportunities such as their parents had to find useful and profitable employment do not exist for them. Either we of the older generations are going to help them solve this problem, or face the issue of having what we built up destroyed by tragic experiments along untried paths not based on sound experience or study. Conditions like those existing today breed the kind of spirit that revolutions are made of. The feeling develops that conditions are intolerable and that anything is better than allowing things to drift as they are. For these reasons I

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>83</sup> See *Art in the Federal Buildings: An Illustrated Record of the Treasury Department’s New Program in Painting and Sculpture, Volume 1, Mural Designs, 1934-1936*; *Lecture at the Exhibit Opening at Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1939*; *Section of Fine Arts Luncheon for Mrs. Roosevelt, 1941*.

believe that your committee, as said in the beginning, is doing a very wise and useful thing.<sup>84</sup>

Bruce is acutely concerned that a generation of young people, devoid of useful and profitable employment and with hours of unstructured leisure time, might rise up in a revolution of the discontented. His testimony reveals a deep seeded paternalism; according to Bruce it is incumbent upon the government to foster the production of art and literature in order to furnish its population with the “interest and activities” to fill leisure time. But perhaps more disturbing is that he positions art and literature as a tool to ameliorate the cultural and social conditions of class-based revolution. He suggests that proper kinds of art and literature can define the bounds of normalcy by setting a national artistic and aesthetic standard, thus acting as a corrective to ‘deviant’ behavior and inculcating modes of proper citizenship.

Bruce’s strain of political conservatism is reflected in his aesthetic taste, Bruce abhorred modern art, describing both the European and American avant-garde, as abstractionist “tripe.”<sup>85</sup> Moreover, unlike his contemporary George Biddle, who praised the Mexican muralists and was the first to urge FDR to follow an Mexican model<sup>86</sup> of federal arts patronage, Bruce was wary of the art and politics of Diego Rivera, José

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<sup>84</sup>United States Congress, House Committee on Patents, 22.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in Alan R. Lawson, *A Commonwealth of Hope: The New Deal Response to Crisis, The American Moment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 137. For a rich discussion of Bruce and the Section’s disdain for overly modernist approaches to painting see Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 3-80.

<sup>86</sup> Shortly after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the Mexican government commissioned artists celebrate Mexican history through a series of federal funded mural projects. See Mary Coffey’s *How Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*, 2012.

Orozco and David Siquieros.<sup>87</sup> Bruce, who while supporting federal arts patronage in general, argued that rather than whole-hearted embracing the Mexican muralists, whose politics he perceived as far too radical, the federal government should be attempting to halt the “Mexican invasion at the southern border.”<sup>88</sup> Both the Mexican art and immigrants that crossed the southern border, according to Bruce, threaten the cultural and national integrity of the United States. As I will discuss in chapter three, during the 1930s mounting anxiety towards Mexican American and Mexican migrant laborers saturated national debates around immigration and nationalization laws. Bruce’s eschewal of a wholehearted embrace of the Mexican muralist tradition, not only reflected this larger national anxiety but also implied that a reliance on the Mexican muralists would stymie attempts to define and promote a renewed sense of American national identity.

### **Gazing at the Government**

On January 17, 1935, Secretary Morgenthau, with the approval of President Roosevelt, announced that twenty-four painters and sculptors would be selected to embellish the walls and corridors of the newly completed Post Office and Justice Department Buildings in the Federal Triangle. These were the first New Deal architectural additions to the capital and as such gave Morgenthau, Rowan, and Bruce an opportunity to demonstrate the importance and success of federal arts patronage. As the

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<sup>87</sup> See Letter Biddle to Roosevelt, May 9, 1933, cited in Patricia Hill, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Painting of the 1930s*, (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1983), 35. Biddle, who had studied in Mexico with Diego Rivera in the 1920s, was deeply inspired by the socially conscious public art in Mexico, particularly the murals of Rivera and Jose Orozco. Although his personal politics were to the left of Bruce, they both believed that if the federal government provided the patronage, great art would be produced.

<sup>88</sup> Cited in Richard D McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 57.

first major commission of the Treasury Section, Morgenthau left little to chance, deciding to organize an advisory committee of artists, architects, museum directors, and representatives of the federal government, who would, along with members of the Treasury Section, select the majority of the artists and sculptors for the Post Office and Justice Department buildings.<sup>89</sup>

In the spring of 1935, the advisory committee selected eleven well known artists and held anonymous competitions to fill the remaining slots. The advisory selection of artists— Thomas Benton, George Biddle, John Stuart Curry, Rockwell Kent, Leon Kroll, Reginald Marsh, Henry Varnum Poor, Boardman Robinson, Eugene Savage, Maurice Sterne, and Grant Wood— reflected the Section’s aim for an “artistic center,” choosing artists who, although incorporating modernist gestures, maintained a representational style and whose works were often populated by heroic celebrations of white masculinity.<sup>90</sup> The committee selected artists who would embrace, as Forbes Watson argued a “return to facts,” rejecting both the abstracted qualities of European modernism

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<sup>89</sup> Committee members included John S. Ankeney, the former Director of the Dallas Art Museum; C.L. Borie, Jr., the architect for the Justice Department Building; Homer S. Cummings, Attorney General of the United States; F.A. Delano the Chairman of the National Planning Board; William D. Delano, the architect of the Post Office Department Building; James A. Farley, Postmaster General of the United States; Robert Harshe, Director of the Chicago Institute of Art; Anna Hyatt Huntington, Sculptor; Bancel LaFarge, painter; Henry Allen More, Secretary of the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; Charles Morre, Chairman of the Fine Arts Commission; William Milliken, Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art; C. Powell Minnegerode, Director of the Corcoran Gallery; Ernest Peixotto, President of the Society of Mural Painters; Duncan Phillips, Founder of the Phillips Memorial Gallery; Henry Schnakenberg, painter; Eugene Speicher, painter; Justice Harlan F. Stone, Justice, United States Supreme Court; Francis Taylor, Director of the Worcester Museum of Art; Harry Where, Acting Curator of Painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>90</sup> Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 7.

and overwrought classism of a “befuddled academism.”<sup>91</sup> Benton and Wood were the only artists to turn down the Section’s commission.<sup>92</sup>

Of the ten artists selected by the committee, Reginald Marsh, Rockwell Kent, and Eugene Savage were the only three assigned to the Post Office Department Building. The remaining eight slots would be decided by competition. However, rather than announcing an open call for participation, the advisory committee invited a select group of artists to submit proposals for consideration. Artists were asked to submit works that addressed pre-selected historical episodes in the postal service’s history, as well as themes related to the values of the postal service.<sup>93</sup> True to the Section’s desires, the eleven muralists constructed a romantic and highly mythologized postal history, one which can easily be read as a history of the United States. The mural cycle begins on the 7th floor with Karl R. Free’s *French Explorers and Indians* (1938), (figure 1) and *Arrival of Mail in New Amsterdam* (1938), (figure 2). Loosely inspired by colonial figures and events, Free’s murals were intended to represent the important role of communication to building peaceful and economically productive relationships. *French Explorers and Indians* is based on the June 27, 1564, meeting of the French colonist René Goulaine de

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<sup>91</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-To-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 56.

<sup>92</sup> In a letter to Bruce dated July 29, 1935, Rowan informs Bruce that Benton and Woods are withdrawing from the Washington D.C.. Post Office Building mural commission as “they seem to think some political committee is over-riding the art one.” (Box 9, Folder 63, Edward Bruce Papers 19092-1960, Archives of American Art).

<sup>93</sup> Approved historical episodes included colonists receiving shipments of mail from England; the Colonial Governor Francis Lovelace of New York arranging mail service between New York and Boston; Scenes of Benjamin Franklin, the first Post Master General working in a post office; and the establishment of postal service in western states. Other acceptable themes included speed, security, endurance, courage, honesty, responsibility, intelligence, courtesy, reliability and accuracy. See the Bulletin of the Section of Painting and Sculpture No. 2, April 1, 1935, 8.

Laudonnière and chief Saturiwa, a member of the Florida Timucuan tribe.<sup>94</sup> A fantastical pastiche of tropes signifying an exoticized Other populate Free's scene of first contact. He borrows generously from stereotypical images of indigenous people with little regard for historical accuracy. The Timucuan's attire is a mélange of various American Indian tribes and the decorated buffalo skull in the lower right section of the work is not a part of the Timucaun visual culture, but instead a stereotypical signifier of American Indianness popularized in the works of Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley. The mostly nude Timucuan Indians, their identities conceived in terms of the primal, instinctual essence of an unspoiled verdant landscape prime for European colonial control, assume kneeling and subservient positions as they bring baskets of squash and game to de Laudonnière and his men.

The recumbent figure, covered in black body paint, gestures, with a conch shell held in his outstretched, muscular arm, towards the mural's most important scene—the meeting of chief Saturiwa and Goulaine de Laudonnière. Chief Saturiwa puts his arm around Goulaine de Laudonnière in a sign of friendship, while Goulaine de Laudonnière looks out toward the bountiful gifts brought to him by the half-naked Timucuan. The recumbent figure along with Saturiwa and de Laudonnière frame a second painted indigenous figure who drapes garlands around a large column bearing a coats of arms. The monument, erected in 1564, commemorates the 1562 landing of the French Colonist Jean Ribault near the mouth of St. Johns River near present day Jacksonville, Florida.

The stone column, bearing the coats of arms of French King Charles IX, was

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<sup>94</sup> General Service Administration, "Karl Free," accessed June 1, 2017: <https://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/120806>

commissioned by Ribault as a visual marker of France's colonial claim to Florida. Free's composition seemed to have been inspired by a sixteenth-century sketch by Jacques le Moyne de Morgues (c. 1533–1588), a French artist who accompanied Jean Ribault's expedition to the New World (figure 3).

In the decade preceding Free's mural, the Florida Chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) began organizing around efforts to commemorate the location of Ribault's point of American debarkation. Members of the DAR wanted to celebrate the origins of European colonization and by extension the cultivation of an enlightened American civilization. In 1924 a small plot of land was donated near present-day Mayport, Florida, and officials erected a column designed by the sculptor Charles Adrian Pillars. The U.S. Post Office also released a commemorative stamp of Ribault's landing, and the U.S. Mint released a coin. The monument, much like Free's mural, was an outgrowth of nostalgia and romance, grounded in a myth about the colonization of America. This myth perpetuated the idea that the 'noble savages' of the Americas welcomed in friendship the enlightened European colonizers, and was designed to provide both justification and reassurances in the face of a brutal genocide and colonial occupation.

Free's pendant piece, *Arrival of Mail in New Amsterdam* (1938) depicts the thriving 1650s port city of New Amsterdam. The director-general of the New Netherlands, Peter Stuyvesant, accompanied by his wife Judith Bayard, walk along the East River wharves to greet Captain Jacob Vandergridt, the commander of the Dutch

West India Company vessel *Zwolle*.<sup>95</sup> Captain Vandergridt gestures towards a mail cart pulled by an African slave that has arrived from the Netherlands. Taken together, Free's murals, along with the twenty other murals in the Washington D.C. Post Office Building not only depict the genesis and evolution of the American postal service, but also the American nation, from its early colonial origins, represented by Free's work to depictions of the early Republic captured in George Harding's *Ben Franklin, Colonial Postmaster* (figure 4) to images of Manifest Destiny communicated in Frank Mechau's *Danger of the Mail* (figure 5) and Ward Lockwood's *Opening of the Southwest* (figure 6) and *Consolidation of the West* (figure 7), to contemporary depictions of American imperialism hinted at in Rockwell Kent's *Mail Service in the Tropics* (figure 8) and *Mail Service in the Arctic* (figure 9).

Given the extent to which the federal government controlled and curated the subject matter and aesthetic appearance of each mural in the Washington D.C. Post Office Building, I believe that the contemporary images of labor in this cycle can be interpreted as indices of idealized citizenship and personal comportment. To that end, a close reading of the murals of Doris Lee, Alexander Brook, Alfred Crimi, and Reginald Marsh, who are the only artists to explicitly address images of contemporary labor in their works for the post office in Washington, D.C., will illuminate the various ways the federal government sought to produce and reproduce a particular discourse of Americanness. Using Foucault's theory of governmentality as a framing device, I will leverage both historical and contemporaneous debates over the relationship between poverty, labor, and social

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

desirability to ground my analysis of the laboring bodies that decorate the walls of the Washington D.C. Post Office Building.

### **Poverty, Labor, and Citizenship**

Work, as the American historian Daniel Rodgers notes in his introduction to *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920*, was understood “as the core of the moral life,” an “act of virtue...the vital center for living.”<sup>96</sup> Indeed, even before the Industrial Age, labor was deeply enmeshed within American culture as a marker of morality, holding both real and symbolic value.<sup>97</sup> America, from its colonial inception onward, was rhetorically constructed by political and cultural figures alike as a land of plenty, where abundant economic opportunity erased both joblessness and poverty. Writings from the colonial period reveal early examples of this paradigm. In his 1538 report, *Discourse on Western Planting*, the English social theorist Richard Hakluyt argued that the North American colony was a quasi-utopian space, where “The frye [children] of the wandering beggars of England, that grow up idly, and hurteful and burdenous to this *realm* [*England*], may there be unladen, better bred up...to their own more happy state.”<sup>98</sup> The colonist Gabriel Thomas described the American colony as a place “where poor people of all kind can here get three times the wages for their labor they can in England or

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<sup>96</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), xix.

<sup>97</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 13.

<sup>98</sup> Richard Hakluyt, *Discourse of Western Planting, 1584* (Cambridge, Press of John Wilson and Son, 1877) 160-161.

Wales.”<sup>99</sup> The myth of American abundance only furthered the link between work and morality. If America was a land of plenty, poverty and joblessness could only be the result of an individual’s indolence and moral failings. Of course this utopian vision constructed by early colonial promoters of America was a fiction.<sup>100</sup> Yet, despite the endemic poverty of the colonial period and early Republic, the myths of American abundance persisted, enabling political leaders to ignore systemic causes of poverty in favor of policies that criminalized an individual’s behavior.

Vagrancy laws, the preferred public policy aimed at addressing poverty, were passed in an effort to deter crime and safeguard communities against the “threats” that poor people posed to the moral order.<sup>101</sup> Vagrancy laws prohibited begging and mandated that the “able-bodied” work. Those found in violation received a range of possible consequences, including corporal punishment, imprisonment, confinement in workhouses, and involuntary indentureship.<sup>102</sup> Those who were not auctioned off to local farmers or simply expelled from town, or institutionalized in poorhouses in an attempt to transform their behaviors and reorder their personalities with the hope of “inculcating a

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<sup>99</sup> Gabriel Thomas, *An Historical and Geographical Account of the Province and Country of Pensilvania*. London: A. Baldwin. Cited in Gwendolyn Mink, and Alice O'Connor. *Poverty in the United States : An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, and Policy* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2004),1.

<sup>100</sup> As John K. Alexander notes in his 1980 publication *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* at least 15 percent of Philadelphians in the second half of the 18th century could not provide for themselves (John K. Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.), 9).

<sup>101</sup> “Vagrancy Laws/Settlements Laws/Residency Requirements” in *Poverty in the United States: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, and Policy*. Gwendolyn Mink, and Alice O'Connor eds. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 755.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

steady habit of work.”<sup>103</sup> Public assistance for the poor existed principally through private charity, although this form of aid was met with a deep rooted suspicion of its effect. It was commonly assumed charity could make poverty a way of life, breeding indolence and enabling poor people to shirk personal responsibility. As Benjamin Franklin, whose portrait graces the halls of the Washington D.C. Post Office Building, famously noted, “The best way of doing good to the poor is not making them easy *in* poverty but leading or driving them *out* of it.”<sup>104</sup>

The perception of paupers as a lazy and shiftless underclass persisted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, as the historian Mary O. Furner has observed, there was “a powerful tendency ... to picture poverty as a product of individual moral failing ... rooted in Puritan moralism, the Protestant work ethic in the early and mid-nineteenth century defined earthly success as evidence of God’s favor—the product of industry, good character, and thrift—and poverty, by contrast, as the result of laziness and sin.”<sup>105</sup> However, by the turn of the twentieth century the Social Gospel Movement armed with the advances made in the emerging fields of social sciences challenged age old beliefs that poverty resulted from an individual’s moral failings. The Social Gospel Movement reframed the causes of poverty in terms of environmental

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<sup>103</sup> Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse : A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 11.

<sup>104</sup> Franklin, Benjamin, and Jared Sparks, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin: Containing Several Political and Historical Tracts Not Included in Any Former Edition, and Many Letters Official and Private Not Hitherto Published : With Notes and a Life of the Author* (Boston: Tappan, Whittemore and Mason, 1848), 358.

<sup>105</sup> Mink and O'Connor eds., 10.

factors— overcrowding, poor sanitation, unhealthy and dangerous working conditions, and a lack of education.

During the Progressive Era, rather than focusing on private charity, reformers sought broader structural changes to eliminate poverty. The Settlement House Movement and the National Urban League were founded to provide social services and education to the poor, while the U.S. Children's and Women's Bureaus were established to improve federal policy-making regarding women and children.<sup>106</sup> Yet, as Cara A. Finnegan incisively charts in her attentive reading of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries images of poverty, both hostile and environmental views existed, reflecting “an ambivalent anxiety about the poor.”<sup>107</sup>

The Great Depression thrust this ambivalent attitude towards poverty into high relief. The devastating economic effects of the Great Depression were not only confined to the poor and vulnerable, but were also felt amongst the “respectable” and “hard-working.”<sup>108</sup> As Neil Batten has charted in his concise history of Americans' attitudes towards poverty, during the Depression popular opinion of poverty began to soften in tone. As he notes, newspapers “concentrated on personal tragedies and human interest

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<sup>106</sup> For further discussion of the Settlement House Movement and Children's and Women's Bureaus see Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Linda Gordon, *Pitted but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

<sup>107</sup> Cara A Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>108</sup> At the height of the Great Depression 25 percent of the population was unemployed, however that number was nearly double in African American and other racial minorities.

stories concerning newly derived poverty.”<sup>109</sup> Yet, this softening tone existed comfortably with a deep-seated anxiety towards the poor. Even FDR, the supposed champion of the forgotten man, was deeply wary over what he perceived as the dangers of the “dole,” which he characterized as a narcotic. In his 1935 State of the Union Address, FDR argued that “continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber.”<sup>110</sup> As such, even as Progressive Era reformers forced a more holistic understanding of poverty into the national political discourse, attempts to define whose lives were worth living and assisting and whose were disposable, persisted. The hostility towards and “othering” of the poor was deeply tied to the policing of citizenship through both social policy and naturalization laws.

Citizenship is often conceived of in one of two ways, either as existing *a priori* as a set of rights determined by ones birth or naturalization or as something that is earned through labor and “proper” behavior. The hostility towards the poor reveals a bias in the United States towards the latter definitions of citizenship. Poor people have often been constructed in political rhetoric from the colonial period onward as apart or outside of the economic and social mainstream, as morally deficient, criminal or otherwise in need of institutionalization and as such unable to fulfill the obligations of citizenship.<sup>111</sup> Although there was an expansion of the social and economic rights of citizenship under FDR,

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<sup>109</sup> Neil Betten, “American Attitudes Toward the Poor: A Historical Overview,” *Current History* 65, no. 383 (1973): 5.

<sup>110</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, “Annual Message to Congress, 1935,” *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt vol 4, 1935* (New York City: Random House, 1938), 15.

<sup>111</sup> See Gwendolyn Mink, and Alice O’Connor, *Poverty in the United States: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, and Policy* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 1-49.

through the creation of unemployment insurance, the Social Security Administration, and the various other programs such as the Civil Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration, all of these measures were tied to a person's ability to work thereby underscoring the importance of labor. It is within this cultural and political milieu, where labor was celebrated as a vehicle through which one earned the rights of citizenship and where poverty was viewed suspiciously, that I will interpret the works of Doris Lee, Alexander Brooks, Alfred Crimi, and Reginald Marsh.

### **Doris Lee and the Agrarian Myth**

In *Country Post* (1939), (figure 10) and *General Store and Post Office* (1939), (figure 11) Doris Lee, the only woman to have her work chosen for the Washington D.C., Post Office Building, transforms her assigned subject matter, "the rural free delivery service (country post)," into idealized portraits of rural life. The warm, evenly lit interior of Lee's *General Store and Post Office* celebrates the centrality of the post office in country life. True to life, Lee's post office is a space that simultaneously functions as a post office, general store, gas station, and community center. In the right corner of the canvas, an intergenerational group of three men cluster around a stove. The youngest of the group, seated on a well-worn wooden chair whose cracked stile is held together by a piece of bent metal, reads a newspaper aloud to the group. The middle-aged man, whose deeply lined forehead and slightly sunken eyes are framed by pronounced crow's feet and periorbital puffiness, cranes his neck towards the overall clad youth to better hear the headline, "Farmer's Organize and Hog Prices Lowered" from *The Time Record*. In a rather bizarre compression of space, Lee has inserted a third man, the oldest in the group

behind a stove. The old man wistfully stares towards the shopkeeper who stands behind a vibrant red counter pouring provisions onto his “honest weight” scale. The fraught subject of food or lack thereof, which was a central concern during the years Lee worked on this mural, belie the abundantly stocked general store. Cured meats hang from the ceiling, while a basket of fresh grapes and eggs nearly overflow and threaten to tumble off the counter.

The shelf behind the shopkeeper is filled with cans of corn, boxed cheese, and tins of coffee and sugar. In front of the shopkeeper’s display of goods, two women approach a postal counter. One in a pale peach dress stares through the postal window, her gaze met by the local post man. She rests her right arm on the counter’s window ledge while her left hand rest tenderly on the shoulder of her daughter who playfully tugs at her mother’s dress. The young girl points with her free hand to a wanted poster, underscoring the importance this space has for disseminating essential information. The second woman, clad in an emerald green blouse and skirt stands behind her, waiting to send a letter she holds in her hand. Lee creates a dynamic rhythming of space, alternating from densely crowded and compressed clusters of people— the group of three men, and the pairing of two women and a young child— to areas which are sparse and expansive by comparison — the door, which opens on to a gas pump and the rolling expanse of farm land to an uncluttered interior area behind the local post man.

*Country Post*, like its pendent piece celebrates rural life. Rather than painting images of Dust Bowl refugees or African American sharecroppers, Lee instead depicts a

farming family who seems to embody the ideals of the so-called Agrarian Myth.<sup>112</sup> The white farmer kneeling in the shallow foreground of the mural is monumentalized, appearing as a looming presence in the viewer's field of vision. Rendered as the landowning hero of Lee's Agrarian Myth, he inspects a shipment of new equipment, implying the productivity and bounty of his land and of the labor of industry. While the church steeple behind him marks the farmer as moral and faithful, Lee makes a point of emphasizing the modernity of the scene. Behind the farmer and his son, the mail carrier drives past in an automobile. Until 1929, rural mail carriers were required to provide their own transportation, which meant that most drove a horse and wagon. While not completely anomalous, the presence of the automobile, even in 1935, would have been unusual.<sup>113</sup> The automobile, coupled with the passing train, emphasizes the mechanical and industrial innovations of modern American progress. Lee, like the Regionalists Grant Wood, Thomas Benton and John Stewart Curry, was vaunted by the art critic Thomas Craven as an antidote to the degenerate hold European modernism had over American painting. Craven praised Lee's works in his book *Treasury of American Prints* for their

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<sup>112</sup> The Agrarian Myth is the notion that the best and most desirable form of community is found in rural, agrarian life. These Agrarian communities were believed to be the backbone of American life, containing the values Americans prized— strong work ethic, independence, and integrity. American writers and social thinkers such as Crèvecoeur, Benjamin Franklin (who believed that agriculture was the only honest way for a nation to acquire wealth), William Jennings Bryan and Thomas Jefferson articulated and promoted the Agrarian Myth. Jefferson wrote, “The small land holders are the most precious part of a state” (cited in Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 25.) and “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (cited in Tarla Rai Peterson, “Jefferson's yeoman farmer as frontier hero a self defeating mythic structure,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 7, Issues 1 (December 1990): 13).

<sup>113</sup> “Rural Free Delivery (RFD),” accessed June 24, 2016, [https://about.usps.com/publications/pub100/pub100\\_020.htm](https://about.usps.com/publications/pub100/pub100_020.htm).

“delicate and precise pictorial charm,” joyous promotion of rural subject, and celebration of ‘traditional’ American culture.<sup>114</sup>

Yet Lee’s murals for the Washington, D.C. Post Office Building are a departure from the Regionalist painters she was often grouped with in both the popular and academic circles of the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike Alexander Hogue’s haunting depictions of environmental disaster, for example, Lee’s murals, as well as her larger oeuvre, did not address the environmental and economic crises of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression and bear little trace of the psychological impact of these catastrophes. She eschews even the quotidian hardships of farm life, which Benton and Curry embraced with evocative dynamism.<sup>115</sup> What Lee gives the viewer instead is a celebration of the mythologized men and women who tamed the prairie and created America’s Fertile Crescent through their indefatigable labor. Lee’s murals are “anytown,” USA, a fictional backdrop of what could be anywhere and everywhere, thus she anchors her images to a supposed “universal” Americanism. Her works are not nostalgic glimpses into a bygone American past usurped by industrialized urbanization, but rather are meant to be read as a dictation of contemporaneous rural life. She presents the viewer with a portrait of the land and the rural folks who tend it, offering a window into the source of American democracy itself. Indeed, her intergenerational family groups are meant to convey that the fertility of the land and the family would continue harmoniously in perpetuity.

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas Craven, *Treasury of American Prints: A Selection of One Hundred Etchings and Lithographs by the Foremost Living American Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), 62.

<sup>115</sup> See Thomas Hart Benton’s *The Hailstorm*, 1940 or John Steuart Curry’s *Tornado Over Kansas*, 1929

Lee's insistence on the inclusion of intimately authenticating details of rural life—the careworn, frayed overall strap held together by another small piece of fabric, the rumpled stocking of a small child who runs around so much and so often that her stocking will not stay put, the pink and green pattern of a sock just peeking out from under a risen pant leg— all work towards the veracity of her images. Yet her farmers' hands are not dirtied by labor and their feet are encased in well-heeled, clean boots rather than soil from the field. In fact, despite being pictured outside by a barn surrounded by objects of agricultural production, the figures in *Country Post* are surprisingly clean and unrumpled. Lee's work provides a startling contrast to the unflinching spectacle of the downtrodden Other, captured in the images by Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Walker Evans and other members of the Farms Securities Administration.

The bare feet and weathered hands, often covered in a layer of soil, in much of Lange's photographs were transformed into emblems of both suffering and perseverance. In Lange's *A young farmer, resettled on the Bosque Farms in New Mexico* (1936), (figure 12) reproduced in Paul Taylor's article "From the Ground Up" in the September 1936 issue of *Survey Graphic*, we are confronted with a young farmer who props his left elbow on a plow. His care-worn, dust-covered clothing, muddy boots, and unflinching, sober expression contrast sharply with the pristine and unsullied clothing of Lee's figures. Both Lee's and Lange's images convey that one's identity is bound to one's work, with figures identifying themselves by their proximity to the tools of their trade. Yet, while Lee's work seems to imply that the farmer and his family own the land, barn, and livestock, the title of Lange's work implies the pictured figure has abandoned his own land and resettled

somewhere else. The running stream, leafy trees, and crowing roosters inject Lee's mural with a sense of lively abundance, worlds away from the barren and unyielding landscapes of Lange's work.

Lee's eschewal of Dust Bowl iconography was a conscious choice shaped in large part by the desires of the Section. Lee was well aware of the plight of rural farmers, not only because images from the FSA circulated widely in publications such as *Look! Magazine*, but also because Lee was married to the FSA photographer Russell Lee, who extensively documented the plight of Dust Bowl refugees. While images of suffering and poverty might have been appropriate for FSA photographers, whose work was meant in part to justify FDR's New Deal programs, Treasury Section administrators were weary of allowing artists to depict the consequences of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl. The archival records reveal that Section administrators often asked artists to create positive representations of rural America. For example, Edward Rowan asked Treasury Section artist Laura B Lewis to "relieve the starkness of the barren house." He would later praise her revisions, noting that they would "give the scene some feeling of hope and well-being."<sup>116</sup> Artist Arthur Getz was criticized for the depiction of a young boy in his *Harvest* mural, with Rowan taking umbrage with his overly slim frame, complaining that "his thin little arms are somewhat distressing in a scene of such abundance."<sup>117</sup> Even animals were required to look happy and well fed. Forbes Watson took Arthur Voney to task because the dog in his mural *Corn, Cotton, and Tobacco Culture* was "unpleasantly

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<sup>116</sup> Cited in Melsosh, 63.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

hungry.”<sup>118</sup> Section administrators even objected to murals which depicted laborers laboring or straining under the burden of their toil. Rowan bemoaned that the “most dominate character of design” in Lew Keller’s mural for the St. Helena, California, post office was its “grim mood; the desperate determination to get the work accomplished at any cost. Surely some of the men would be realized in their work and the gesture of these men would be reflective of more ease.”<sup>119</sup>

While Lee’s work was not criticized for its subject matter as it was chosen by the Section, her work did not avoid the scrutiny of its administrators. Her initial cartoons and sketches were criticized for their overly folksy cartoonish style. Lee was instructed that the heads of her figures were much too large for their bodies and their faces and poses were “unduly blatant.” As Marling notes, she was directed to “neutralize the storybook innocence” of her earlier sketch work in order to render figures that would look more like individuals rather than caricatures.<sup>120</sup> Edward Rowan, who along with Watson Forbes, regularly visited her studio to check on her progress. On one such visit in 1937 he noted in a report back to the Section that:

Miss Lee has continued to discard the caricature of her preliminary sketches and the mural looks quite dignified....I called her attention to the fact that in the painting the door of the barn and the barn as a whole seemed smaller than it did in the color cartoon. She admitted that she herself had noticed that and that she was going to correct it. She does not seem pressed at the moment for money, so that she will not present the second full sized cartoon until the first panel is almost complete.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>120</sup> Marling, 60.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

There are perhaps two reasons for the Section's policing of her work. The same year that Lee was awarded the post office competition, her painting *Thanksgiving* (1935) was awarded the Logan Prize from the Art Institute of Chicago. Her award came much to the chagrin of the prize's patron, Josephine Hancock Logan, who called Lee's work "atrocious" and "awful."<sup>122</sup> Logan's indignation prompted her to found the Sanity in Art Movement to protest the impropriety of modern art and to restore the traditional norms of art. Section administrators were keen to avoid a similar controversy, particularly with the prestige they attached the Washington D.C. Post Office commission and as such seemed to have internalized Logan's criticism of Lee's work. But perhaps a more significant reason for the Treasury Section's insistence that Lee's work comport to a proscriptive, realist style is that the Section was attempting to shape a discourse of American art and, by extension, an American identity. Establishing a regulated system of producing American art required that certain constraints be placed on artists who were instructed to follow a set of stylistic and thematic rules. In other words, an initial aspect of the rules for creating an American Art meant that works produced for the Treasury Section would have to be easily legible with recognizable narratives and figurative styles that avoided both the abstracted stylistic tendency of European modernism and the idealized classicism of academic art.

Despite Lee's willingness to accommodate the various demands that Treasury Section officials made, when the finished versions of her murals were unveiled,

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<sup>122</sup> Josephine Logan, cited in Karal Ann Marling, *Designs on the Heart: The Homemade Art of Grandma Moses* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 149.

administrators continued to bemoan the “slight caricature” of her figures.<sup>123</sup> However, the public generally warmed to her work. In the July 1937 *Forum* magazine article, the artist Ralph M. Pearson argued that in Lee’s work:

We get the values which have made pictorial art endure through the ages... Routine events of life have been lifted from the actual to the epic. Reality has been perceived, clarified and forcefully expressed.<sup>124</sup>

Lee’s ‘epic’ depiction of rural life transformed self-sufficient, industrious farmers into the ideological heart of an American national identity, providing an important and lasting visualization of the ideal citizen. While Doris Lee’s celebration of the Agrarian Myth belies the stark reality for millions during the so-called “Dirty Thirties,” her colleague, Alexander Brook more explicitly referenced the turmoil facing millions of Americans. However, Brook, like Lee had to operate under the rules and constraints of the Treasury Section’s attempts to construct a triumphalist discourse of American art and by extension American identity.

### **Alexander Brook**

Celebrated during his life time as one of the country’s “most important painters,” Alexander Brook’s work was lauded for its “authority, faith... and pervading beauty.”<sup>125</sup> While Brook now occupies a tiny footnote in the canon of American art, at the time of his death in 1980 the *New York Times* estimated that Brook may have had “more one-man

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<sup>123</sup> Marling, 60.

<sup>124</sup> Ralph M. Pearson, “The Artist’s Point of View: The Government Art Projects Appraise Us,” *Forum*, (July 193): 47.

<sup>125</sup> Ernest Brace, “Alexander Brook,” *The American Magazine of Art* 27, no. 10 (October 1934): 520-529.

shows at American museums than any other American painter of his day.”<sup>126</sup> As the winner of the Logan Prize in 1929 and the second prize winner of the Picasso Prize at the Carnegie Institute International Exhibition of Modern Painting in 1930, he was even chosen by the art critic and historian Lester D. Longman to lead the “better American art” movement because “he betray[ed] neither art nor America.” Brook’s subtle, restrained realism and tonal richness fit squarely within the more conservative tastes of the Section.<sup>127</sup> As a member of the Woodstock School, Brook’s work avoided both the nonobjective and figural distortions of European modernism. His paintings charted a “middle course” much to the pleasure of his close friend Forbes Watson, who fondly recalled that Brook’s artistic experimentations did not “dash our eyes with its radicalism.”<sup>128</sup>

Brook’s two contributions to the post office building, *Writing the Family Letter* (1939), (figure 13) and *Reading the Family Letter* (1939), (figure 14) celebrate the important role of the post office in connecting distant loved ones. *Writing the Family Letter* gives the spectator an intimate view of a sparse domestic interior. The family matriarch stands in the center of the canvas surrounded by her three young children. Her relatively large stature, emphasized by the vertical dimensions of the canvas and even more by the perspective from below, endows the matriarch with a heroic stoicism. The

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<sup>126</sup> Grace Glueck, “Alexander Brook, 81, a Painter Who Remained a Traditionalist,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1980, accessed June 20th, 2016 <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1980/02/27/111223454.html?pageNumber=34>

<sup>127</sup> See *George Biddle Playing the Flute*, 1929; *Summer Wind*, 1933; *Black and White*, 1941

<sup>128</sup> Lenore Clark, *Forbes Watson: Independent Revolutionary* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2001), 72-73.

pudgy hand of the infant she cradles tugs at her shirt; however, the mother's careworn gaze lingers over her daughter who is seated at a small writing desk, wrapped in concentration as she composes a letter. A young boy stands still holding in hand a homemade cat toy while an equally motionless cat peers out at the spectator from behind the boy's legs. The still solemnity of the image is underscored through Brook's muted color palette and subtle tonalities—the figures are framed by the brown ocher of the carpet and the gray walls of the room. Even when Brook's injects color into the scene—the pine green of the young girl's dress or the rusty red and semolina yellow of the mother's clothes—the saturation of these colors has been dulled by the addition of black. The sole bit of decoration that adorns the otherwise bare walls is a reproduction of Jean-François Millet's *The Angelus*, 1895. Millet's humanitarian impulse and ability to depict the hardship of manual and agricultural laborers with dignity and pathos, coupled with his realist aesthetic, served as a model for Brook, reinforcing the ideological content of his own work.

In the adjacent panel, *Reading the Family Letter*, a young man, the recipient of the family's letter, sits on a low fence post pouring over the latest news from home. Brook unifies his narrative through color. The drab grey walls of his domestic interior have been replaced by overcast grey skies, which overtake much of the background given the work's low horizon line. The barren, unforgiving, landscape is punctuated by small tufts of greenery. In the foreground, a group of three young laborers, their identities established through their proximity to instruments of work, gather around a fourth who points into the distance, perhaps detailing their next assignment. The viewer's attention,

rather than focusing on the recipient of the family letter who is the supposed subject of the work, is drawn instead to the bear chested man in the foreground. The figure strikes a confidently heroic posture— his hands rests assuredly on his hips and his feet face squarely towards the viewer. The denim shirt, draped nonchalantly around his shoulders, expose a muscular and well sculpted chest. His slightly protuberant eyes and unsmiling, stoic expression intensely engage the gesturing figure. He is transformed into an emblem of masculine resolve. His two colleagues, who stand just behind him, wear similarly serious expressions as they stare resolutely into the distance. Taken collectively, the four men who are compressed and layered on top of one another, read as a solid block of masculine fortitude in the face of an unforgiving landscape.

While Brook's murals are ostensibly about the importance of the postal service, they also serve to celebrate one of the most popular programs of the New Deal's relief efforts— the Civilian Conservation Corps. During his first one hundred days in office, FDR introduced the legislation to create the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was envisioned as a program that would save two of the country's most important resources: its young men and its land by employing the former to combat the worst effects of the deforestation and soil erosion which had stymied the economic recovery of the country.<sup>129</sup> On March 31, 1933 Congress approved the Emergency Conservation Work Act, creating the CCC. During the program's lifetime it employed over 3 million men who worked on a number of conservation projects including reforestation, forest protection, soil-erosion prevention, flood control, wildlife restoration, and public range

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<sup>129</sup> On the eve of FDR's inauguration in 1933, FDR inherited an environmental crisis, the years of deforestation and soil erosion exacerbated by the Dust Bowl effected nearly 17 million people.

and park development.<sup>130</sup> Unmarried U.S. citizens aged 18-25 whose families were on government relief rolls were eligible to apply for the program, with special exemptions made for veterans of the Spanish American War and World War I. Hired men would move away from their families and into camps operated by the War Department. The military-style barracks in the background of *Reading the Family Letter*, coupled with the youthful age of the men pictured, help signal to the viewer that these men were indeed part of the Civilian Conservation Corps and thus the family pictured in *Writing the Family Letter* were likely on the relief rolls.

Men recruited into the CCC worked forty hours a week, earning thirty dollars a month,<sup>131</sup> twenty-five of which they were required to send home to their families. CCC workers managed to plant over 3 billion trees, erect 3500 fire towers, lay down 97,000 miles of fire road and spend millions of hours fighting fires, floods and soil erosion. At the program's zenith, between 1935-1936, the CCC employed over 500,000 young men and operated 2650 camps in every state.<sup>132</sup> Like nearly every program of the New Deal, it disproportionately benefited white men at the expense of racial minorities. Although nearly 250,000 African Americans were employed by the CCC, the program instituted racial quotas, limiting African Americans participation to the proportion of African Americans in the national population.<sup>133</sup> However, given the Great Depression's

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<sup>130</sup> Perry Henry Merrill, *Roosevelt's Forest Army: A History of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942* (Montpelier, Vt.: P.H. Merrill, 1981), 11.

<sup>131</sup> In addition to their monthly salary they were also were provided room, board, and clothing.

<sup>132</sup> Merrill, 11.

<sup>133</sup> Letter to Congressmen Aubert C. Dunn from Robert Fechner, General Correspondence, 1933-1942, Enrollment of men, RG 35, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps, National Archives Building, Washington D.C..

disproportionate impact on African Americans, the CCC's racial quotas meant that the program did not sufficiently address poverty in African American communities and denied many qualified African Americans the opportunity to work. Moreover, despite the significant need, historian Olen Cole found that the CCC rarely even fulfilled the racial quota it set. Camps were segregated and African American workers reported countless instances of racial bias and discriminatory acts from their supervisors, and they were often met with hostility from the communities they served.<sup>134</sup>

Mexican Americans were also the target of racial discrimination. As the historian Maria Montoya documents, the CCC was often used to remove Mexican-Americans, often conceived as the undeserving poor—from the relief roles. In New Mexico, county officials were asked to withdraw relief from “families where eligible boys refused to enlist in the CCC in order that Aid to Dependent Children grants may be cut down” thus relieving the county's economic burden by forcing families to work for relief.<sup>135</sup> Latinos and Native American families were also targeted for this type of unscrupulous removal. As Montoya argues, local government officials did not believe that Latinos and Native Americans deserved federal relief but should work for the aid “given” to them by the federal government. Official reports from the New Mexican CCC's offices to Washington reveal the anxiety that administrators felt towards Mexican Americans employed by the program. As one officer noted:

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<sup>134</sup> Olen Cole, *The African-American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 13-21; 27-28.

<sup>135</sup> María E Montoya, “The Roots of Economic and Ethnic Divisions in Northern New Mexico: The Case of the Civilian Conservation Corps,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1995): 22.

The camps are almost 100 percent composed of Spanish-Americans, or Mexicans as they are known here, and about thirty Texans but in spite of this mixture of races the morale is very good. This camp [Bandelier] is unfortunate in that it has had three unrelated accidents in which four men were killed. . . . I do not believe that racially these Latin Americans are as careful as they might be.<sup>136</sup>

Despite the CCC's requirement of citizenship, administrators saw CCC laborers of Mexican descent as mentally inferior and above all else inalienably other.<sup>137</sup> As such, despite the dire need for work among New Mexicans, officers selected out of state white Americans, often from Oklahoma or Texas to fill jobs in New Mexico.

The anxiety surrounding the non-white laborer in the Civilian Conservation Corps was grounded in the notion that the dignity of labor, even when supplied by the federal government should be reserved for "real" (white) citizens, members of the 'deserving' poor. While the race of the figures in Brook's murals was not discussed (as far as I can tell from the archival record), it was tacitly assumed that they would be white, particularly given how controversial the inclusion of African American and Mexican American laborers in the Civilian Conservation Corps was amongst its officials.

At a time when the benefits of citizenship were expanding and the idea that the government had a responsibility towards its citizens was becoming widely accepted, Brook's murals work to visualize precisely which type of person was deserving of help. His depiction of steadfast, economically productive white masculinity fits within the

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<sup>136</sup> M. L. Grant to R. W. Fechner, 21 March 1934, Box 143, Camp Inspection Reports, NM-1 Santa Fe file, CCC Records. By Texans Grant meant Anglo Texans who had been assigned to the camp, cited in Montaya, 28.

<sup>137</sup> A contemporary CCC report noted that Mexicans Americans were "they are mentally and physically inferior to the Texas and Oklahoma enrolled. The average New Mexico enrollee is of Spanish or Mexican decent, speak little to no English, is small and not very well education" (cited in Montaya, 28).

existing paradigm of ideal citizenship that the CCC hoped to produce. There is a convergence of iconography between Brook's manly CCC workers and the workers visualized in official CCC recruiting posters. The government advertised the program as a heroically patriotic undertaking. In a recruitment poster for Vermont's Civilian Conservation Corps (figure 15), a shirtless, muscular young white man triumphantly stands, an ax in hand, ready to work. His youthful strength and vitality recall the figure in Brook's work, whose labor transforms the natural landscape.

Another recruitment poster for the Wisconsin CCC (figure 16) depicts, in photomontage of images, young men engaged in a verity of jobs, including clearing brush, farming, studying, and like the figure in the Vermont poster, working in the lumber industry.<sup>138</sup> The text reads, "The CCC--A Young Man's Opportunity to Work and To Conserve our National Resources." Both the recruitment posters and the Brook's mural emphasize manual, outdoor labor, which would transform the natural landscape, reflecting the belief held by the architects of the CCC as well as FDR, that outdoor labor could reverse the physical deterioration caused by the unemployment and unhealthy environments of the Great Depression. The visual imagery suggests that CCC enrollees would not only venture off to the frontier to tame it through American ingenuity and hard work, but through the process of work they would themselves emerge as economically independent, hardworking, manly, and muscled citizens.<sup>139</sup> Importantly, the construction

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<sup>138</sup> The CCC offered classes, including courses in current events, geography, English, biology and American politics. As Montonya argued the classes emphasized "English, American Politics, and good citizenship... classes were intended to help men act as model American citizens." (Montoya, 25).

<sup>139</sup> See Jeffrey Ryan Suzik's discussion of the notions of masculinity and manliness publicized by the CCC in "Building Better Men": The Ccc Boy and the Changing Social Ideal of Manliness" *Men and Masculinities* 2, no. 2 (1999): 152-79.

of an ideal masculine type in both CCC posters and Brook's work hinge on the maintenance of traditional gender roles. While men were put back to work, women were expected to remain in the domestic space in order to raise families and to support their husbands, brothers, and sons.<sup>140</sup>

Both the CCC's posters and Brook's murals reproduce preexisting notions of the 'deserving poor.' Those deserving of assistance were previously productive members of society. The 'deserving poor' were participants in the Agrarian Myth, embodied by the farmers in Lee's murals, who had merely stumbled on hard times through no fault of their own. The deserving poor continued to be included in the foundational myth of an American national identity and as such deserved assistance. Like Lee, Brook's work acknowledges the ideological importance and dignity of labor and its inextricable link to identity and citizenship; but unlike Lee, Brook more explicitly acknowledged the economic reality of the Great Depression. However, his works do not render reality transparent, but rather provide ideological comfort, confirming to spectators that if one were a 'deserving' (white and male) poor person, the government would provide an opportunity to work one's way out of poverty, all the while maintaining their status as productive *citizens* within the American polity. Brook's murals camouflage the realities of the racial disparities in the CCC employment practices and reinforce a narrative that

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<sup>140</sup> As Barbara Melosh observes, the much of the progress that women breaking the gendered line and entering into the workforce were wiped away by the great depression. The Economy Act of 1932 hurt women's abilities to enter or remain in the work force as it mandated that if cutbacks were needed, those employees who have spouses working in government must be dismissed first, and if new positions are available, priority was to go those who did not have a federally employed spouse.

celebrated white American men's ingenuity and hard work at the expense of ethnic and racial minorities as well as women.

### **Alfred Crimi**

Before his post office building commission, Sicilian-born artist Alfred Crimi was already well known to Bruce and Rowan through his Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civil Work Administration (CWP) murals.<sup>141</sup> Crimi was an enthusiastic supporter of the various federally sponsored art programs. In a 1960s government survey sent to artists about their experience working in federal art's projects, Crimi reflected on his experience working in the program, noting that:

In my opinion, the major virtue of the WPA was: Professionally it enabled the dedicated artist to pursue his art with a feeling of accomplishment, free from the restrictive pressures we have seen under dictator governments. This was the virtue on the part of the government which helped to stimulate a creative attitude in the arts, thus helping to raise the artistic standards of the nation...and was instrumental through its liberal philosophy to make this country the art capital of the world.<sup>142</sup>

Crimi approached his Treasury Section commission with the same enthusiasm. In his murals, *Transportation of the Mail* (figure 17) and *Post Office Work Room* (figure 18), he was tasked with depicting post office workroom scenes as well as the newest methods of postal transportation, including special delivery on bicycles and motorcycles. *Post Office Work Room* opens on an image of modernized labor as men stand sorting letter by size as they move along a conveyor belt towards a stamping machine; other postal workers send out mail through pneumatic tubes and receive packages as they slide down mail chutes.

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<sup>141</sup> In a 1934 letter to Crimi, Edward Rowan wrote to congratulate him on his work, calling it "a beautiful piece of design and draftsmanship."

<sup>142</sup> Alfred Crimi in a Work's Progress Administration Artist's questionnaire, answer to question 38. Box 1, folder 6, Alfred D. Crimi papers, 1930-1987, Archives of American Art.

Work hums along in this convivial scene of a modern postal work room, affording viewers forms of labor not typically visible to them. His mural was inspired by hours spent sketching postal workers and work rooms at the New York General Post Office Building. The cool color palette of mostly blues, greens, and grays coupled with the crisply rendered horizontal and vertical lines order the work, fostering a sense of regularized linearity. However, hulking forms of the rectangular steel machinery give the work its compositional structure and they almost become active figures in their own right. Work in the modern postal room, with its gleaming machinery— emblems of progress— reveals a compatibility of men and the latest technology

Crimi's treatment of modern machinery recalls the machine age iconography of Diego Rivera, Charles Scheeler, and Charles Demuth. While Crimi would have been intimately familiar with the work of Rivera, having been hired in the 1930s to restore Diego Rivera's controversial fresco of communist leaders at the Rockefeller Center in New York City;<sup>143</sup> unlike Rivera, Crimi did not link the "triumph of the working class revolution with a technological Utopianism."<sup>144</sup> The depiction of technical advancement in the work of Crimi was not offered as a means of liberation for the worker, but rather as a marker of the progress and modernity of the federal government.

In the adjacent work, *Transportation of the Mail*, Crimi continues to celebrate the post office's ability to connect people and economies. Right behind the intersection of

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<sup>143</sup> There are six photographs showing Crimi's restoration of Diego Rivera's controversial fresco of communist leaders at the Rockefeller Center in New York City, and a pamphlet titled, *Diego Rivera Portrait of America*. Box 2, folder 3, Alfred D. Crimi papers, 1930-1987, Archives of American Art.

<sup>144</sup> Anna Indych-López, "Electric Power" in *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art*, Leah Dickerman, Diego Rivera, Anna Indych-López, Anny Aviram, Cynthia Albertson, Jodi Roberts, and Museum of Modern Art (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 110.

“Export Place” and “Rail Street,” a train rushes past, full steam ahead into tracks that seem to end abruptly behind a red-roofed two-story house. Crimi’s image is one of commerce and exchange in a suburban town: men stand on a raised platform preparing boxes of items for shipment, while just behind them, a man drives a horse-pulled cart filled with goods. In the foreground, a young girl, the only female figure in either of Crimi’s works, hands a letter to a uniformed postal worker. Another uniformed postal worker on a bicycle watches the exchange. The two predominant figures in the foreground are the railway mail clerks who prepare a box for shipment. The mail clerk with his back facing the viewer wears a holstered gun around his waist. During his preparatory research and sketching trips, Crimi had observed postal workers carrying firearms, a common practice as postal robberies were a regular occurrence. Crimi’s murals captures the bustling, masculine spaces of commerce and the promise of technological progress (embodied in the train); but more importantly, Crimi’s works celebrate the postal workers as emblems of progress. In *Post Office Work Room* modern machinery and technology are extensions of postal workers, their mastery over machines enabling them to move mail quickly and efficiently, while in *Transportation of the Mail*, the mail carrier becomes a conduit of communication, connecting suburban and rural communities to urban centers.

Crimi’s work celebrates the postal worker’s role in American life, a highly coveted job as it not only provided a path to economic stability, but was also seen as a marker of civic service. Importantly and despite the lack of representation in Crimi’s murals, postal work was an important source of employment for both women and African

Americans. Becoming a postal worker meant access to job security and the pay scale and professional prestige of civic service, which could secure one's place among the ranks of the middle and working class.<sup>145</sup> In the early Republic, jobs at the post office were given away as part of the spoils of party patronage; however, the passage of the 1883 Civil Service Act (the Pendleton Act) replaced the patronage system with merit examinations. This merit based system allowed African Americans to enter the federal government at previously unseen rates. After the passage of the Pendleton Act, between 1881 and 1910 African American federal employment grew from .57 percent to 5.86 percent of the total civic service employees.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless, further progress for African Americans was hampered by the "rule of three," which allowed personnel officers to pick one of three qualified applicants. As such, even if African Americans scored high enough on civil service exams for employment, they were often passed over in favor of white workers.<sup>147</sup> African Americans faced additional impediments to federal employment after the election

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<sup>145</sup> Middle class is a flexible and unfixed term, as the social theorist Loic J. D. Wacquant notes "The middle class, like any other social group, does not exist ready made in reality. It must be constituted through material and symbolic struggle waged simultaneously over class and between classes; it is a historically variable and reversible effect of these struggle" (Loic J. D. Wacquant, "Making Class: The Middle Class(es) in Social Theory and Social Structure," in *Bringing Class Back In: Contemporary and historical Perspectives*, ed. Scott G. McNall, Rhonda F. Levine and Rick Fantasia (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991) 57). However as the historian Daniel J Walkowitz has argued, through his careful examination of social workers, argued that their labor as federal employees gained access to the middle class, which he broadly defines as "situated between the blue-collar workers with whom they shared conditions of dependence and the affluent, propertied bourgeois with whom they shared attitudes of individualism and consumer values" (Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working with Class : Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 6). I find this definition of the middle class particularly instructive as it also encapsulates the ambiguity and marginality of the middle class, as a contingent liminal social and political space.

<sup>146</sup> Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality*, 28.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

of Woodrow Wilson, who re-segregated the federal government.<sup>148</sup> On April 11, 1913, his Postmaster General Albert S. Burlseon ordered the segregation of African American and white workers in the Washington, D.C. post offices.<sup>149</sup> In 1914 the Civil Service Commission, with the full support of the President, began requiring that photographs accompany all applications for civil service jobs. While ostensibly the photographs were meant to prevent “impersonations,” the real intent of the requirement was to screen out black applicants. This requirement would not be abolished until 1940, although postal branches throughout the country would continue to remain segregated. Despite the best efforts by many in the federal government to preserve federal jobs as a privilege exclusively for white men, the post office as Philip F. Rubio has shown, became a centrally important site, not only as a vehicle of economic security, but also for the advancement of civil and labor rights, for not merely African Americans but for all Americans.<sup>150</sup>

The anxiety over African Americans in the federal government (beyond a few token positions) intersects with larger notions of civic duty, Americanness, and citizenship. Before 1865 African Americans were legally barred from becoming postal workers (although there are a few examples of enslaved blacks allowed to carry mail under white supervision). The fear was, as antebellum Postmaster General Gideon Granger noted:

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

<sup>150</sup> Philip F Rubio, ““Who Divided the Church?”: African American Postal Workers Fight Segregation in the Postal Unions, 1939-1962,” *The Journal of African American History* 94, no. 2 (2009): 172-99.

Negroes constituted a peril to the nation's security, for employment in the postal service afforded them an opportunity to co-ordinate insurrectionary activities, mix with other people, and acquire subversive information and ideas. Indeed, in time they might even learn that a man's rights do not depend on his color and transmit such ideas to their brethren.<sup>151</sup>

This cravenly racist assertion, meant only to bolster the hegemony of slave-holding states and the racist hierarchy they depended upon, reveals the power of federal employment.

By becoming a federal employee, one did not merely gain access to a steady source of income, but one could learn the rules of citizenship and earn its rights. Indeed, as

Frederick Douglas wrote in 1863:

Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter U.S; let him get an eagle on his cotton, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket and there is not power on earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the rights of citizenship.<sup>152</sup>

A uniform of the federal government was a marker of citizenship and personhood, thus working for the federal government was a way to earn membership into the American political and social polity. A job at the post office afforded one the opportunity of membership into the civic community and thus substantive citizenship. It is significant that, despite the large number of African Americans working for the postal service, Crimi's murals omits any reference to their labor or contributions. Depictions of interracial labor in the seat of federal power would have threatened existing power relations in the capital. It would appear that the only place where African American labor could be shown is in the sorting room and loading docks of Reginald Marsh.

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<sup>151</sup> Cited in Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality*, 19.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

## Reginald Marsh

Despite being tasked with addressing the same subject matter as Alfred Crimi, Crimi and Marsh's stylistic approaches are a study in contrast. Marsh replaces the harmonious, staid placidity of Crimi's figures with an undulating frenzy of bodies. The rhythmic fluctuation of Marsh's figures as they strain to move mailbags coupled with his thick, calligraphic brushstrokes, destabilize the viewer's gaze. Neither *Sorting the Mail* (figure 19) nor *Unloading the Mail* (figure 20) has a fixed center, nor does Marsh provide the viewer with an easy entry into the work or even a stable groundline to occupy. Rather, Marsh fragments the bodies of his laborers, placing them in a shallow foreground, thus thrusting the workers into the space of the viewer. The intimate perspective Marsh captures is a result of the hours he spent creating on-site preparatory sketches. Inspired by the methodical approach to painting urged by Robert Henri, to which he was exposed while a student at Yale and again through classes at the Art Students League in New York, Marsh became an astute observer of the bustling chaos of modern life, immersing himself within the vitality and excitement of New York City. To complete *Sorting the Mail*, Marsh spent hours meticulously surveilling the railway mail service under the old Pennsylvania Station in New York, sketching the modern machinery, interviewing postal workers about their experience on the job and observing as they loaded and unloaded mail.<sup>153</sup> Marsh was also able to conduct onsite research for *Loading the Mail*, which was inspired by a visit to the RMS *Berengaria*, part of the Cunard Line's global shipping fleet, docked in New York City's harbor. Evidence of the ship's international

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<sup>153</sup> Box 2, Folder 27. Reginald Marsh Papers, 1897-1955, Archives of American Art.

reach can be seen in the mailbags from India, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. While Crimi imagines a fictitious suburban town and a mail room that could have been located in any city, Marsh's scenes of urban toil are centered on a specific location— New York City, whose skyline can be seen out the vessel's open windows.

Both *Sorting the Mail* and *Unloading the Mail* are exceptional. These works inaugurate Marsh's experimentation with fresco, a technique which appealed to his well-documented interest in Renaissance Italian art.<sup>154</sup> One can immediately see that Marsh is still learning how to handle the medium, the thick layers of plaster and visible lines demarcating his *giornata* would be refined and would eventually disappear by the time he executed his fresco cycle for the Custom House in New York City. But it is the content of his work— specifically his decision to include depictions of interracial labor— that make these murals noteworthy. Marsh's works are the only ones in the Washington, D.C. Post Office Building to depict contemporary scenes of urban labor and, perhaps even more noteworthy, they are the only depictions of black and white laborers working alongside one another. *Sorting the Mail* features two African American men, one appears prominently in the foreground and the other, whose barely visible torso, framed by mail shoots, peeks out from behind the body of another worker in the top left register of the mural. The two African American men in *Unloading the Mail* are positioned in the center of the mural, one lifting, with the help of a white colleague, a mailbag from Belgium,

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<sup>154</sup> Barbara Haskell, "Swing Time: Reginald Marsh and the Exuberant Chaos of Modern Life," in *Swing The: Reginald Marsh and Thirties New York*, Marsh, Reginald, Barbara Haskell, Morris Dickstein, and New-York Historical Society (New York: New-York Historical Society in Association with D. Giles, London, 2012), 39-40.

while the other reads the destination label (Chicago) from a mailbag which has arrived from Great Britain.

What are we to make of these scenes of urban, interracial labor? On the one hand, they fit within Marsh's larger oeuvre, which attempted to capture the frenetic energy and dynamism of New York City and contemporary American life. Carmenita Higginbotham estimates that during the 1930s Marsh created more than 40 images featuring working-class African Americans.<sup>155</sup> Yet, unlike the Marsh's typical scenes of African Americans in paintings such as *Jobless* (originally titled *Buck Niggers* (1934), (figure 21) or *Sandwiches* (1938), (figure 22) which are notable for the absence of bodies at work, Marsh's Treasury Section murals are explicitly about labor— strenuous and arduous labor. Significantly, the African American laborers in Marsh's work depart from the discursive role African American bodies were required to play during the 1930s. As Higginbotham argues:

Black male bodies of the Depression era, needed to be repositioned to accommodate the new archetype of the noble and suffering unemployed white male. The discursive role of African American male bodies as a code for black (or nonwhite) masculinity required that they likewise change; they were read as lazy, pretentious, insolent and impediments to the country's recovery.<sup>156</sup>

Marsh captures this discursive role of African American masculinity in works such as *Holy Name Mission*, 1931. Rather than depicting the dignified humility of the urban poor captured in images such as Lange's *White Angel Breadline*, 1933. Marsh's men, who stand waiting in line for food assistance, "appeared too upright and too self-possessed to

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<sup>155</sup> Carmenita Higginbotham. *The Urban Scene : Race, Reginald Marsh, and American Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

be regarded as poignant urban spectacles.”<sup>157</sup> Their suffering was transformed into loitering and their subject-hood deemed unworthy of the economic relief afforded to their white counterparts. Indeed, Marsh’s representations of black masculinity from the 1930s are notable for the absence of labor.<sup>158</sup> Yet, because this work was completed for the Treasury Section, images of unemployed African American men would not have been considered suitable subject matter given the Section’s aversion to imagery of struggle and hardship. Instead Marsh’s men, both black and white, are rendered as diligent laborers working in concert with one another. In this capacity, Marsh’s Treasury Section murals adopt similar representational strategies to those of Crimi and other New Deal muralists.<sup>159</sup> Marsh’s muscular bodies become proxies for the steadfast strength of working-class masculinity, emblematic of the cultural stability and the masculine heroism that would carry the nation through a time of crisis.

Yet, Marsh’s images have to walk a delicate line: while black workers cannot play the same rhetorical role as the lazy, pretentious, indolent that they do in his other works, depicting too many employed and thus potentially economically independent African American men would threaten the carefully constructed racial hierarchy operative in the United States. Instead, Marsh elects to depict scenes of interracial laborers working collaboratively towards a collective goal; however, he neutralizes the perceived threat of black masculinity by evacuating the works of their historical context.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> See *Belmont Hotel, East Tenth Street Jungle, 1935; Tattoo and Haircuts, 1931; Jobless* (originally titled *Buck Niggers*); *Sandwiches, 1938*

<sup>159</sup> Erika Doss, “Toward an Iconography of American Labor: Work, Workers, and the Work Ethic in American Art, 1930-1945,” *Design Issues* 13, no. 1 (1997): 53-66.

Marsh's images of racial collegiality were painted against a political landscape of significant racial protests, such as the 1935 Harlem riots and FDR's repeated refusals to pass anti-lynching legislation or forcefully promote civil rights mostly out of fear of alienating the support of Southern white democrats who were foundational to his governing coalition.<sup>160</sup> Particularly significant in the context of Marsh's work is the continued segregation and discrimination African Americans faced in their hiring, promotion, and job assignments within the postal service. African Americans were consistently excluded from the whites only national union of postal workers and were thus forced to establish their own labor federations.<sup>161</sup> Even after Washington, D.C. Post Office desegregated its federal buildings, by 1955, many post offices in Alabama, including in the cities of Birmingham, Montgomery, and Mobile, maintained segregated break rooms and bathrooms. As one Baltimore postal employee noted, "South of Washington, D.C., to the best of my knowledge, there is not a single Negro supervisor or window clerk serving in any of the post offices."<sup>162</sup> Presenting white and black laborers working side by side would have the potential to destabilize traditional racial boundaries, especially given not only the segregated work space of much of the country, but also the continued acts of resistance and organizing that black postal workers engaged in through their various unionizing efforts. Indeed, as Higginbotham argues the black bodies that

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<sup>160</sup> See chapter One: Race, Institutions, and Welfare in American Political Development in Robert Lieberman's *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>161</sup> Rubio, "'Who Divided the Church?': African American Postal Workers Fight Segregation in the Postal Unions, 1939-1962," 172-73.

<sup>162</sup> Cited in A. L. Glenn, Sr, *History of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, 1913-1955* (Cleveland, OH: Cadillac Press Co., 1957), 170.

occupy Marsh's scenes of dance halls, subways, streets, and beaches "acted as substantive cultural and visual markers"<sup>163</sup> that "came to frame anxieties about urban culture, specifically regarding the impact of African Americans on New York's turbulent social landscape."<sup>164</sup> However, Marsh, through various aesthetic strategies curtails the potentially destabilizing threat of interracial labor by neutralizing the perceived threat of the black male body, creating work that fit squarely within the expected racial hierarchies codified by the New Deal.

The majority of Marsh's figures are fully clothed, a number dressed in government uniform, such as the sailors unloading the mail bags marked "Liverpool to Wellington" on the right hand side of *Unloading the Mail* or the uniformed mail carrier in the left corner of *The Sorting of the Mail*. However, the most prominent African American figure in *Sorting the Mail* is semi-nude, dressed from the waist up in a thin undershirt, the contours of his body visible. He faces away from the viewer, presenting the spectator his muscular backside. Unlike the semi-nude figure in Brook's mural, who stands squarely and powerfully towards the viewer, Marsh's semi-nude laborer appears unaware of the viewer's gaze. Bent over at the waist, the figure pulls a rope behind. He is suspended in a moment of strenuous movement, made vulnerable to the penetration of the viewer's gaze.<sup>165</sup> The art historian Erika Doss argues that the semi-nudity in depictions of

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<sup>163</sup> Higginbotham, 3.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>165</sup> The only other semi-nude figure in *Sorting the Mail*, is a white laborer, whose right side of his body—his arms and shoulder—is significantly darker than the rest of his body. This might have been a result of Marsh's inept handling of fresco, as one can see a *gionata* that divided the two halves of his laborer's body. However, this darker skin tone of the white worker may have disquieted contemporary viewers. Indeed, Marsh's work was often criticized for its "tendency towards muddiness" and "color crudities" (Higginbotham, 166).

1930s male labors reflected the politics of masculine and class-based vulnerability. As she argues, nudity and semi-nudity marked figures as “passive objects of pleasure for others rather than the active subjects of their own autonomy and agency.”<sup>166</sup> Semi-nudity excludes the subject from the benefit of prestige and status that clothing can offer, particularly in the context of federal uniforms. The semi-nude bodies of Marshes’ African American figure is denied the privilege of proper clothing, thus rendering vulnerable a non-threatening actor amongst a large group of white, muscular male colleagues.

In *Unloading the Mail*, the muscular figure of an African American worker faces the viewer, his large biceps displayed prominently in his undershirt. Despite his appearance as a steadfast and strong laborer, his brightly painted, enlarged red lips and nose recall racial caricatures that were inescapable in 1930s popular culture. As Higginbotham has posited, Marsh’s propensity to traffic in deeply problematic racial stereotypes in works such as *The Subway* (ca. 1930) and *Twenty Cent Movie* (1936) was a way to define the boundaries of socially acceptable interactions between black and white figures in close contact.<sup>167</sup> Injecting the work with stereotypical markers of blackness enabled Marsh to maintain the country’s racial hierarchy, thus making his work socially acceptable.

Marsh’s African American laborers are set within the frenzied urban toil, working collectively with their white counterpart. They present an image of interracial harmony united in the greater cause of moving mail. These interracial scenes celebrated human

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<sup>166</sup> Erika Doss. “Looking at Labor: Images of Work in 1930s American Art.” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 257.

<sup>167</sup> Higginbotham, 45.

productivity and the strenuous labor of men that ensured the American public could continue to remain informed and connected. Despite the potential progressive decision to include both white and black workers in the space, engaged in the same type of labor, Marsh evacuates the revolutionary potential of racial equality in his work. Instead he creates an images that conforms to the racial caste system at the heart of the New Deal.

## **Conclusion**

In 1938 the Treasury Section published a guide to the newly completed murals and sculptures in the Washington, D.C. Post Office Building. The guide included a floor plan, brief explanations of each art object, artists' biographies, and a list of art to see in Washington, D.C. Emphasizing the democratic dimensions of the Treasury Section's art program, the guide's introduction praised the murals and sculptures as "vitalizing" the post office building, transforming it into "a landmark in the story of American Art" and "a new museum of American art."<sup>168</sup> The use of the term museum is important as it implies that Section administrators believed the space took on the functions of a museum. In other words, administrators viewed the post office-art museum as a space with at least three distinct museological functions: aesthetic, didactic, and social.

The aesthetic function of the post office-art museum was to expose viewers to a native American art, one rooted, through a competitive selection process, in a predetermined set of supposed American traditions and values. The didactic function was

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<sup>168</sup> Box 6, Folder 33, Forbes Watson papers, 1840-1967, bulk 1900-1960, Archives of American Art.

found in the subject of the mural cycle— *the romantic history of the post office*. The murals were meant to instruct viewers, teaching them a highly selective postal history and one deeply intertwined with America's founding, westward colonization, and recent technological modernity. Finally, the social function of the post office-art museum was to present a particular narrative of Americanness by providing situated encounters between the federal government, the artist, their work, and the spectator. The murals were part of a network of political and cultural power, and they were, thus, deployed to inculcate a particular vision of the federal government and its people, helping the visitor metabolize certain myths about American cultural identity.

This chapter demonstrated the works of Alexander Brook, Alfred Crimi, Doris Lee and Reginald Marsh, collectively promoted a citizenship forged through labor. The artists and government patrons aim was to produce ideal citizen-subjects principally conceived of as white, male and able-bodied. The murals of Doris Lee reproduce and reaffirm the importance of the Jeffersonian farmer, whose indefatigable labor settled the West and produced America's Fertile Crescent. Alexander Brook's work reinforced the (fictitious) category of the deserving poor while simultaneously affirming that only the worthy (white men) deserved the support of the federal government. The works of Marsh and Crimi produce harmonious depictions of laboring men. In the murals of Crimi the postal machinery endows the laborers with the prestige accorded to modern technology, while the rugged manliness of Marsh's interracial laborers masks the existing political reality for African American workers. Each mural labored in concert to construct a narrative of American citizenship that reflected the new institutional arrangements of the

New Deal's social and labor policies which, in turn, both shaped how certain groups of people were incorporated into or excluded from the polity. In the following chapters, within the context of murals that specifically address issues of race, I will further examine naturalization, immigration, and social policies that defined political and cultural desirability and membership in American culture. I will compare the depictions of African and Mexican American men and women laborers to the depictions of laborers found on the walls of the Washington, D.C. Post Office Building. Through this comparison I will be able to construct a fuller understanding of how the federal art visualized a divided American citizenship.

## Chapter Two: Cotton—From Slavery to Tenancy, Philip Evergood and the Limits of African American Citizenship

*Really we had made ourselves lifetime slaves, or peons, as the laws called us. But, call it slavery, peonage, or what not, the truth is we lived in a hell on earth what time we spent in the Senator's peon camp.*<sup>169</sup>

An anonymous autobiography provides a searing account of life as an African American sharecropper in Georgia. The constant threat of violence, punishing labor conditions, and seemingly inexorable debt defined the existence of hundreds of thousands of black farmworkers across the South and stands in sharp contrast to the convivial scene of cotton farming depicted in Philip Evergood's *Cotton—From Field to Mill* (1939) located in Jackson, Georgia (figure 23). Evergood's canvas bustles with activity. An army of workers picks raw cotton in the sprawling fields that extend into a vast rural landscape, while others weigh and load bales of cotton into the mule-drawn cart in the foreground. The bales of cotton are presumably headed for the cotton mill that occupies the middleground of the canvas. While the viewer is not privy to the work occurring inside the factory, its productivity is implied by the adjacent train that prepares to carry the mill's products to a national and global market. Evergood's harmonious scene of peaceful productivity belies the brutal history of cotton's development. As a land and labor intensive crop, cotton's ascent as America's export par excellence depended upon the violent expropriation of both indigenous land and African labor. While the cotton

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<sup>169</sup> A Georgia Negro Peon, "The New Slavery in the South--An Autobiography," *The Independent*, (February 25, 1904): 411. Unfortunately, beyond the what is detail in his brief autobiography, nothing is know about the author and he is only referred to by the name "Georgia Negro Peon" (Harris Henderson, "Summary," *Documenting the American South/University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*, accessed August 2, 2018, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/negpeon/summary.html>).

industry secured American global economic dominance, its development begot the staggering social, political, and racial inequalities that continue to define the contours of American life.

Evergood's choice of subject matter— cotton—was hardly original. Indeed, throughout the South, scenes of cotton plantations were such a widely popular subject for Treasury Section murals and sculptures that artists depicted little else. The lack of thematic diversity is due in large measure to the disquiet that southern historical themes—slavery and the Civil War—aroused for the members of the Section, who deemed them inappropriate subjects for post office art. Evergood's work, while presenting a variation on a ubiquitous theme in southern post office art, is distinguished by the presence of cooperative interracial labor.<sup>170</sup> Given Georgia's political climate,<sup>171</sup> his depiction of white and black laborers—who are rendered in a range of different skin tones, an indication that these cotton workers did not merely work harmoniously together— has been interpreted as “a political achievement.”<sup>172</sup> However, rather than reading Evergood's mural as emblematic of a leftist critique of southern race relations, his work reflects the organizing principles of New Deal citizenship and its cultural order, which were deployed to define the boundaries of social and political identities based on race. *Cotton—From*

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<sup>170</sup> To be sure, there are numerous murals of whites and black people occupying the same space, but rarely are they engaged in the same type of labor. White men are instead shown as foremen and bosses, supervising and surveilling the labor of black folks. CF. Marion Sanford, *Weighing Cotton* for the Winder, GA post office or Lee R Warthen, *Cotton Scene* for the Hartselle, AL post office.

<sup>171</sup> When Evergood installed his work in 1939 the state's governor Eugene Talmage, an infamous white supremacist, whose guiding political ideology was grounded in white supremacy and whose central campaign promise the disfranchisement of African American voters by restoring the all-white primary, where by only white voters were permitted to participate.

<sup>172</sup> Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 159.

*Field to Mill* not only illuminates the limits of the supposed radicality of Evergood's politics, but the constraints placed on artists working under the auspices of a government agency whose ultimately conservative ideology shaped the nature of the works it commissioned.<sup>173</sup> The New Deal created a series of policies and institutions grounded in racial discrimination that fundamentally re-inscribed the Jim Crow caste positions of African Americans and further cemented the color line in the American polity. As such, I argue that Evergood's mural, rather than challenging the color line, helped to make sense of and rationalize it. In this chapter, I will read his work against the long history of cotton farming in the United States, early twentieth-century racialized discourses of labor, which seized on racialized ideas of difference and hierarchy to rhetorically assign race to certain types of labor, and a close examination of the social policies of the New Deal. As the Foucaultian framework of governmentality suggests, Evergood's mural became a tool through which the "proper" behavior and conduct of black bodies could be modeled and managed. I contend that his work is part of a set of visual codes and indices that construct the black body as the oppositional "anti-citizen"—that is, as figures who lacked the requisite qualities to exercise full and substantive citizenship and as such were ineligible to participate in the rituals of democratic self-governance and economic independence that defined conceptions of American freedom and belonging.

### **History of the Commission**

In July 1936, the town of Jackson received a \$50,000 grant from the federal government to construct a building that would serve as both an agricultural center and

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<sup>173</sup> Indeed, the Treasury Section's ideological commitments reflected New Deal government's disinterest upsetting the racial hierarchy at the heart of the American project.

post office.<sup>174</sup> As established by the Procurement Division of the Department of the Treasury's Public Works Branch, one percent of the cost of construction was reserved for the building's embellishment. Unlike the post office murals commissioned in San Antonio and Washington, D.C. (the other mural cycle this dissertation considers), which were selected by national competition, Philip Evergood was invited by the Section to design Jackson's post office mural. By 1937 the Section realized that holding national competitions for every mural and sculptural installation was an unmanageable task for a small department, which at its largest only employed thirteen people full-time.<sup>175</sup> Capitalizing on the significant number of submissions already received for their most prestigious national competitions, coupled with the eagerness of artists to participate in federally-sponsored art programs, the Section began to commission artists who, despite having unsuccessfully submitted works to national competitions, showed promise, inviting them to create murals for smaller, often rural post offices. As noted in a 1937-1938 Section report:

The Section has been able to develop further the practical policy of making one large anonymous competition serve as the basis for a number of appointments. This system is whole-heartedly endorsed by artists and has greatly increased their interest in the competitions.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> "Bids to Receive for Federal Building," *Jackson Progress Argus*, July 17, 1936, 1.

<sup>175</sup> For fiscal year 1940-1941 total personnel expenditure was only \$9,123.75, the total authorized expenditure was \$2,140,249.69. From "Section of Fine Arts: Fiscal Year — July 1, 1940 to June 30, 1941," Annual Reports, 1935-42; Box No. 1 Entry 128; Records for the Public Building Service; Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration, and Its Predecessors; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>176</sup> "Section of Fine Arts: Fiscal Year — July 1, 1937 to June 30, 1938," Annual Reports, 1935-42; Box No. 1 Entry 128; Records for the Public Building Service; Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration, and Its Predecessors; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

In a July 22, 1937, letter, Edward Rowan wrote to Evergood inviting him to create a mural for the Jackson post office:

Dear Mr. Evergood: The Section of Painting and Sculpture invites you to submit designs for a mural painting for the Jackson, Georgia, Post Office, on the basis of the merit of the design submitted by you in [the San Antonio] Competition. The submission of designs for this building is non-competitive. Upon the approval of the new designs by the Director of Procurement, a contract for the execution of the painting will be prepared for your signature.<sup>177</sup>

Despite the non-competitive nature of Evergood's commission, the Section, with input from the Jackson Postmaster, Victor Carmichael, closely monitored and circumscribed both the content and aesthetic presentation of Evergood's work. In the same letter, Rowan directed Evergood to create a work whose subject matter "embodies some idea appropriate to the building or to the particular locale of Jackson, Georgia."<sup>178</sup> Rowan urged Evergood to not only visit the town, but to work with the local postmaster to determine the most appropriate subject matter for the mural.

Evergood enthusiastically accepted the Section's offer and began work immediately. Unable to afford a trip to Jackson, he made frequent visits to the New York Public Library, where he was able to immerse himself in the history of the industrial and

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<sup>177</sup> Edward Rowan to Philip Evergood, Washington, D.C., July 22, 1937; GA Decatur-McRae; Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD. I was not able to find explicit evidence for why Evergood's submission for the San Antonio post office mural competition was rejected. In chapter 4, I discuss the Section's great enthusiasms for work of Howard Cook, the winner of the San Antonio competition. It may have been the case that the Section, rather than rejecting Evergood's work on the basis of its merits, was simply more captivated by Cook's design.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

agricultural industries of the Deep South.<sup>179</sup> Unlike the Piedmont region of Georgia, Jackson's principle industry was not cotton farming, but rather canning and cotton milling. Despite his awareness of canning's importance to Jackson's industrial landscape, Evergood chose to focus on cotton because "it seemed more interesting from the pictorial standpoint."<sup>180</sup> On November 22, 1937, Evergood wrote to Postmaster Carmichael soliciting his guidance:

I have been concentrating on the theme of cotton— treated in a progressive way from the cotton fields and picking to the mills. As I believe one of the important industries of Jackson is the cotton mill, I felt that this would be a most appropriate subject for the mural. I would appreciate a letter in the near future, giving me any suggestion or idea that you may have in this regard.<sup>181</sup>

While Carmichael never responded to Evergood's request,<sup>182</sup> his preliminary sketches worried the Section. Despite his popularity within artists circles in New York, the Section was acutely aware that Evergood's aesthetic sensibility would not easily translate to the

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<sup>179</sup> In an October 16, 1939 letter to Rowan, Evergood noted he was unable to make a research/sketch trip to Jackson as the journey, which would have cost fifty dollars, was cost prohibitive. As Evergood wrote: "this outlay seemed excessive and really unnecessary in view of the fact that I shall have to make the trip later to install the mural. The contract price being five hundred and ten dollars, two trips down would have meant an outlay of approximately one hundred dollars or about twenty percent of the price of the mural" ( Philip Evergood to Edward Rowan, Woodside, NY, October 16th, 1939; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43, National Archives II, College Park, MD).

<sup>180</sup> Philip Evergood to Victor Carmichael, Woodside, NY, Nov. 22, 1937; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> In an October 16, 1939, letter to Carmichael, Evergood writes, "I received no discussion of the subject or recommendations from you and no data or material concerning Jackson which might have been used." Philip Evergood to Victor Carmichael, Woodside, NY, Oct. 16, 1939; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

rural and conservative town of Jackson. No doubt aware of the protests and picketing that his *The Story of Richmond Hill* (figure 24) mural sparked, the Section urged Evergood to modulate his aesthetic.<sup>183</sup> After seeing Evergood's initial sketches, Rowan wrote:

I do not believe however that you are very conscious of the fact that you are painting not for The Section of Painting and Sculpture nor for an artists group but rather for the people of Jackson, Georgia. It occurs to me that they would not understand the liberties which you have taken with the drawing of the human figures and for this reason I am asking you to reconsider this phase of your work. In this sketch you have made your figures consistently short and the action of them strained in a manner which I believe would be unconvincing to the layman. Further, the rhythm of your composition would be enhanced if the figures of the adults were presented more normally and given greater height. I further believe that it would be more interesting in the composition to present the center building in a less arbitrary manner rather than having the form of it open so that one sees the action going on in the interior. The landscape has indications of real charm and it occurs to me that you might like to develop a landscape decoration... I may add that it has not been possible to procure the approval of the Supervising Architect at this time as the work has not yet been carried far enough or to a wholly satisfactory state.<sup>184</sup>

Throughout the three years that Evergood worked on his mural, the Section continuously attempted to constrain his tendency to distort perspectival space, encouraging him to

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<sup>183</sup> Evergood was commissioned by the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project to create a mural for the Richmond Hill branch of the Queens Borough Public Library. *The Story of Richmond Hill*, oil on canvas, depicts the founding of Richmond Hill in a tripartite narrative arch, beginning on the right with a scene of urban blight. The murals continues with the center narrative, which shows the founders of Richmond Hill as they plan a new community. The work culminates on the left, where viewers observe residents of the newly founded Richmond Hill celebrating their community. Critics of the mural, furious over the accentuated bodily poses and the "ugliness" of the figures faces, called for the works removal. Herbert R. Hartel Jr. discusses the criticism of the mural in great length in his essay "Philip Evergood's 'The Story of Richmond Hill': Suburban Life and Social Class in A New Deal Mural," *Notes in the History of Art*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter 2007): 40-48.

<sup>184</sup> Edward Rowan to Philip Evergood, Washington, D.C. Feb. 18th, 1938; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

create a more harmonious and balanced composition.<sup>185</sup> The Section's anxieties extended beyond Evergood's stylistic choices. In a letter dated August 10, 1939, Rowan cautions Evergood, "care should be used to avoid carrying the tones of the negroes too low in value as this is a sensitive point."<sup>186</sup> Although Rowan does not elaborate on what he means by "sensitive point," his comments reflect the Section's intermittent concern regarding the representation of African Americans.<sup>187</sup>

However, in another 1939 letter to Evergood, Rowan notes:

The people of the South place great stress on dignity and it is our feeling that they are not going to accept the mother and child as you have presented them in the foreground. She frankly looks a little too much like a tramp that is accompanying the workers and for this reason I suggest that you introduce instead of two figures plant growth or shrubbery eliminating both mother and child.<sup>188</sup>

Rowan never makes a specific reference to the race of the mother; however, one can imagine that if the mother was white, Rowan would have feared the implication of a

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<sup>185</sup> In a July 12, 1940 letter for example, Rowan asks Evergood to add another figure in the foreground to "give the work more depth to the central portion of the frieze.. .which was thought to be need pulling forward." Edward Rowan to Philip Evergood, Washington, D.C. July 12, 1940; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>186</sup> Edward Rowan to Philip Evergood, Washington, D.C., Aug. 10. 1939; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>187</sup> After reviewing the initial sketches for Charles Ward's *Cotton Picker* for the Roanoke, Virginia post office, he warned Ward against portraying the black cotton pickers as caricature. Ward responded to Rowan noting, "I shall attend to the things you mention. I'd not want the negroes to think I am poking fun at them, because I like them and am interested in all they do," which according to his mural is picking cotton. Cited in Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture : Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 68.

<sup>188</sup> Edward Rowan to Philip Evergood, Washington, D.C., July. 29th. 1940; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

white “tramp” accompanying black workers. Conversely, given Evergood’s history of painting interracial couples, an image of a black woman with a mixed-raced child, would have also provoked a similar reaction. Rowan’s comments reveal an anxiety surrounding the strict racial codes of white supremacy, which virulently opposed interracial sex.

Rowan’s approach to race in Evergood’s mural vacillates between a support for the supposed foundational creed of the United States (that is all men are created equal) and the much more complicated reality of race in the American South. Rowan’s approach to race reflects the Section’s own ambivalence toward race. Through her careful study of Section records, Barbara Melosh reveals how the Section wavered between a “defense of local taste— defined by prominent whites— and a commitment to liberal pluralism.”<sup>189</sup> Rowan for example, requested that a number of artists include representations of “old plantation mansions,” a symbolic representation of the antebellum South and the ‘genteel’ slave owner.<sup>190</sup> In fact, Evergood included a plantation mansion in the background of his own mural at the apparent behest of Rowan. Moreover, the Section supported the requests of local postmasters to include segregated scenes of labor and to exclusively depict cotton pickers as black, thus maintaining the racial codes of the South, which relegated African Americans to the cotton fields.<sup>191</sup> I will return to the Section’s complicated relationship with race later in the chapter; however, suffice to say that Evergood’s mural crystalizes

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<sup>189</sup> Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture : Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 68.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 71.

both the Section's own rhetorical commitments to liberal pluralism and the strict racial hierarchy that undergirds New Deal politics.

Despite the Section's best efforts to curtail Evergood's propensity to use garish colors, discontinuous and distorted perspective, and anomalous treatment of the human form, and indeed his own responsiveness to the Section's suggestions, the mural was not well-received in Jackson. In an October 1940 letter to the Public Building Administration, Postmaster Carmichael wrote, "so far as this office [the Jackson post office] is able to determine, the mural has been properly installed. Comments have been unfavorable and critical."<sup>192</sup> Indeed, between 1937 and 1940, as Evergood executed his mural, Carmichael continuously raised objections to the content and form of Evergood's work, criticizing the work's lack of "truthfulness."<sup>193</sup> A 1939 editorial in the *Jackson Progress Argus* echoes Carmichael's criticism. The newspaper's editor, J.D. Jones writes:

The mural in the Jackson post office, a WPA project to give some alleged artists a job, is a good example of money wasted while the administration pursues a policy of lifting all the people to the more abundant life at the expense of the taxpayer. The painting is supposed to represent a cotton-picking scene, with gin plants, railroads, compressors and community life in the deep South where cotton used to be king and almost every voter was a democrat. The picture is as full of flaws as a candidate's platform is full of promises. There is nothing true to life about the picture, certainly not as we who were born and reared in cotton county

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<sup>192</sup> Victor Carmichael to Public Buildings Administration, Jackson, GA, Oct. 1940; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>193</sup> Carmichael asked Evergood to send photographs of his sketches so that he could "check the truthfulness of the design as it shows recognized local scenes." Philip Evergood to Edward Rowan, Woodside, NY, January 21, 1938; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

know cotton picking and ginning. Not even the pickaninnies measure up to plantation life hereabouts.<sup>194</sup>

It is unclear why the “pickaninnies” or the rest of the image did not “measure up to plantation life.” Were the black figures not servile enough? Or was it the interracial nature of the labor that elicited Jones’ reaction? The scathing criticism of Evergood’s work, particularly Carmichael and Jones’ insistence on the work’s lack of verisimilitude, coupled with the Section’s anxiety around his depictions of African Americans, illuminate the various ways race was deployed as a marker of Otherness and as an instrument that defines acceptability in the American polity. Before examining the mural’s relationship to race and New Deal citizenship, it is first necessary to discuss Evergood’s own ideological and political commitments.

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<sup>194</sup> J. D. Jones. *Jackson Progress Argus*, Sept 5, 1940.

## Evergood and the Politics of the Left

Born in New York City in 1901 to Miles Evergood, an Australian landscape painter and Flora Jane Perry, an English-trained artist and musician, Evergood spent his formative years in England. He attended Trinity Hall College, Cambridge where he read English but dropped out after his first year, having found his “interests in academic studies [had] rapidly dwindled.”<sup>195</sup> Evergood applied and was accepted to work with Henry Tonks at the Slade School in London. He would later go on to study painting both at the Academie Julien in Paris and the Art Students League in New York under the guidance of G. William von Schlegell and George Luks.<sup>196</sup> His first one-man show opened in 1928 at the N. E. Montross Gallery in New York; an exhibition of fifteen etchings and twenty paintings that reflected his interest in what he termed “imaginative paintings.”<sup>197</sup>

Evergood’s participation in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1933 exhibition *American Painters and Photographers* was a transformative experience. The exhibition afforded him the opportunity to meet Ben Shahn, Hugo Gellert, Reginald Marsh, and Velum Poor. According to his own account, the MoMA exhibition coincided with a loss of “interests in subjects purely drawn from the imagination” and his search for “expressions in contemporary life and scene...and in the artist’s role in society— social

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<sup>195</sup> Philip Evergood, “Chronology,” in Box 1, Folder “Curriculum Vitae, Biographical Material Circa 1940-1960.” Philip Evergood papers, 1890-1971. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

protest art [and] the potential importance of the artist as a propagandist.”<sup>198</sup> By the mid-1930s, Evergood had become increasingly engaged in a burgeoning leftist movement. Elected president of the Artist Union in 1937, his tenure was marked by a sustained effort to champion the rights of artists.<sup>199</sup> As an active member in the American Artists’ Congress, he took part in the 1936 “219 Sit-in strike,” protesting layoffs from the Federal Arts Project. While the managing supervisor of the New York Works Progress Association easel project, he worked tirelessly to prevent artists from being cut from the payroll when budget shortfalls forced the layoff of numerous artists.

Despite the leftist sympathies behind Evergood’s various organizing activities, as Patricia Hill notes “we find that the radicalism in his [Evergood’s] art surges and subsides.”<sup>200</sup> However, beginning in the 1930s, in his written work, Evergood begins to express a philosophical approach to painting that is, in general, sympathetic to the plight of the working class, aligning artists with the proletariat. Identifying himself as a worker rather than an artist,<sup>201</sup> throughout the decades between the 1930s and 1960s, Evergood argued that artists possessed a particular social responsibility to “hear the tumult and smell the decay of suffering and inequality amongst [their] fellow man.”<sup>202</sup> Economic

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> During his time as the Union’s president, Evergood was instrumental in helping organize talks with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which resulted in the Union’s formal affiliation with the CIO in 1938 as the United American Artists, Local 60, of the United Office and Professional Workers.

<sup>200</sup> Patricia Hills, “Art and Politics in the Popular Front: The Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood,” in Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden and Jonathan Weinberg (eds.), *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 182.

<sup>201</sup> “I am a worker. My trade is artists.” Philip Evergood. *My Philosophy*. Box 4, folder 27, Philip Evergood papers, 1890-1971. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

inequality and exploitation are a reoccurring preoccupation in much of Evergood's written work. In his 1960s essay *My Philosophy*, Evergood notes:

There is more than enough food produced on this globe to feed all these People, but only about half this vast population have enough to eat and the rest are either poorly fed or half starved. It always works out that the over-fed make slaves of the under-fed.<sup>203</sup>

According to Evergood, the economic disparity engendered by industrialism distorts and deforms, limiting a person's capacity to live a rich and full life. As he asks rhetorically, "Under economic pressure can the full stature of a man develop without being in some way warped or twisted?"<sup>204</sup> Despite his bleak assessment of the world,<sup>205</sup> Evergood, in both his textual and visual work configures the role of the worker in explicitly approbatory terms, noting, "Our workers are heroes. Our workers are the hope of America."<sup>206</sup>

In both his painterly and political practice, Evergood strove to promote the dignity of labor. In 1933 he began attending forums at the John Reed Club, contributing *Mine Disaster* (figure 25) to their 1933 exhibition *World Crisis Expressed in Art on the Themes of Hunger, Fascism, War*. *Mine Disaster* marks not only Evergood's shift from biblical to contemporary social themes, but inaugurated his experimentation with saturated and

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Philip Evergood, *Statement of Principles*, January, 1962. Box 4, folder 27, Philip Evergood papers, 1890-1971. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>205</sup> He once described the life as "insecure and dangerous" and the human character as "uncertain and liable to malformation from social strain and stress." (Philip Evergood, *Statement of Principles*, January, 1962. Box 4, folder 27, Philip Evergood papers, 1890-1971. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

<sup>206</sup> Evergood, *Statement of Principles*.

discordant colors schemes of neon greens, muster yellow, and lurid pinks.<sup>207</sup> The work, divided into three sections, described by Evergood as “Labor in Darkness,” “The Rescue Squad,” and “Tragedy of Entombment,” reflects his growing outrage over the exploitative and dangerous conditions miners were subjected to in the name of maximizing profits. In the left section, ‘Labor in Darkness,’ miners toil away in a cramped, poorly lit cave. Standing at the shallow edges of the picture plane, the miner, holding a red flag and smoking a cigarette, confronts the viewer, inviting our participation in his suffering. The right section is occupied by the scene of a cave-in—miners are shown half buried, some with just hands or feet visible under fallen rocks. A rescuer in a respirator’s suit desperately attempts to pull a wounded and bloodied miner to safety. In the center of the canvas, a team of rescuers descends into a mine shaft in search of their missing comrades. Their efforts are, of course, in vain as the black coffin on the right portion of the canvas foreshadows the rescue mission’s futility. Just to the right of the central pair of rescuers, a woman, children in tow, occupies the shallow foreground. Hemmed in by the iron chains that partition the fictive space of the canvas from the corporeal space of the viewer, the young children, presumably the next generation of miners, allude to the intergenerational exploitation of wage slavery.

*American Tragedy* (1937), (figure 26), perhaps Evergood’s most well-known work, poignantly captures the struggle between workers and industrial capitalism. His work was inspired by the melee that erupted between steelworkers, their families and armed police at the Republic Steel’s South Chicago plant on Memorial Day 1937.

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<sup>207</sup>Hemingway, 61.

Employees of the Republic Steel factory gathered with their families in an effort to organize their own plant after the successful unionization of workers of U.S. Steel. Closely studying the photographs and written accounts of the event, Evergood captures the violence that occurred when police attacked the peaceful demonstration, leaving ten men dead and more than one hundred injured.

Evergood juxtaposes the confused pandemonium of the fight against the utter stillness of the factory that looms in the background, seemingly emerging from a startlingly yellow, dry earthen ground. Unlike Diego Rivera or Robert Lambdin whose works often celebrated the harmony between machine and labor, the Republic Steel factory lies idle as workers and their families engage in a pitched battle against the repressive and exploitative forces of capitalism and state sanctioned violence.<sup>208</sup> The chaotic scene is underscored by the crowd of figures in the foreground, who, stacked tightly on top of one another, push up against the picture plane. Bloodied workers dressed in their Sunday best bend backwards, away from the striking police batons at impossible angles. Just behind the central cluster of figures, police fire on the unarmed crowd at point blank range as they try in vain to escape the indiscriminate brutality. The prone body of a fallen black worker clutching an American flag in his hand draws the viewer's eye upward towards the central focus of the scene.

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<sup>208</sup> See Lambdin's *Bridgeport Manufacturing*, 1936, executed for the Bridgeport, CT post office.

The scene centers upon two figures— a brawny, red-haired man and his pregnant Hispanic wife.<sup>209</sup> The pregnant woman, armed with a stick, shakes her fist at an armed officer, while her husband grabs him by the collar. Unlike the pessimistic view of the future for the working class expressed in *Mine Disaster*, here the woman's pregnancy leaves the viewer with the hope that the next generation of workers will continue to struggle for labor rights.<sup>210</sup> Importantly, too, Evergood acknowledges the significant role of art and artists within the various political fights of the left. Patricia Hills has even suggested that the bloodied, crouching figure, whose face is visible just under the outstretched arm of the red-haired figure, is a self-portrait, underscoring the essential role artists play in the struggle for labor rights.<sup>211</sup> Both *Mine Disaster* and *American Tragedy* are emblematic of Evergood's socially conscious art, demonstrating his solidarity with the interests of the working class and sensitivity to their socioeconomic reality, yet inability to reconcile race.

### **Evergood and the Treasury Section**

Evergood was not merely interested in creating art whose subject matter centered upon the lives of working class Americans. He also believed in employing a stylistic vocabulary that would be widely accessible to the subjects of his paintings. Convinced

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<sup>209</sup> A number of scholars have referred to the women's ethnicity as either Hispanic or Latina. See for example, Patricia Hills, "Philip Evergood's American Tragedy: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," *Arts Magazine*, 54 (February, 1980):140 and Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002),143.

<sup>210</sup> Hill even suggests that the branch the woman holds, coupled with her pregnant belly is meant as a reference to the "Tree of Jesse," the father of King David, from whose branch, according to the Old Testament the Messiah would return to earth. As such, Hill suggests, that Evergood's Biblical reference is meant to signal his belief that the America's 'savior' will be found in the next generation of laborers.

<sup>211</sup> See Patricia Hills, "Philip Evergood's American Tragedy: The Poetics of Ugliness, The Politics of Anger," *Arts Magazine* 54, (February, 1980):138-142.

that if art was democratized, it possessed the capacity to foster an increasingly engaged and enlightened citizenry. In a 1938 radio interview broadcast from the ACA Gallery in New York City at the opening of an exhibition entitled *1938: Dedicated to the New Deal*, Evergood, deploying rhetorical strategies similar to those of the Treasury Section, celebrated the accomplishments of the Federal Arts Programs and revealed the ideological similarities between himself and the Section:

Today, after nearly three years of work for the public under government patronage, one can definitely state that the artist has become an indispensable agent for newly born standards—moral uplift, higher aims in education, higher levels of cultural and creative accomplishment in America. . . . By coming to the financial aid of the artist in the economic depression, by giving him a bare living wage in exchange for his labor, our movement unwittingly started a cultural movement, which has developed to such promotions that it already has definitely affected the lives of several million people and bids fair to become eventually one of the great art moments of the world. To us who have worked on the project and to those millions through the length and breadth of our country who have been beneficiaries of this cultural bequest, this great art movement has become a reality.<sup>212</sup>

According to Evergood, artists could lift the conscience of the American public and inculcate a renewed set of civic and moral principles. His beliefs mirror the ideological commitments of Rowan, Bruce, and the other members of the Treasury Section, who understood the embellishments of federal buildings as a great “civilizing force.”<sup>213</sup> Like Bruce, who believed that art produced under the Section’s guidance would take “the

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<sup>212</sup> Philip Evergood, interviewed ACA Gallery in New York City at the opening of an exhibition entitled *1938: Dedicated to the New Deal*, August 1938. Box 4, folder 35. Philip Evergood papers, 1890-1971. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>213</sup> Speech delivered by Bruce on the occasion of the opening of the Section of Fine Art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, November 2, 1939. Reprinted in the Section of Fine, No, 20, November, 1939 (Washington D.C.: Section of Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, Federal Works Agency), 9. In Section of Fine Arts selected administrative records and correspondence, 1934-1943. Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

snobbery out of art and mak[e] it the daily food of average citizens,”<sup>214</sup> Evergood concluded that “great art” was necessarily democratic, arguing that:

Great art has always been a people’s art. By people’s art, I mean an art which can be understood by the people—an art which means something definite to them — an art which is significant because of its broad appeal, and one which is neither exclusive or abstruse. A people’s art lives because it has a universal human appeal—it lives because its creators have not worked to please an exclusive class.<sup>215</sup>

The congruence between the Section and Evergood’s beliefs ideally positioned him to create a symbolic system of representation that would reflect the particular social and cultural order of the New Deal.

### **The Limits of Evergood’s Supposed Radicality**

Perhaps the most fraught, but important, aspect of Evergood’s career was his relationship to race. Evaluating the extent to which Evergood’s art can be considered anti-racist is difficult.<sup>216</sup> On the one hand, as Andrew Hemingway notes, “Evergood’s credentials as an activist were impeccable.”<sup>217</sup> His participation in various anti-Fascist and anti-racist campaigns led to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dismissing him from his job as a “pictorial recorder” embedded with American troops in North Africa.<sup>218</sup> He

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<sup>214</sup> Edward Bruce. To Admiral Peoples, November 14, 1934, Bruce MSS, Reel D 89. Archives of American Art.

<sup>215</sup> Philip Evergood, interviewed during a WNYC Form, March 21st 1938. Box 4, folder 39. Philip Evergood papers, 1890-1971. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>216</sup> By antiracist, I do not simply mean the negative definition of the absence of racism. Rather, to be an antiracist is to engage in an active process of recognizing and eradicating racism through changes to the political, economical, social and cultural structures and organization that define policies, practices, and attitudes.

<sup>217</sup> Hemingway, 227.

<sup>218</sup> Kendall Taylor and Philip Evergood, *Philip Evergood: Never Separate from the Heart*, (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1987), 109.

also engaged in a number of anti-lynching campaigns throughout the 1930s, contributing a powerful work to the 1935 *Struggle for Negro Rights* exhibition at the ACA Gallery in New York. His contribution, *That's the Man*, a pencil on paper drawing (figure 27), retitled *Lynching Party*, addresses issues of class, race, and sexuality through a strident critique of the role white women had in the lynching of black men. As a white artist, Evergood was able to engage this politically charged and sexually explicit subject and present it to a predominately white audience in a way that was not available to black artists. A slender boy, hands bound with rope around his neck, shrinks away from a sneering white woman. Ornately dressed in an evening gown, she points viciously with her jewelry encrusted wrist, in an accusatory gesture, at the black youth. Her gesture signals to the viewer that she is charging him with sexual assault. A sheriff, smoking a cigarette, head cocked mid-laugh stands in the background amused by the gruesome scene unfolding in front of him. As if her talon-like hands and sneering, nightmarish expression were not enough to convey the incredulity of her accusation, the cap-sleeve of her gown, shaped like a lion's claw, heightens her ferocity and implies that she is the predator rather than the victim. A second sheriff, grasping the teenager's neck and holding his body in-between his legs, points a gun at his head. Dora Apel argues "his [the sheriff's] gun holster looms as a large phallic allusion while the positioning of the pair is suggestive of a homoerotic embrace, even as it insinuates the triumph of white constructions of manliness over black assertions of masculinity."<sup>219</sup> Evergood further disrupts traditional expectations around gender and sexuality by making the white woman

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<sup>219</sup> Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: London, 2004), 123.

the virile huntress while emasculating the black youth, who is unable to control his own fate. Evergood's purposeful distortions of the white figures—their bulging and deformed bodily proportions—draw the viewer's attention to a central white supremacist anxiety: the loss of patriarchal white power and the disintegration of racial distinctions through miscegenation.

Throughout Evergood's oeuvre, one finds a significant number of works which, through their depictions of interracial couples, undermined white supremacy's insistence on the maintenance of strict racial boundaries. In *New Birth/New Struggle* (1947), (figure 28) a white woman reclines in a hospital bed after giving birth, while her African American husband grins gleefully beside her. She excitedly hands her mixed race newborn over to the two white miners who reach out eagerly to welcome the next generation of labor into the world. Evergood's treatment of race, particularly his willingness to paint non Anglo-Saxon figures, engendered a deep disquiet among many viewers. His mural, *The Story of Richmond Hill*, painted for the Richmond Hill Library in Queens, was picketed by the Daughters of the American Revolution and Republic Club Ladies because the figures in his mural had "foreign racial characteristics and are therefore unamerican."<sup>220</sup> Members of these conservative patriotic clubs objected to Evergood's inclusions of "ethnic," that is non Anglo-Saxon, white-Europeans. Their protestation reflects not only the historical contingencies of whiteness, but the lingering anxieties over

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<sup>220</sup> Philip Evergood, *Chronology*. Box 1, folder 2. Philip Evergood papers, 1890-1971. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Evergood also recounts the xenophobic criticism his mural received in his February 7, 1940 lecture "*What is American Art*" delivered at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

the effects of immigration from eastern and southern Europe, which by 1936 had all but ceased after the passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act.

Despite the progressive merits of depicting interracial couples or white and black workers laboring in solidarity, Evergood's work, rather than challenging racial hierarchies, often conforms to them.<sup>221</sup> *The Bridge of Life* (1942), (figure 29) a mural Evergood painted for the Welles Dining Hall at Kalamazoo College, depicts groups of students, children and interracial laborers encircling the central image— a bridge under construction. Children play and pick flowers in a verdant field of tulips, which opens onto idyllic rolling hills and Stetson Chapel, the centerpiece of Kalamazoo College's campus. To the right of the children is a group of all white college students some prepare to ascend the bridge, while others dressed in academic regalia and holding diploma, confer with senior faculty. The groups of academics are juxtaposed against groups of multiracial muscular laborers in various states of undress, who work to construct the bridge. Atop the unfinished bridge, a group of workers, their arms outstretched, is greeted by a group of academics on the opposite end of the bridge. Evergood's mural was deeply unpopular at the time of its unveiling and continues to raise difficult questions about race, class and privilege at a majority-white academic institution. In recent years, African American students at Kalamazoo have found Evergood's work to be increasingly problematic. For these students, as Christina Hahn observes, Evergood's work is a "visual reinforcement of

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<sup>221</sup> For more on the anti-lynching campaigns of the 1930s, see Marlene Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," in *The Social and the Real*, eds. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 157–9; and Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

class structures and racial hierarchies that conveyed the sense that Kalamazoo College was for white students only.”<sup>222</sup> In other works, Evergood seems to engage with the romanticized trope of the primitive black figure living closer to nature. In Evergood’s *Elephant Hunt*, 1946, a group of naked spear and shield-wielding African hunters, shown from behind, pursue a distant elephant. As Micheal Leja argues, the work’s “exoticism and fascination were overpowering, not unlike the lure of Orientalism for an earlier generation, and Evergood’s picture descends into *National Geographic* romanticism and *Life* magazine voyeurism.”<sup>223</sup>

The problematic depiction of race in Evergood’s oeuvre, which will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter, reflects an underdeveloped understanding of race and the legacy of racism within his contemporaneous American cultural milieu. Evergood subscribed to what we might now call a “color-blind” approach to race. He wrote:

There are the great cities crammed with all the races of man, belonging to one great human family with different faces and norms and colors of skin. All have the same red liquid blood flowing through their bodies.<sup>224</sup>

On its face, Evergood’s framing of race is laudable. Given persistent racial terrorism and the long history of black subordination in America, the rhetorical appeal of Evergood’s statement is obvious. In blurring the distinctions between different ethnicities, he argues that all people should be seen and treated as part of the same human race, to be judged solely on the content of their character. Evergood’s attitude reflects a person who clearly

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<sup>222</sup> Christine Hahn, “Maintaining Problematic Art: A Case Study of Philip Evergood’s *The Bridge of Life* (1942) at Kalamazoo College,” *Public Art Dialogue* 6, no. 1 (2016): 120.

<sup>223</sup> Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 98.

<sup>224</sup> Evergood, *My Philosophy*.

rejects racism, but in his haste to affirm the equality of all people, he cannot fully account for the subtle ways that white supremacy structured every aspect of American life. His formulation of race means that it is the individual who counts, not the historical group.<sup>225</sup> Evergood's understanding of race makes it easy for him to criticize lynching and individual acts of hate and racism, but he was unable to call attention to the deeply entrenched anti-black bias that existed (and still exists) as a constitutive element of American life.<sup>226</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Evergood's colorblindness operates in the precise manner of the post-Civil Rights era colorblindness of Nixon, Reagan, Clinton and others, who likely deployed the term to purposefully obfuscate racial inequality and dismantle the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement<sup>227</sup> by weaponizing the political rhetoric that condemned African Americans for their own oppression.<sup>228</sup> However, framing Evergood's understanding of race through "colorblindness," even if anachronistic, is instructive as it helps to illuminate the ways in which the artist could, on the one hand, participate in anti-racist demonstrations and paint scenes of interracial labor while, on the other, produce works that conform to and confirm the racial hierarchies and long history of racial oppression in the United States. In the sections that follow, I will

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<sup>225</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown, 2016), 107.

<sup>226</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016), 72.

<sup>227</sup> Cf. Ian F. Haney-López, "Is the "Post" in Post-Racial the "Blind" in Colorblind?," *Cardozo Law Review* 32,(2010): 807; Michelle Alexander, and Cornel West, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2011); Eddie S. Glaude Jr, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown, 2016).; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016).

<sup>228</sup> Taylor, 72.

examine the specific types of labor in *Cotton—Field to Mill*, reading it within the context of the history of America’s empire of cotton, the attendant racialized discourses of labor, and the efforts to extend the benefits and privileges of citizenship under the New Deal’s expansion of federalism. I will demonstrate how, despite its inclusion of interracial labor, Evergood’s works fit into a larger pattern of the negative representation of black labor in Treasury Section murals across the South, much if not all of which sought to confirm and retrench African American’s caste position as unfree laborers and thus unfit for substantive inclusion within the New Deal polity.

### **King Cotton: Racialized Labor and The Political Economy the South**

Evergood’s work drew the ire of the local postmaster as well as the Jackson public for the work’s perceived lack of verisimilitude. After seeing a photograph of Evergood’s initial designs for the mural, postmaster Carmichael, upset by what he believed was a lack of “truthfulness,” sent Evergood a number of photographs of “local scenes which might be incorporated in a mural [sic] that would be acceptable for installation [in Jackson].”<sup>229</sup> The photographs are not to be found in either Evergood’s personal papers or the Treasury Section Archives. However, from a letter Evergood sent to Edward Rowan, one can reasonably assume that Carmichael sent Evergood pictures of main street, town hall, local stores, and historical monuments.<sup>230</sup> Although Carmichael does not mention

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<sup>229</sup> Victor H. Carmichael to Philip Evergood, Jackson, Georgia, Oct 5, 1939; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>230</sup> Philip Evergood to Edward Rowan, Woodside, NY, October 16th, 1939; GA Decatur-McRae, Box No. 17, Entry 133; Records of the Public Building Service: Records Concerning Federal Art Activities: Textual Records of the Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, and Its Predecessors: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

specific examples of untruths in Evergood's mural, given his insistence that the mural design include recognizable imagery from the town of Jackson, Evergood's imagined pastiche of southern life no doubt provoked Carmichael's displeasure.

While Jackson's economy was almost entirely dependent on cotton, it was the milling of it along with a growing canning industry that were the principle engines of its economic growth. It is significant, therefore, that Evergood resisted the suggestions of Carmichael to paint Jackson's main-street or town hall and instead turned his attention to an imagined scene of fecund cotton fields and their convivial and productive laborers. Under a bright blue sky, populated by white flocculent cumulus clouds that resemble the cotton cultivated in the fields below, *Cotton—From Field to Mill* is a congenial representation of cotton's life cycle—from its cultivation and harvest to its transformation from a raw material into a commodity object ready for national (and global) consumption. Tracing cotton's journey from field to mill to market, the viewer is invited to read the image from left to right. On the left side of the work, in the mural's middle ground, three farmers harvest cotton in the field and a white figure in a pink shirt carries a basket filled with cotton on his or her head, while two other figures—a white man facing the viewer, clad in a sleeveless blue shirt, and another figure, whose race is indistinguishable—bend to pick cotton. Just to the right of the cotton fields, a man and woman walk, carrying baskets of cotton atop their heads, towards a long rectangular wooden barn whose red painted doors open to reveal bales of cotton stacked to the ceiling. Other figures busy themselves tending to the mules and moving empty cotton carts. Another barn, its unlatched doors exposing sealed wooden crates, presumedly

filled with cotton or thread ready for the market, further underscores the plantation's productivity (figure 30).

The mural revolves around the mule-drawn cart in the center of the shallow foreground. A group of six African American men and one white man, some carrying baskets while others wear field sacks on their back, unload their harvest onto an already mountain-like pile of cotton. To the right of the mule drawn cart, a group of eight white and black laborers, three women and five men, haul baskets of cotton, presumably to unload them into the already full cart. While the majority of the figures concentrate on the task at hand, the racially mixed man in the shallowest space of the foreground stares out directly at the viewer. Not only would an image of white and black people working cooperatively arouse disquiet among the mural's predominately white viewership, but the central figure's racial ambiguity, which evokes the long history of interracial sex (both consensual and coerced),<sup>231</sup> threatened both patriarchal white power and the myth of racial purity on which it depends (figure 31). Just to the right of the central group of figures, a white man, in overalls and a straw hat, crouches down to read the weight of the cotton that hangs in the scales. On the other end of the scale's cross beams are two shirtless black men, one appearing to steady the wooden crossbeam while the other leans on a basket filled with cotton. A besuited white overseer, consulting a manifest, supervises their labor (figure 32).

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<sup>231</sup> C.f. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

Just behind the cotton weighing station, Evergood included a cotton mill, perhaps Jackson's own Pempberton Mill,<sup>232</sup> and a train, linking the economic productivity of the mill with Northern markets. Underscoring the economically productive endeavors of the plantation workers, a river snakes its way through the background of the mural. The body of water, presumably the Ocmulgee River, which lies eight miles west of Jackson, was the principal navigation route to the economic hub of Macon and an important natural resource for the development of the cotton industry in the surrounding region. Although steamboat traffic had almost entirely ceased by the time Evergood painted his mural,<sup>233</sup> its inclusion in his work added to the romanticized image of southern life. It mattered not that Evergood provided a precise historical transcription of reality or a verisimilitudinous representation of the present day town of Jackson. Rather his work was meant to present an idealized vision of the South and by extension the United States that would reproduce the racial and class hierarchies that were the necessary framework of exclusion that reside at the heart of the American (New Deal) economic, social and cultural order. The plantation is a visual manifest of the long history of racial oppression that formed the necessary conditions for the economic success of the United States. Moreover, the plantation as a microcosm of racial hierarchy was the symbolic imagery par excellence

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<sup>232</sup> According to the *American Textile Reports for Combined Textile* held at the New York Public Library, by 1922 the mill had \$250,000 of capital and 350 employees. Their 4 spindles and 142 narrow looms provided Bacon and Company, a New York based selling agent, with two-ply turkey red yarn.

<sup>233</sup> By 1909 steamboat traffic to Macon had stopped and by 1924 regular river traffic dropped precipitously. Commercial traffic on the Ocmulgee had ceased entirely by 1944 (Keith Hulett and University of Georgia Libraries, "Ocmulgee River," accessed 06/08/2017, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/geography-environment/ocmulgee-river>).

for particular social order that the Section sought to reproduce across the South, one which replicated the chivalric ideal of the antebellum plantocracy.

Cotton, in no small measure, helped create the American empire. Indeed, its elevation as America's most important export was fostered by an insatiable drive for territorial expansion and the continued enslavement and dehumanization of millions of people. The ascendancy of the United States on the world cotton market was not merely a result of America's rich soil and amenable climate, but the consequence of both the plantocracy's access to practically an unlimited supply of land, labor, and capital and a near monopoly on political power.<sup>234</sup> En route to becoming the American export par excellence and catalyzing the rapid industrialization of Western Europe and the American North, cotton shaped the lives of most every inhabitant in the United States, fostering large-scale staggering social, political, and racial inequality into the twentieth century.

Moreover, the entire global economy hinged on the production of cotton as no other industry employed more people globally.<sup>235</sup> The economic viability of not only the American South, but of the industrializing West, depended upon the white plantocracy's ability to extract the maximal labor from their human property. As Barbara Fields notes slavery "was not simply [about] white supremacy, but the production of cotton."<sup>236</sup> By the 1830s an entire managerial discourse emerged in the South, which sought to uncover the most effective strategies for managing slaves. In so doing, these discourses created a

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<sup>234</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton : A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 105.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* (May-June), 1990: 95-118.

racialized language of labor that shaped the content of racial identity and the very nature of acceptable interactions within and across racial boundaries during the ninetieth century and into the twentieth.

David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch trace the history of racialized managerial strategies from the management of slaves in the fields to the oversight of workers in industrial factories. Their work illuminates the various ways in which race and racism are embedded within the experiences of class and capitalist accumulation.<sup>237</sup> To understand the way Evergood's murals would have resonated with contemporary perceptions of the relationship between race, labor, and eligibility for substantive inclusion into the American political economy, it is worth outlining the racialized managerial strategies from the antebellum years as they shaped the perception of labor and race through the decades of the Great Depression.

The ability to manage other races became understood in American political discourse as a uniquely "white" contribution to civilization.<sup>238</sup> As Roediger and Esch document:

As members of both a white settler and a slaveholding society, Americans developed a sense of themselves as white by casting their race as uniquely fit to manage land and labour, and by judging how other races might come and go in the service of that project.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> David R Roediger and Elizabeth D Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>238</sup> David R Roediger and Elizabeth D Esch, "Race and Management of Labour in US History" in *Theorizing Anti-Racism: Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories*, Abigail Bakan and Enakshi Dua eds, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 343.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, 344.

In 1830s, southern journals such as *The Farmers' Register*, *Southern Cultivator*, *American Cotton Planter*, and *De Bow's Review* initiated the development of management theory in the United States with their ideas hinging on the management of the “negro.”<sup>240</sup> Enjoying wide circulation,<sup>241</sup> the articles by leading Southern ‘intellectuals’ that appeared in these various periodicals often included glowing exaltations of the managerial acumen of white slave masters, generally attributing these virtues to their whiteness.<sup>242</sup> As one planter writes, the white plantocracy “is as much duty bound to improve and cultivate his fellow-men [black laborers] as... to culture and improve the ground.”<sup>243</sup> Managing black people was equated with animal husbandry; and the discovery of the most efficacious managerial strategies became a “grave subject, and one that is not only always in order, but a subject that imperiously demands our instant and unremitted thoughts and our most devout consideration.”<sup>244</sup>

Contributors to these publications grounded their natural abilities to manage labor efficiently in absurd and aggrandizing claims, fabricating self-histories and arguing that

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 20-21.

<sup>241</sup> For example, at its hight of circulation, in 1858, the *American Cotton Planter* reached over ten thousand homes.

<sup>242</sup> Unsigned, “Laborers of the South,” *Souther Cultivator*, 16 (August 1858): 235, cited in Roediger, and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 28.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>244</sup> J. W. Pitts, “Best Methods of Managing Negroes,” *Southern Cultivator* 18 (October 1860): 325-46 cited in Roediger, and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 21.

white man's abilities to manage "the negro" was a god given gift articulated in the Bible.<sup>245</sup> As one prominent Southern "intellectual" William S. Price argued:

Now if it is the... desire and ambition of civilized man to bring the things of the earth to a state of usefulness...how much more is it his duty to bring persons bearing his own physical (and probably mental) image purported to have descended from the same common stock, who are by the millions roaming the earth's surface, as wild as beasts of the forest, without any usefulness, as terror to civilized men.<sup>246</sup>

In the minds of the plantocracy, white men were ideally suited to transform their human property from an imagined bestial and savage state into a productive workforce. The racist insistence that white people were natural masters and managers necessitated a political, cultural, and economic discourse that would define African slaves as racially inferior and degraded, but simultaneously an economically wise investment. If by the peculiar logic found within Southern management journals African slaves were regulated correctly, the slave master would be able to extract handsome profits. What emerged was a set of mendacious assertions that the white plantocracy claimed gave them a particular racial knowledge of black people, while simultaneously reinforcing a strict racial hierarchy that placed white people at its apex.

The white plantocracy's identity and profits were utterly dependent on a cultural and political structure grounded in the coerced labor of black people. The plantocracy, cotton manufacturers, merchants, and politicians across both sides of the Atlantic

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<sup>245</sup> George Fitzhugh, a 19th century influential Southern "intellectual," argued that the Bible not only justified the genocide of indigenous people and enslavement of Africans, but ordained white people's natural place at the top of the racial hierarchy because of their God-given abilities to "husband nature and civilize Africans" (cited in Roediger, and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 29).

<sup>246</sup> William Price, "Commercial Benefits of Slavery," *ACP*, 1 (December 1853), 355 cited in David A. Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 23.

understood that the emancipation of 3.5 million black slaves threatened the health of the world's "mechanized cotton industry" in general and the South's entire economy in particular. The central question facing the white plantocracy class (and Northern industrial capitalists) was articulated in an article in *The Economist* shortly after the end of the Civil War:

If, however, complete freedom is to be principally adopted, it is clear that the dark races must in some way or other be induced to obey white men willingly.<sup>247</sup>

The American plantocracy resurrected the social and economic conditions of slavery through new systems of exploitation once slavery itself was outlawed throughout the United States. Despite paying a very nominal wage to the newly emancipated slaves in the form of either money or more typically a share of the crop, the plantocracy monopoly of landownership and the organization of labor and patterns of plantation life under formal systems of chattel slavery remained intact. As Sven Beckert notes, "Former slaves, liv[ed] in the hovels they had inhabited before emancipation, were here to plant, weed, and harvest under the supervision of overseers."<sup>248</sup> Across the cotton belt landlords begrudgingly paid wages, while simultaneously attempting to curtail the freedom of movement of their former slaves, forcing them to remain on their plantation and plant cotton.

In addition, the myriad of laws established after Reconstruction, known collectively as the black codes, "attempted to reproduce Negro bondage and servitude

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<sup>247</sup> Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 271.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid*, 282.

through the social classification and control of vagrancy.”<sup>249</sup> Those classified as vagrants were subjected to capitation taxes, which if went unpaid, allowed the state to contract the so-called vagrant out for employment to any individual willing to assume the delinquent tax payment. Black codes severely crippled the economic freedom of African Americans, foreclosing on the possibility of inclusion into the substantive economic polity. By the time Evergood painted *Cotton—From Field to Mill*, just 12 percent of African Americans owned the land they worked. Facing decades of *de jure* and *de facto* exclusion from substantive political, economic, and social inclusion, many African American families in rural Georgia lived without electricity, running water, indoor privies and on nutrient deficient diets mainly of molasses, fatback, and cornbread.

The cotton fields were an important site for African Americans’ continued exclusion from the American polity. As such, an image of a plantation is never neutral—it can never be a bucolic signifier of a South with genteel belles and gallant cavaliers. Images of cotton are laden with meaning and can never be decoupled from the long history of oppression, exploitation or the attendant racialized discourse of labor, which cemented particular stereotypes of African Americans and determined the extent on limitations on the eligibility into the American polity. Just by his subject choice, Evergood dulls the limits of his more radical choice to depict black and white people working cooperatively.

**Wages of Whiteness, Racialized Labor: *Cotton—From Field to Mill***

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<sup>249</sup>Ibid.

Evergood's cotton fields are the visual corollary to the symbolic order established after Reconstruction which attempted, through legal and extra-legal means, to entrench the social, political and economic order of the slave past by preserving the structures of white supremacy that shaped the daily existence of African Americans. Despite the potentially subversive inclusion of black and white farmers laboring harmoniously in the field, ultimately Evergood's work is part of the social production of difference defined by race and citizenship status and reflected the significant effort to racialize particular types of work in the service of maintaining a strict racial hierarchy.

Evergood's mural re-inscribes the ideal conditions of labor imagined within the pages of the *Southern Cultivator* and *American Cotton Planter*. Confined to the field, the black laborers in Evergood's mural have been transformed by the civilizing guidance of the besuited white overseer into a productive commodity. Their labor was "cultivated" much like the fields they tend. In the figure grouping on the left side of the landscape, Evergood made little attempt to individuate the figures' facial features. Their heads are bent down or turned away from the viewer. In fact, the facial features of the mules are given more attention than their human counter parts. Rather, Evergood emphasized the human figures' abilities as effective and strong laborers, giving particular care to both their robust musculature and the large pile of cotton it yields. His figures labor without fatigue under the intense heat of the Georgia sun. Indeed, the racially ambiguous figure in the center of Evergood's work even appears to offer the spectator a slight smile as he hoists a basket of cotton across the picture plane. As if to further draw the spectator's attention to the brawn of the African American cotton pickers, two muscular male black

figures, nude from the waist up, are juxtaposed against the besuited white overseer, reinforcing the place of white men as managers and black men as commodities to be managed. Evergood gained intimate access to the anatomy of the two figures, carefully articulating their musculature, and posing them in positions which expose their strong backs to the viewer. His figure evokes a longer tradition in the history of western art, which constructed black identity as exotic and sexualized objects, whose partial nudity revealed the various ways that they were closer to nature and more sensual than their white counterparts.

The potentially radical act of depicting cooperative black and white labor is undercut further by the type of labor Evergood chose to portray. As farm work was understood to be “negro work,” white tenant farmers and sharecroppers, like the ones depicted in Evergood’s mural, presented a threat to the carefully constructed images of whiteness at the heart of white supremacy’s claim of racial superiority. As tenancy increased across the South in the decades following the Civil War, the system created a perpetual class of poor white cotton farmers. As the number of impoverished white farmers grew, agricultural economists such as William Spillman began to make distinctions between types of whiteness, or as he termed it “high-minded, self-respecting small proprietors” and the “discontented thriftless tenancy class” who became increasingly poor and as such “unfit for American citizenship.”<sup>250</sup> Across the South, poor whites who vied for the same sharecropping positions held by Mexicans in Texas and African Americans across the Deep South, became marked as racially inferior whites,

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<sup>250</sup> Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 69.

whose “reproductive fecundity threatened the vigor of nordic whiteness.”<sup>251</sup> The persistent impoverishment of tenant farmers and sharecroppers was not simply a consequence of those systems, but their bedrock principle. However, their inexorable poverty only served to affirm, among members of the plantocracy, that the problem resided within the character of the sharecropper or tenant whether white or black, rather than the system itself. In the case of African American sharecroppers and tenants in particular, the seeming unceasingness of sharecropping among black farmers was seen as confirmation of their racial inferiority and as such, sharecropping became their “natural economic condition.”<sup>252</sup>

Through the type of labor they performed, white tenant farmers were a threat to the Jeffersonian ideal—the small independent farmer, which Doris Lee, among many other New Deal artists, celebrated in murals across the North and Midwest. Indeed, these white farmers in Evergood’s work are not working their own land as the hardy pioneers of Louise Emerson Ronnebeck’s *The Fertile Land Remembers* in the Casper, Wyoming post office (figure 33) or Ted Gilien’s *Pastoral* in the Lee’s Summit, Missouri post office (figure 34) idealized farm family working in timeless harmony, the “icons of an idealized social and moral landscape.”<sup>253</sup> As such, one should question the extent to which Evergood’s inclusion of interracial labor understood as radical. White farmers who were rhetorically engaged in “negro work” were understood to be “off-white” and unqualified for American citizenship. As I discussed in chapter one, in the early eighteenth century,

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Melosh, 53.

definitions of citizenship were tied to property. It was widely accepted that the propertyless did not possess the requisite moral character to participate as members in American political life; rather, they were regarded as economic dependents and, as such, were always or would be prone to the dictates of others. Unable to be truly independent, the propertyless were seen as a threat to social stability.<sup>254</sup>

By the early nineteenth century democratizing movements began to agitate for greater political equality among white men, helping to shift definitions of citizenship based on property to ones grounded in free labor. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues, the obligation to be economically independent by working and earning for oneself became central to American concepts of citizenship. Both tenant farming and sharecropping were defined as unfree labor and, as Glenn documents, were racialized as non-white labor. As such, Evergood, simply by depicting tenant farming, casts both the black and white farmers in his work as persons engaged in “unfree” labor unable to meet the obligation of true economic independence. The farmers in Evergood’s work therefore lacked an essential quality of citizenship and could thus be excluded from participating as full members in American political life.

Moreover, Evergood eschewed the depictions of cotton mill workers. The mill workers, whose labor at the Pemperton Mill was an important source of economic growth for Jackson, are rendered invisible. Their conspicuous absence, particularly given that the town of Jackson did not have large plantations as Evergood depicted, allowed him to avoid destabilizing the highly constructed and impenetrable racial hierarchy and division

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<sup>254</sup> Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*. Cambridge (Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 54.

of labor between cotton fields and mills. Throughout the South the employment of African Americans in cotton mills, even in the most menial and unskilled positions, was outlawed.<sup>255</sup> As the historians Michael D. Schulman and Jeffrey Leiter suggest, “since the oppression of blacks was legitimated by the concept of the natural superiority of whites, employment of blacks even in unskilled positions on an equal basis with whites risked questioning the ideological underpinnings of white dominance.”<sup>256</sup> White workers in states across the South, fiercely guarded the “whiteness” of mill work. In some cases when mill operators attempted to hire black workers, white mill-workers staged walkouts and organized unions to maintain the color line in the mills, fighting viciously to sustain an economic advantage grounded in white supremacy.<sup>257</sup>

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Evergood’s image points to a deeply maintained relationship between race and exploitation, which not only drove capitalist accumulation but shaped strategies of political rule and defined the nature of membership of the American polity.<sup>258</sup> American identities were shaped through the practice of racial exclusion and were the result of a strictly enforced racial hierarchy, which had undergirded slavery, justified settler expansion, and determined the new systems of labor and *de jure* racial segregation that emerged after Reconstruction. Central to maintaining

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<sup>255</sup> The South Carolina legislature passed an act that legally prevented African Americans from working in all but the most dangerous and grueling mill jobs.

<sup>256</sup> Jeffrey Leiter, Michael D Schulman, and Rhonda Zingraff, *Hanging by a Thread: Social Change in Southern Textiles* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>257</sup> Douglas Flamming. *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884-1984* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.), 110.

<sup>258</sup> See Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

an American identity grounded in racial exclusion is the discourse that emerged around race and the management of labor. Indeed, the racialized managerial claims codified in the *Southern Cultivator*, and the *American Cotton Planter* far outlived Emancipation and generated the biases and stereotypes we live with today.<sup>259</sup> These southern publications inculcated a set of racialized beliefs about labor and management that shaped the way African American labor and citizenship was understood and policed throughout the New Deal. Evergood's work was part of a much larger pattern across the South. Representation of agricultural labor in the South often included representations of supervisors or bosses as exclusively white, not only re-inscribing the belief in whites as managers, but also removing the possibility of the self-sufficient dignity of the independent black farmer.<sup>260</sup>

Evergood's stylistic approach to his mural helped to reinforce the ideological content presented in the subject matter in his mural. As the art historians Karal Ann Marling, Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz detail, the Section promoted a style that attempted to avoid both the overly conservative aesthetic inclinations of nineteenth century academic art and the tendency towards abstraction embedded in their perceptions of the European avant-garde. As noted earlier in the chapter, the Section endeavored to curtail and constrain what they perceived as Evergood's overly modernist tendencies and align his work squarely within their centrist representational style. However, despite his willingness to abide by the Section's numerous suggestions, Evergood's stylistic choices

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<sup>260</sup> See Marion Sanford, *Weighing Cotton* for the Winder, GA post office (figure 35); Lee R Warthen, *Cotton Scene* (1941) for the Hartselle, AL post office (figure 36); Arthur Getz, *Cotton Field*, 1942 for the Luverne, AL post office (figure 37); Caroline Speare Rohland, *Cotton Pickers*, (1939) for the Bunkie, LA post office (figure 38).

in *Cotton—From Field to Mill* engendered evidentiary opposition amongst the Jackson public. Despite the significant stylistic modifications, Evergood's work proved too modernist, alien, and foreign for the people of Jackson. His aesthetic vocabulary in *Cotton—From Field to Mill* is important, not only because of the outrage it engendered within the town of Jackson, but also for what it reveals about the carefully constructed myths of American identity at the heart of the Treasury Section's visual rhetoric. Exploring the evident disjunctures between the mural's stylistic vocabulary and Evergood's other works reveal the extent to which the potentially radical political ideology of his previous works is evacuated from the mural, allowing his work to comfortably conform to the conservative and cautious nature of the Treasury Section's approach to politics and painting.

While Evergood's fundamental antipathy for abstraction's elitist inaccessibility was grounded in his desire to create a widely intelligible national self image, which celebrated the life and histories of the common man, his eschewal of abstraction does not mark him as an anti-modernist. Rather, Evergood positioned his art against bourgeois conceptions of "high" art, aligning his work with a more progressive and democratic vision of mass culture, which drew upon elements of modernist aesthetic tendencies. Across his oeuvre the deformation and fragmentation of the human form, the angular ruptures in their bodily contours, and his rejection of scientific perspective were markers of his modernist approach to painting. His dismissal of established (academic) styles of painting coupled with the social content of his work was meant to be read as social criticism, immediately accessible and resonant to a working class viewer. However,

Evergood substantially modified his mural for the Treasury Section. As such, it is instructive to compare *Cotton—From Field to Mill* with his earlier works to better understand the significant changes he made to his own stylistic approaches to painting. He changed his stylistic vocabulary in the Jackson post office mural in a number of significant ways: his treatment of space and more generally his compositional strategies, approach to figuration, and color palette.

Unlike the compressed and at times unintelligible space, cramped with a tangle of bodies and body parts in *American Tragedy*, the centripetal cluster of figures at the painting's center is replaced by evenly spaced groups of figures dispersed amongst open areas of landscape in *Cotton—Field to Mill*. The compositional stability and comparatively increased legibility of his Jackson mural results from the organized and plotted world constructed within the bounds of the canvas. Rather than dispensing entirely with the foreground as he does in *American Tragedy*, *On the Beach* (1934), (figure 39), or *Dance Marathon* (1934), (figure 40), the figures in *Cotton—From Field to Mill* do not press up against the picture plane. Instead, Evergood gives the viewer a shallow, but distinct foreground to occupy, allowing the viewer a stable point of entry into the work. Employing a comparatively more consistent and even scale of objects and figures in relation to their distance from the picture plane, Evergood created an increasingly naturalistic depiction of depth. While he does not employ linear perspective per se, his work does use orthogonal lines—formed on the right side of the canvas by the train and train tracks and on the left by the edges of the cotton field—to guide the viewer's eye to a central point in the back of the canvas, creating an organized

composition and experience of depth. The juxtaposition of figural groups and architectural structures with open swaths of landscape allows the spectator to move slowly and methodically through the work. Entering the canvas through the open space in the left foreground of the painting, the viewer is invited to examine the labor of the men unloading their bags of cotton onto an already full cart.

Following the line created by the raised arms of the figure in red atop the cart, the spectator moves back into the canvas to the next cluster of figures—the donkeys, farmers, and barn in the middle ground—before following the diagonal line created by the leftmost walls of the barn back to the foreground of the picture to the group of farmers hauling cotton in the center of the work. Guided by the rightward sloping line created by the silhouette of the white farmer wearing a large straw-colored hat, the spectator's eyes rest upon the final figural cluster of men weighing cotton, before being pulled back into the canvas by the diagonal line of the train track moving towards the vast and fecund landscape. Unlike works such as *Waiting Room* (1936), (figure 41), *Dowager in a Wheelchair* (1952), (figure 42) and *American Tragedy*, which each have ground planes that slant towards the viewer, destabilizing the figures who threaten to tumble out of the fictitious space of the canvas, Evergood levels the ground plane in *Cotton—From Field to Mill*, securing his figures firmly within the space of the canvas and enhancing the viewer's ordered experiences of depth and ordered experience of race.

Adding to the mural's legibility is the lucidity of Evergood's figuration. Evergood replaced the sinuous contours and twists of his figures in *American Tragedy* with figures that, while engaged in acts of labor, appear transfixed, their bodies placed perpendicularly

to the ground and composed of rectilinear rather than diagonal lines. Rather than bodies thrusting outward towards the viewer, like the figures in *American Tragedy*, the figures in the mural are parallel to the picture plane. Perhaps most significant is the restraint with which he treats the figures in his mural. A distinguishing feature of Evergood's oeuvre is the deliberately crude and caricatural treatments of the human form—his figures often possess overly articulated musculature and bulging and exaggerated bodily proportions, such as the figures in *The Angel of Peace Offering the Fruit of Knowledge to the World, or Artist's Fantasy* (1932–58), (Figure 43). More importantly, Evergood's works often feature the emphatic presence of abject bodies. In *Mine Disaster*, the central pair of seated miners are tinged green, their sunken cheeks and protruding collar bones underscoring the ravages their bodies have suffered in the mines—their bodies marking the labor they perform. The suffering of other figures is made even more explicit—the miner on the far right, sunk knee-deep in fallen ricks recalls Christ on the cross. The Christ-like figure, a contemporary martyr of the capitalist exploitation of the working class, as well as the other miners lay bare their traumatized and disfigured forms. The hyper-saturated and keyed-up, almost lurid colors in shades of neon greens, electric blues and pinks add to the disquiet evoked by the scene.

The bodies of the poor and working classes are texts to be read, vehicles of social meaning, which record deep and profound social and economic inequality and conflict. As such, they are embodiments and emblems of class exploitation. Evergood's images of disfigured workers are meant to disquiet and disrupt, literally pushing up against the picture plane in order to close the distance and disinterest of a polite bourgeois

aesthetic.<sup>261</sup> The shock and anger created by his work were meant to constitute a new working-class, epistemological model of representation and class consciousness. Yet, the bodies in Evergood's mural are neither scarred by their labor nor appear as abject subjects of capitalist exploitation. Rather than engaging the viewer with stares of melancholic despair, like the miners in *Mine Disaster*, the only figure to directly hold the gaze of the viewer in *Cotton—From Field to Mill* stares out with a slight smile and relaxed countenance.

While Evergood still emphasizes the figures musculature, particularly that of the shirtless African Americans, the grotesquely bulging arms and legs of the figures in his other works, such as *The Angel of Peace Offering the Fruit of Knowledge to the World*, are smoothed and lengthened. The lurid neon greens and blues are likewise replaced with a comparatively more naturalistic color palette, composed of earth tones with a few pops of color. The profoundly expressive emotive visages of *American Tragedy* and *Mine Disaster* are muted, evacuated of righteous fury and affecting despair and replaced with placid, nearly expressionless stares. For example, despite the fact that the white woman in a reddish-pink skirt bends over a heavy basket of cotton, her blank facial expression belies nothing of her back breaking work. The male farmer to her right wears a similarly vacant expression (figure 44). The emotional tenor of Evergood's larger oeuvre is disarmed, replaced by poised laborers engaged in harmonious and calm work.

The significant aesthetic compromises Evergood made removed the possibility that his stylistic re-presentation of a traditional and ubiquitous theme could operate as an

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<sup>261</sup> Andrew Hemingway terms these figures the “grotesque proletarian types” (Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 61).

explicit or even subtle social critique. As such, despite the work being the most “unrefined” of the murals this dissertation explores, given the significant ways Evergood’s more radical aesthetic choices—hallmarks of his larger corpus—are dulled, the relationship between the style and content is symbiotic and mutually reinforcing. Rather than using style as a vehicle to explore racism, it is used to allude and elide it. His bodies, rather than being conveyers of racial inequality are manifestations of a harmonious and convivial imagined past, where racial hierarchies are naturalized, conceived not as a construction of humans intervention but as a function of birth.

### **Different Bottle, Same Wine: New Frameworks for Racial Exclusion and New Deal Policies**

In chapter one, I suggested that Michel Foucault’s theory of governmentality offered a powerful framework that can be leveraged to articulate the way that Treasury Section murals were deployed as part of a complex set of instruments that sought to put New Deal political ideology into practice, transforming painted walls into active sites where values of citizenship were created and codified. As such, Evergood’s mural, along with hundreds of post office murals across the South, were part of a system of symbolic representation designed to depict African Americans as figures within the American body politic that needed to be regulated, controlled and circumscribed within a race based caste system codified by the social policies of the New Deal. The goal of the New Deal, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt envisioned, was to expand the social rights of citizenship.

Rhetorically, he subscribed to an account of freedom premised on the belief that every American would be granted equal rights to the nation's wealth and the freedom to be safe from economic destitution. The New Deal promised to democratize access to a set of public social provisions for every member of the polity.

A close examination of the laws and policies behind the lofty oratory flourishes of FDR reveals that rather than creating an increasingly inclusive and emancipatory future, the New Deal policies capitalized on the powerful institutions that institutionalized the *de jure* and *de facto* racial hierarchies of Jim Crow. As George Lipsitz demonstrates, the New Deal marks the beginning of an American racialized social democracy wherein the overt discrimination of the Jim Crow era is replaced by powerful new forms of structural racial discrimination.<sup>262</sup> Despite FDR's rhetorical claims to a universal expansion of the benefits of citizenship, the New Deal programs aimed to both rationalize and entrench the existing Jim Crow caste positions of white and black Americans. Although more African Americans worked in FDR's cabinet and in various federal programs than in any other previous administration, the president embraced a fabricated Southern identity, spending so much time at his summer home in Georgia that locals began to call him an adoptive son of the state.<sup>263</sup> He catered to the South, never advocating for civil rights legislation, ignoring attempts to abolish the poll tax, refusing the repeated attempts of NAACP to pass federal antilynching legislation, and generally disregarding racial inequality in order

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<sup>262</sup> George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Sep., 1995): 369-387.

<sup>263</sup> Rebecca Miller Davis, "Dixiecrats, Dissenting Delegated and the Dying Democratic Party: Mississippi's Right Turn from Roosevelt to Johnson." In *Nation Within a Nation: The American South and the Federal Government*, Glenn Feldman ed. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 123.

to maintain the Democratic party's political dominance in the South. While this dissertation is less interested in interrogating the individual prejudices of FDR or any other New Deal administrator and more concerned with how the series of New Deal policies functioned in building upon the existing foundation of racial hierarchies in the United States, FDR's personal indifference towards racial equality ultimately shaped the nature of the American welfare state and the character of 20th-century citizenship.

The national welfare state ushered in by the Social Security Act of 1935 was in fact not aimed at all Americans irrespective of race, class, and gender. Rather the laws were targeted to uplift industrial white workers (predominately men) and the southern planter class by creating new governmental institutions built upon long established racial inequality.<sup>264</sup> Not only did the Social Security Act omit explicit anti-discrimination provisions, the act articulated a number of exclusions by banning the occupations which most African Americans (and other nonwhite workers) were employed from eligibility.<sup>265</sup> The Social Security Act excluded agricultural and domestic employees from the program. The initial language of the act proposed by the FDR administration included both sharecroppers and tenant farmers; however, as the bill made its way through the House Ways and Means Committee, Southern Democrats lobbied successfully to remove agricultural and domestic workers from eligibility. These restrictions barred five million workers from access to both Old Age and Unemployment Insurance. Nearly half of all black workers nationwide were excluded from these federal benefits (more than 3/5 of

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<sup>264</sup> Robert C Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State*. Cambridge, 11.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

black workers in the South were excluded). Attempts to amend the bill to expand Old Age Insurance to domestic and agricultural laborers failed. In fact, the agricultural lobby successfully won an expansion of the definition of ‘farm laborer’ to include anyone engaged in the “processing or agricultural products” on the farms (with exceptions made for commercial operations such as canneries). This expanded definition of farm labor only increased racial disparities in eligibility.<sup>266</sup>

Southern Democrats found other ways to exclude African Americans from the Social Security Act. Applicants for Unemployment Insurance were required to produce a verifiable employment history, demonstrating work in a covered occupation consistently for a minimum amount of time. However, as African Americans were more likely to work intermittently than their white counterparts, many were unable to produce an acceptable employment history. Moreover, the government imposed a number of regulations tied to an applicant’s behavior and personal conduct. For example, applicants were required to demonstrate that their unemployment was a result of factors beyond their control and that they were actively searching for work. Quitting one’s job “voluntarily without good cause,” termination for “misconduct,” refusing an “offer of suitable work” or “fraudulently misrepresenting oneself on his application for relief,” were all disqualifying events.<sup>267</sup> In addition to ignoring the significant structural racism embedded in the experience of working, the legal loopholes of Unemployment Insurance offered bureaucrats wide discretion, allowing for significant opportunities to discriminate against

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 206.

African Americans when determining an individual's eligibility for the program. The government's attempts to impose strict eligibility requirements related to an applicant's behavior and personal conduct must be read against the Southern plantocracy's anxiety over the "problem of recalcitrant" black laborers, whom they believed would "loafer" and "lummoX" around without proper surveillance.<sup>268</sup> As such, efforts to regulate the behavior of the black workforce should be interpreted as another way that the planter class sought to produce a type of racial etiquette that supported the strict racial hierarchy of slavery and Jim Crow. There was also an economic motivation for regulating access to social benefits. Public relief programs posed a threat to the South's low-wage economy and a labor system which was entirely structured around systems of paternalism and dependency (through debt peonage) upon which the planter class depended.<sup>269</sup> As such, by both regulating proper modes of employee behavior, and simultaneously denying the majority of African American workers access to a social and economic safety net, the New Deal social policies were a vehicle that served white economic and cultural supremacy.<sup>270</sup>

With the new redistributive social policies and increased labor regulations, the New Deal gave select Americans a new sense of citizenship, providing protections from the most egregious forms of economic destruction. As detailed above, the social and

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<sup>268</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom : How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 100.

<sup>269</sup> Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 74.

<sup>270</sup> The third important social welfare program of the Social Security Act was Aid to Dependent Children. The Aid to Dependent Children was a program largely administrated at the state and local level, leaving ample room for substantial racial discrimination in the implementation of the program.

economic policies were not aimed at a radical transformation of the system, but rather were meant to restore confidence in American capitalism and democratic institutions.<sup>271</sup>

The New Deal created a set of policies aimed at the center and in so doing reflected the Treasury Sections own centrist approach to national culture. Evergood's mural can thus be interpreted as a visual codex to the New Deal, especially as it applied to small-town Georgia. His convivial, productive black field workers reflect the social and economic vision that Southern New Dealers sought to create which aimed simultaneously to deny access to the economic security and financial independence required for a substantive exercise of citizenship, and to maintain the paternalistic cultural structures and racial etiquette of Jim Crow.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>271</sup> The programs at the heart of the Social Security Act rationalized and entrenched the color line that existed in the United States from its inception, deepening the oppression and exclusion of African Americans from full inclusion into the American political economy. While federal New Deal legislation, such as the Social Security Act, created a new racialized social democracy, where new forms of structural racial discrimination took the place of the more obvious forms of Jim Crow segregation, state-wide programs expose the endemic and overt problems of racism in New Deal programs. Even work relief and job training programs targeting African Americans were guided by racist and paternalistic assumptions about African Americans' positions in the racial hierarchy of the United States. The Depression changed the nature of domestic labor, requiring that black domestic workers hold multiple jobs or move from position to position, rather than living with and looking after a single family. Traditional paternalistic relationships between black women and white families deteriorated during the Depression, creating widespread white anxiety and prompting calls from government officials across the South, as Ferguson notes, for "training in domestic service for black women, ostensibly to improve their efficiency and skill, but also to subdue them through subservience" (Ferguson, 124) White Georgians complained of their "servant problem," opining for the mythic days of the antebellum South, were black slaves were loyal, servile, and 'willing' to work continuously to meet the demands of their white owners (Ferguson, 124). In response, New Dealers in Georgia created a number of programs aimed at training black women to be domestic servants. For example, the WPA's Housekeeping Aid Project aimed at teaching black women household management and practical nursing so that they could be employed to provide relief to households where a white mother was ill or disabled. Other programs such as the Hospital Auxiliary worker program trained back men and women as maids, cafeteria workers, waiters, and janitors. These programs were the only ones open to black women during the Depression (Ferguson, 124). In the South, the New Deal attempted to force African Americans into jobs that mirrored the paternalistic rubric of the antebellum period.

In chapter one I argued that the murals in Washington, D.C. presented the visual vocabulary that reflect a social reality that solidified the myths of both American exceptionalism and the belief that full and free citizenship was tied to a particular conception of white masculinity. Collectively, these murals re-inscribed the myth of American exceptionalism—that America was the land of milk and honey, forged as an egalitarian meritocracy upon the diligent work of the Jeffersonian farmer. However, the ideological construction of citizens is defined and gains meaning through its contrast with the oppositional anti-citizen, that is those who lacked the qualities needed to exercise citizenship. Put another way, as Aziz Rana argues, the democratic ideals of equality and liberty of citizenship at the heart of the myth of American Exceptionalism “gained strength and meaning through frameworks of exclusion” and oppression.<sup>272</sup> The black figures in Evergood’s mural then, should be read as the necessary rhetorical corollary to the white figures in the Washington, D.C. Post Office murals. Evergood’s figures were not the hardy pioneers that settled the West or the hard working independent farmers at the heart of the Jeffersonian ideal. The figure of the black body had to be constructed as something that existed outside of the narrative of the American experience—incompatible with the unimpeded social mobility of democratic liberty available to free white male citizens. Though legally free, the figures in Evergood’s mural lacked the material bases for true independence and were thus forced to work for land owners either for wages or as tenants, permanently marking them as the antithesis of the Jeffersonian ideal—landless hired hands, undeserving of substantial inclusion into the American polity.

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<sup>272</sup> Rana, 7.

## Excursus

During the course of my research I spoke with the current postmaster of Jackson, “Judy G.” She mentioned that many African American residents of the town were and continue to be deeply troubled and outraged that the mural, which contains, as I have outlined above, troubling depictions of African Americans, is still on display. The postmaster mentioned that black residents of Jackson believe that the mural contains profoundly insensitive tropes and racist depictions of African Americans and they petitioned to have the mural removed. The postmaster was under the impression that a compromise was reached. Instead of removing the mural, some of the black figures in the foreground were “re-raced,” transformed from black to white. Pointing out the noticeable difference in skin color of a figure’s brown legs and white face, the postmaster specifically believes that the figure closest to the donkey’s head, carrying a basket and clad in a white shirt and blue pants, was repainted to be a white man. Unfortunately, she was unable to give me further details (she could not remember when this supposed repainting occurred or direct me to anyone who could give me further details).

I contacted the *Jackson Progress Argus*, the local newspaper, hoping that one of their reporters would remember the event, but no one on staff could. I also contacted the local historical society, and they confirmed that “when the post office was moved from the former post office building to the present post office location, the painting was “sent out” to be cleaned and following the cleaning, while the painting was still “out,” “touch ups” of paint were applied to the painting.”<sup>273</sup> Unfortunately, no one at the historical

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<sup>273</sup> Jim Herbert, Butt County Historical Society, personal communication, July 22, 2018.

society was able to define what they meant by “touch-ups.” To be sure, there is a stark contrast in skin color between the leg and face of the figure in the foreground this could be attributed to Evergood’s own handling of paint, as he often laid one color next to another in large unmodulated swaths. Additionally, he was known to come back to figures and repaint sections or parts of a work, which might also explain the difference in skin color.<sup>274</sup> Unfortunately, the only photographs of his initial sketches are in black and white, making it impossible to tell the race of each figure, particularly if he intended them to be read as mixed race. Given Evergood’s well documented history of painting interracial scenes, it is not unlikely that the work originally contained both black and white farm laborers; however, this does not exclude the possibility that the figures were “re-raced” to create more racial balance. Without further information, it is impossible to know the extent to which Evergood’s figures have been changed (if at all). However, my conversations with the postmaster and members of the Butts County Historical Society point to an issue worthy of further consideration: what to do with problematic public art?

### Chapter Three: On the Border, Migration, Race, and the Making of Alien Citizenship

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<sup>274</sup> Jody Patterson, “‘Marx on the Wall’: Muralism and Anglo-American Exchange during the 1930s,” *Tate Papers*, no.27 (Spring 2017), accessed 12 August 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/27/muralism-and-anglo-american-exchange>

Juxtaposed against the indomitable, masculine figure of the cowboy hero—the archetypal protagonist of America’s Manifest Destiny—and the refined, bourgeois industrialists whose trains bring with them the promise of technological innovation and modern progress to the West, the figures of the Mexican (American?<sup>275</sup>) cotton farmers occupy a marginalized position in Howard Cook’s *San Antonio’s Importance in Texas History* (1939) (figure 45), created for the San Antonio Post Office and Federal Courthouse. The three cotton farmers, rendered in shades of ochre, merge seamlessly with the land on which they toil, drawing our eye not to their obscured identities, but rather to the luminous white of the cotton they pick. Their marginalized positions obfuscate the historical importance of their labor. The cotton industry and the labor of Mexican American and migrant farm workers were fundamental to the region’s agricultural revolution.<sup>276</sup> While labor was responsible for building the infrastructure of the modern southwestern economy, it is almost entirely absent from Cook’s triumphant depiction of the Texan creation myth. This vignette is part of a six-foot high continuous frieze running along the four walls above the arched portals in the foyer of the United States Post Office and Federal Courthouse in San Antonio, Texas. Cook’s *buon* frescos depict the significant events in the city and the state’s history from the arrival of Spanish

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<sup>275</sup> It is unclear whether Cook intended these figures to be Mexican or Mexican American farmer workers, but the ambiguity points to the various ways that the federal government collapsed the distinction between Americans of Mexican descent and Mexican nationals. In archival documents the Section does not seem to comment on the cotton pickers at all. However, given that by 1910 the cotton industry in Texas was utterly dependent upon Mexican labor and coupled with the significantly darker skin tone of the three laborers shown picking and hauling cotton and Cook’s documented interest in depicting Mexican communities in Texas, I believe it is safe to assume that Cook intended these figures to be read as Mexican laborers.

<sup>276</sup> Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, 129-30.

Conquistadors to Texas's struggle for independence to San Antonio's present-day agricultural and industry might.<sup>277</sup>

Using Howard Cook's *San Antonio's Importance in Texas History* and focusing specifically on his depictions of Mexican migrant labor, I seek here to complicate the racial map I charted in chapter two, which was principally delineated along a black and white racial divide. Here, I consider the borderlands of race and citizenship, both literally as a geographical site located along the US-Mexico border and metaphorically as a liminal space forged between blackness and whiteness. I intend to capture increasingly complex definitions of race in 1930s United States. Central to this chapter is a discussion of how migration in the southwest and immigration from Mexico, the increasingly restrictive immigration policies, and the creation of the Border Patrol shaped the meaning(s) of race and citizenship in the United States. I argue that Howard Cook's *The Importance of San Antonio in Texas History* illuminates the complexity of race in America and participates as a Foucauldian true telling technology of government, which helps to create a larger cultural and visual discourse of citizenship.<sup>278</sup> The visual rhetoric of citizenship in Cook's mural worked to define Mexican identity as immutably Other and illicit and, thus, excludable from the American polity.

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<sup>277</sup> Buon fresco a painting technique where a fine layer of plaster is spread over a wall's surface. An *arriccio* or cartoon is drawn on top of the first layer of plaster and then an extremely smooth layer of plaster, the *intonaco*, is spread over the *arriccio*. In buon fresco the paint is applied directly onto the wet *intonaco*.

<sup>278</sup> As I discussed in chapter one, Foucauldian true telling technologies of government are the tools that a government deploys to shape the behavior, thought, decisions and aspirations of the populous to fit their own objectives (see page ten for further discussion).

## History of the Commission

In June of 1939 Edward Rowan wrote to Howard Norton Cook (1901-1980), congratulating him on his “distinguished” and “gratifying” San Antonio post office mural.<sup>279</sup> Rowan rhapsodized over Cook’s larger contributions to American culture, noting “You [Cook] have done much to help the cause of American art by the intelligent and kindly way in which you have taken the people of San Antonio in your confidence.”<sup>280</sup> Members of the Treasury Section and the local San Antonio public praised Cook for what they perceived as his sensitive and accurate rendering of Texas history. Lauding him as an artist who could capture “real old fashion beauty,” the Rotary Club of San Antonio praised Cook’s “factual” murals for their ability to “give San Antonians a faithful history-in-pictures for a thousand years or longer.”<sup>281</sup> Cook’s grand and sweeping historical narrative, anchored in his heroic interpretation of Texas’s Revolutionary-era history was not chosen at random, but rather shaped by the demands of the Treasury Section. In the June, July, and August 1936 edition of the *Bulletin: Treasury Department Art Projects*, the Section had announced a call for submissions for the newly constructed San Antonio Post Office and Court House Building. Unlike other competition announcements, which generally offered only a brief description of the project and often

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<sup>279</sup> Edward B. Rowan to Howard Norton Cook. June 7th, 1939, Box 7, folder “Correspondence Subject Files: United States Treasury Department, 1939, 1942, 1945,” Howard Norton Cook Papers, Special Collections Research Center, and Syracuse University Libraries.

<sup>280</sup> Edward B. Rowan to Howard Norton Cook, June 7th, 1939.

<sup>281</sup> John Bob, “The Wheel of Fortune,” *Rotary Club of San Antonio Club*, no. 52 Vol. XXVII (November 25th, 1938) in Howard Norton Cook Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Box 13, Folder, “Memorabilia: Article Review.”

omitted specific references to a building's architectural features or information regarding surrounding urban geography, the Section went to great lengths to provide a physical description of the building as well as information about its urban context. The call for submissions in the Treasury Section Bulletin noted that the foyer of the building was

[Lit] by three hanging bronze fixtures on the South wall by three lunettes and two windows. The floor of the foyer is Gold Vein Pink Tennessee marble with a hinged finished. The wainscot is light St. Genevieve Golden Vein marble (a grey marble with golden veins) with a base course and decorative trim around the lunettes of Dark Cedar (a dark red marble). All marble in the wainscot and trim will be polished.<sup>282</sup>

The Section's physical description of the space, which emphasized the marble wainscot finish, signaled the building's importance as a site of the federal government. The pink Tennessee marble, which had been used in the United States Capitol and the Grand Central Terminal in New York, coupled with the dark cedar and St. Geneva marble endowed the foyer with a rich, warm elegance. Artists were asked to submit proposals that reflected the stately refinement of the building's architectural embellishments, with the Section reminding artists that they "should consistently keep in mind the relation between [their] design and the architecture of the building."<sup>283</sup>

What is even more striking about the call for submissions is the emphasis the Section placed on the urban context of the post office building, asking artists to consider that the "building is located on a part of the old Alamo mission grounds and faces the

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<sup>282</sup> United States, Department of the Treasury, Section of Fine Arts. "National Competition for Four Mural Paintings Open to All American Artists," *Bulletin: Treasury Department Art Projects*. No. 10 (June, July, August 1936), 1.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

Alamo chapel with its surrounding park.”<sup>284</sup> The Section’s two directives that artists consider both the physical building and its geographic location within the city are reflected in the subject matter the Section deemed appropriate to adorn the walls:

It is suggested that the local history of Texas is so rich in pictorial material that historical subject matter seems particularly appropriate to this building. The building is located on a part of the old Alamo mission grounds and faces the Alamo chapel with its surrounding park. Pictorial material from the history of Texas, that is readily suggested, could include the landing of LaSalle on the Texas coast and the claiming of the country for France; the Spanish conquest of Mexico; the independence of Mexico from Spain; Texas gaining its independence from Mexico; and a number of local historical facts such as the founding of missions by the Franciscan monks in San Antonio, the settlement of the town by the Spaniards; the Texas battle for independence culminating in the fall of the Alamo, and the subsequent colonization by the French and Germans.<sup>285</sup>

Despite the Section’s bromides, meant to gesture toward the value placed on an individual artist’s independence and creative freedom, its “suggested” subject matter reflects not a desire for artistic freedom, but rather a very particular version of history that the Section wished to make visible. The Section’s call for submissions continued:

The Section, however, wishes to allow the artists a wide latitude in choice of subject matter and suggests past industrial pursuits and landscapes characteristic of the locality of San Antonio would also be suitable. The nature and use of this Federal building also suggests a wealth of subject matter. In this connection the Section would like to emphasize that the central idea of the Postal Service is communication, by which experiences, ideas and goods are shared through the civilized world. This method of communication, the Committee believes need not be represented by the most obvious symbols, but might take on great dramatic and human significance. The Post Office, moreover, is the one concrete line between every community *of Individuals and the Federal Government, and, in addition to mail services, through such departments as postal saving, money orders, etc. functions importantly in the human structure of the*

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

*community* (emphasis added). As distinguished and vital a conception as possible is desired.<sup>286</sup>

Recognizing the integral role the post office occupied in the lives of American citizens as the “one concrete line between every community of Individuals and the Federal Government,” the Section appears to acknowledge that the work chosen to embellish the walls in San Antonio would act as a state-sanctioned method of communication between the viewers and the federal government. As such, the subject matter suggested in the competition announcement is particularly illuminating, as it gives one insight into the specific vision of the world the federal government wished to promote. The Section clearly sanctioned an “official” Texas history, rooted in a narrative of the past grounded in European imperialism and the celebratory heroics of the Alamo. This official worldview erased the rich and complex histories of the Native Americans who had lived in Texas for centuries before the European conquest as well as diminished the important contributions of African Americans and women to Texas history. Dictating the terms of a given post office mural, a standard operating procedure for the Section, these reflected the broader aim of the murals themselves. The Treasury Section murals were part of the larger strategy of governing, through which a particular set of heroic public memories about whiteness was to be codified visually and symbolically.

### **History of the Commission and Cook’s Early Career**

Chosen by a committee of Treasury Section administrators, including Ralph H. Cameron, the San Antonio-based architect of the postal building, the muralist Ward

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

Lockwood,<sup>287</sup> and the distinguished painter Reginald Marsh, Cook's mural designs vitalized the Section's vision, transforming the call for proposals into a heroic narrative of white masculine triumph. Prior to his success in San Antonio, Cook was already known to the Section through another post office and courthouse mural in Springfield Massachusetts, *Steel Industry*, (1936), (figure 46). The Section would also commission him to paint a series of tempera panels for the Corpus Christi post office in (1941), (figure 47). These commissions likely derived from the artist's critical and popular success as a commercial illustrator and photoengraver.

In 1919, at the age of 18, Cook began taking classes intermittently for three years at the Art Students League with Andrew Dasburg, Maurice Sterne, and Wallace Morgan.<sup>288</sup> His first major break came in 1922, when his pen drawings and woodcut illustrations appeared in *The Forum*, *Survey Graphic*, and *The Century*. Moreover, he won critical praise for his first East Coast solo show in 1934 at the Weyhe Gallery in New York, which featured a series of works he completed during his first of two Guggenheim Fellowships to Mexico in 1932. The year and a half Cook spent in Mexico provided, in his words, "tremendous stimulus, allowing [his] freedom to develop new techniques, including [him] first fresco," a skill set that would prove invaluable in his later work for

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<sup>287</sup> Lockwood, an artists whose work can be categorized as American Scene Realism, participated in a number of murals projects for the Work Progress Administration. Well known to the members of the Treasury Section, as his murals *Consolidation of the West*, 1937 and *Opening of the Southwest*, 1937 were part of the Washington DC post office cycle, Lockwood was a member of the Taos Society of Artists.

<sup>288</sup> Howard Norton Cook, "On the Road from Prints to Frescos." *Magazine of Art*, Volume 35 no. 1 (January 1942) in Howard Norton Cook Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Box 13.

the Treasury Section.<sup>289</sup> According to a short profile of Cook in the *New Mexican Quarterly*, written by the curator and art dealer Carl Zigrosser, while in Mexico Cook even “had some advice from Diego Rivera on [mural] pigments and materials.”<sup>290</sup>

The Mexican landscape and its people would continue to be a productive subject throughout Cook’s career. Indeed, his interest in Mexico reflects the enormous popularity of all things Mexican that emerged before and during the Great Depression.<sup>291</sup> During the political and social upheaval of the 1930s, Mexico had become a popular site for “cultural pilgrims,” a place where American tourists could escape the cultural decay engendered by modernity and immerse themselves in a ‘primitive,’ but authentic culture. The magazine *Mexican Folkways*, which over the course of its ten year circulation from 1925-1937, became a leading source on Mexican colonial and folk art for an increasingly enthusiastic American audience.<sup>292</sup> Such was the interest in Mexican colonial and folk art that in the fall of 1930 the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened the exhibition *Mexican Art*. The show, which traveled to thirteen cities over two years, helped to firmly set the perception of Mexico as a land of unsullied culture, devoid of the perils of industrialization and modernity.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>289</sup>ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Carl Zigrosser, “Howard Cook.” *New Mexcian Quarterly*. XXth Issue Year, (Spring 1950), 25 in Howard Norton Cook Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Box 13.

<sup>291</sup> Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 55-91.

<sup>292</sup> James Oles and Marta Ferragut, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1917-1947* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 121.

<sup>293</sup> Anna Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 76.

For American artists in the first three decades of the twentieth century, Mexico held powerful sway over their imaginations, functioning as an unspoiled land of discovery, a site where the exotic and at times dangerous landscapes and primitive people could satisfy their search for an “authentic” art. During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), images of the violence were widely available to a North American audience. Circulating in major news outlets, images such as *Women Revolutionists* (1911), (figure 48) taken by unidentified photographers, and the gruesome *Bodies of Three Men lying as They Fell After Being Executed* (1916) (figure 49) depicted Mexico as a lawless site of arbitrary violence. After the revolution, thanks in large measure to a flood of American artists who traveled to Mexico, from Milton Avery, Stefan Hirsch, Olin Dows (director of the Treasury Relief Art Project and an administrator for the American Federation of Arts) to George Biddle, Hale Woodruff, Charles White, Marsden Hartley, Edward Weston, and Paul Strand, a different view of the country emerged, one which suggested a mystical and timeless utopia.<sup>294</sup>

Emblematic of this atemporal paradise is the series of landscape paintings Marsden Hartley completed while on a Guggenheim Fellowship in Mexico. Transfixed by extant Aztec art and architecture, Hartley’s *Yliaster (Paracelsus)* (1932) (figure 50) depicts the volcanic mountain Popocatepetl emerging from a primeval and people-less landscape of intense primary colors. The title of the work, *Yliaster*, a neologism of the medical mystic Paracelsus meaning the prime matter, consisting of body and soul, reflects Hartley’s intense interest in an instinctual essence of art and life, one which he grounds firmly in

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<sup>294</sup> Oles, 145.

the Mexican landscape. The inhabitants of Mexico's paradisiacal landscape captured the attention of American artists. Reflecting the timeless landscapes of their homeland, Mexicans are depicted as abstracted indigenous types whose traditional dress or labor bound them to a distant past untouched by the development of Western modernity. Unconcerned with the actual identity of the women they painted, the notably flattened and featureless faces of Lowell Houser's *Ajijic Maidens Carrying Water Jars*, (1925) (figure 51); Jean Charlot's *Indian Women with Jug*, (1922) (figure 52); and Henrietta Shore's *Women of Oaxaca* (1927) (figure 53) mirror the various ways in which white artists idealized Mexican identity to the point of obscurity.

While Cook's portraits avoid s flattening, mask-like treatment of his subjects, his ink and pen drawings capture the larger trends in American artists' representations of Mexico and Mexicans. Set against an unmodulated white background, his anonymous portrait heads float in space (figures 54-57). Cook is keenly interested in capturing each sitter's physiognomy—every wrinkle, the contours of the noses and mouths, the bushy mustaches—all the qualities that made these figures resolutely Mexican and as such, foreign, exotic, and Other. In addition to his portrait types, Cook's other etchings include scenes of folk celebrations, emphasizing the harmonious, atemporal customs of the rural Mexican peasants. His exhibition was well received by New York art critics, notable among them Margaret Breuning, who praised his work in jingoistic terms. In a 1934 article for the *New York Evening Post*, she lauded Cook's work for its ability to maintain a distinctly American idiom when depicting Mexican subject matter, noting, "Cook, happily, has not suffered from this unfortunate Mexicanitis which has so lamentably

afflicted a number of painters... [He has] escape[d] the influence of the powerful Mexican artists whose work is seen at its real measure of achievement only on their native soil."<sup>295</sup> The racist nationalism coloring Breuning's praise of Cook is not only an implicit critique of the scores of American artists, such as Jean Charlot, George Biddle and Marion Greenwood, who trained with and adopted the painterly techniques of the Mexican muralists, but also the presence of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco in American cultural and social institutions.

During the first few years of the 1930s, Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco each finished major mural projects in the United States.<sup>296</sup> Rivera and Frida Kahlo, in particular, were objects of special fascination in the imaginations of the American public. In 1931 Rivera became the subject of MoMA's second monographic exhibition, setting new attendance records in its five-week run. As Kahlo's and Rivera's celebrity reached new heights with the latter's commission in Detroit, the artist couple graced the pages of major American magazines—including *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. However, while Kahlo and Rivera evoked an exoticized fixation among some Americans, their presence in the United States also revealed a deeply rooted cultural anxiety. As was noted in chapter one, the head of the Treasury Section, Edward Bruce, feared the cultural influences of the

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<sup>295</sup> Howard Norton Cook Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Box 12.

<sup>296</sup> During a 1932 extended stay to Los Angeles, Siqueiros painted three murals: *Street Meeting* at the Chouinard Art Institute; *América Tropical* at El Pueblo de Los Angeles; and *Portrait of Mexico Today* at a private residence in Pacific Palisades. A fourth mural may have been painted at the John Reed Club in Hollywood, but was largely undocumented and likely incomplete at the time of his departure. Between 1927-1934 Orozco lived and worked in the United States, during this time he completed three important murals: *Prometheus*, 1930 at Pomona College, Claremont, California, a 1931 five-wall fresco cycle for New School for Social Research, New York, and *The Epic of American Civilization*, 1932-34, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

Mexicans, who “poured across” the southern border. Bruce and others sought to confine Mexican culture to “their own native soil,” lest they infect American artists with *Mexicantisis*. Despite the various ways in which Mexicans and their culture were romanticized and celebrated, as soon as they crossed the border, they became objects of political and cultural anxiety.

### **Hardy Pioneers and Revolutionary Heroes**

Perceived by critics and the popular press alike as the consummate American artist, and praised for his ability to capture the intensity of the contemporaneous American scene, Cook’s work was widely collected. It appears in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Whitney Museum, the Newark Museum, and the British Museum.<sup>297</sup> The curator Carl Zigrosser praised Cook as an authentic “observer” and “recorder” of American life, celebrating his “remarkable sense of design” and praising his ability “to suggest in an admirable way the essential character of widely divergent sections of the United States.”<sup>298</sup> As a member of the American Artist Group, an organization which aimed to popularize contemporary American art by publishing and selling reproductions of original etchings, lithographs, drawings and paintings on greeting cards, his work was also available to a larger American public. As such, when Cook turned his attention towards the San Antonio post office commission, he brought not only popular recognition but also critical affirmation.

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<sup>297</sup> William D. Miller in the Brooklyn Eagle Magazine, February 8th, 1931. In Howard Norton Cook Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Box 12.

<sup>298</sup> Carl Zigrosser in the *Print Collector’s Quarterly*, October 1929 in Howard Norton Cook Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Box 12.

Cook's mural consists of sixteen distinct but connected vignettes. He begins the narrative on the south wall of the foyer with a scene that locates the origins of Texas history not with indigenous tribes, but rather with the arrival of Spanish Conquistadors (figure 58). The largest figure in the group, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, identified by his distinct facial hair and the coat of arms he carries in his right hand,<sup>299</sup> dominates the scene, which is circumscribed by the corner of the wall and the molding of the lunette. Cabeza de Vaca occupies the entire length of the frieze; his broad, armour-clad shoulders and barrel-chest render him an imposing figure within the desert landscape. A semi-nude Native American, wearing only a loincloth, crouches next to Cabeza de Vaca. With his right arm outstretched, the native directs Cabeza de Vaca's gaze onward, towards vast empty lands ripe for conquest while guiding the viewer's gaze towards the unfurling narrative of Texas history. A Franciscan friar bearing a standard with a Christian cross leads a cavalcade of well-armed soldiers, some on foot and some on horseback, who process behind Cabeza de Vaca, underscoring the forceful success of his conquest of 'unexplored' territories.

Cook's depiction of Cabeza de Vaca's arrival in Texas is pure fantasy. Unlike the seemingly heroic ease with which Cabeza de Vaca conquers Texas in Cook's fresco, his actual 'discovery' of Texas was a harrowing attempt at survival. Cabeza de Vaca arrived in present-day Tampa Bay, Florida, in 1528, as the treasurer to a Spanish expedition led by Pánfilo de Narváez. Narváez's expedition was disastrous. Separated from Narváez, Cabeza de Vaca and his men were shipwrecked by storms along the Gulf Coast in

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<sup>299</sup> See similarities between Cook's image and the one that appears in the title page from a 1555 edition of *La relacion y comentarios del gouernador Aluar Nuñez Cabeca de Vaca*

present day Galveston, Texas, in 1528.<sup>300</sup> Rather than commanding native peoples, Cabeza de Vaca was entirely at their mercy, having landed severely dehydrated and on the verge of starvation.<sup>301</sup> Over the next four years, he and his remaining crew members traveled across Texas not as conquerors but as traders and healers. By 1532, when Cabeza de Vaca reached Mexico's northernmost provinces, only three members of his original expedition were alive. Despite the resounding failure of Cabeza de Vaca's colonial pursuits, he is memorialized in Cook's mural as the legendary pioneer whose 'discovery' of Texas laid the foundation for the transformation of the land from a barren wilderness to an economically productive, civilized state.

The viewer is meant to follow Cabeza de Vaca's gaze as he looks left towards an imagined future dominated by the "civilizing" effects of the Spanish empire. In the next scene, a Franciscan friar stands in the center of a group of kneeling Native Americans, who hold wheat and corn, symbolizing the land's fecundity that is the result of the Spanish presence (figure 59). With a bible in his right hand, the friar stretches his left arm out in a rhetorical gesture of instruction and tutelage—he appears to be teaching the gathered Native Americans' "proper" religious and agricultural practices. Just behind the friar, Native Americans haul stones on their backs as they build a mission—the ornate niches and scalloped edges of the doorframe resemble the central portal of the Mission San José, located a few miles from the post office. The permanence of the mission, implied by its stone construction, is juxtaposed against the impermanence of the cloth

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<sup>300</sup> Ralph Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

tee-pee in the overarch. The two structures read as cultural proxies. The former represent aspects of the enduring strength and enlightenment of European civilization. The latter represents the ephemerality of a culture, one whose bellicose and uncivilized nature, visualized by the Indian war dance occurring to the right of the tee-pee, would soon be overcome by the civilizing forces of the Christian West.

Following the conventional developments in San Antonio's history, Cook next depicts a vibrant marketplace where Native Americans, no longer dressed in traditional garb, carry their wares on their backs or drive large-wheeled carts (figure 60). Canary Island emigrants, who first settled in San Antonio in the 1730s, established the settlement of San Fernando de Bexar, now the modern city of San Antonio, and are shown in the foreground. According to Cook's narrative, Cabeza de Vaca discovered the land that would become San Antonio, the friars and the Catholic Church civilized it, and the Canary Island settlers created the foundations for its vibrant political and economic life. If the first three vignettes depict Texas and San Antonio's founding, the following three illustrate Texas' struggle towards independence. The fourth vignette on the south wall illustrates Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821 (figure 61). A mounted soldier, a Mexican flag fluttering just behind his head, rides past cheering townsfolk. The men and women wave their hats and open their arms, welcoming the soldiers into the walls of the city just visible in the background. More soldiers, whose backs face the viewer, march towards a barrel-vaulted archway, leading the viewer's gaze rightward, towards an image of Stephen F. Austin in the next scene.

Austin, whose eponymous city became the Republic's capital in 1839, is depicted as an elegantly dressed statesman, his waistcoat and jacket setting him apart from the pioneer families who surround him (figure 62). In 1822, Austin had led a group of 300 families to settle a land grant given to his father, Moses Austin, by the Mexican government.<sup>302</sup> Cook visualizes the nascent stages of Austin's colony—Austin looks off into the distance, the outlines of his colony already taking shape as he points to a spot on the map that lays in his lap. A stalwart pioneer family sits attentively near Austin as he discusses plans for his newly established colony. As emblems of marriage and family, the pioneers capture, as Barbara Melosh as argued, “mutuality and community, a vision of upward mobility without competition, anxiety, and isolation that often attended Americans' economic lives” during the political and social upheaval of the Great Depression.<sup>303</sup> The vivid evocation of white-Anglo resilience in the face of the hardships of Western migration is continued in the vignette's background. In the background, Austin's settlers make further preparations for the new colony—on the left a family group marches forward driving out a group of nondescript Indians on horseback, recognizable because of their stereotypical headdresses. On the right, a cluster of men fell trees, preparing the lumber for the construction of the colony. Their rugged, masculine strength affirms the enduring American ideals of Western expansion.

The final vignette on the south wall details the Siege of B exar, which occurred from October 12, 1835 to December 11, 1835 (figure 63). An early but important battle in the

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<sup>302</sup> Pablo Mitchell, *Understanding Latino History: Excavating the Past, Examining the Present*. (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood an Imprint of ABC-CLIO-LLC, 2018), 25.

<sup>303</sup> Melosh, 50.

Texas Revolution, the scene depicts the volunteer Texan Army, led in part by an icon of the Texas Revolution, Ben Milam, defeating Mexican forces and capturing the city of San Antonio. Set against the stone outline of the Alamo, Cook recreates the epic battle as groups of men, dressed not as soldiers but rather as hardy pioneers with coonskin caps and buckskin shirts, fire their rifles towards the unseen but approaching Mexican soldiers, who are represented only by the Mexican flag over the lunette. Cook juxtaposes the volunteer army, whose energy and attention create a sense of momentum that pulls the viewer leftward, with the languid figure of the fallen Milam, who was killed before the surrender of the Mexican army. Milam's unblemished body, which falls back into the arms of another of Texas's revolutionary heroes, Samuel Maverick, recalls the languishing body of Christ's descent from the cross. By visually aligning Milam to representations of Christ descending from the cross, Cook elevates Milam in death, transforming him into a martyr of freedom and independence—an icon of the Texas Revolution.

On the west wall, Cook captures the patriotic valor of the mythic Battle of the Alamo. In the first of two scenes, Cook depicts the erroneous legend of William Travis' "line in the dirt" (figure 64). According to Texas lore, during the Battle of the Alamo, Travis supposedly drew a line in the dirt with his sword, asking his small but courageous band of besieged men to cross the line and die defending the Alamo or to leave the fort. Travis stands proudly in the center, his broad shoulders and confident pose anchoring the composition as he points his sword towards the ground. He is surrounded by groups of

eager fighters: Davy Crockett and James Bowie are poised at the ready to fight the approaching Mexican army.

In the adjacent panel, we see the men who have crossed Travis's mythical line, locked in a deadly battle with scores of Mexican soldiers who emerge into the composition from a shadowy black background (figure 65). In the overarch are the battle flags of the Texas Revolution: the white, red, and green striped 1824 *Alamo Flag*, said to have flown over the Alamo during its siege; the *Liberty or Death* white flag of the Georgia Battalion of Volunteers led by William Ward; and the *First Company of Texan Volunteer* flag of the New Orleans Grays, which participated in the battle of Goliad. In addition to the battle flags, Cook includes two slogans associated with the Battle of the Alamo. In the overarch, one finds "I shall never surrender or retreat," a refrain that reminds viewers of the valor and courage of the defenders of the Alamo. A second maxim, "Remember the Alamo, Remember Goliad" urges contemporary viewers to participate in the re-inscription of the Battle of the Alamo, as represented in Cook's work, into the collective public memory. While the Texans lost the Battle of the Alamo, Cook omits references to the defeat of the Texan rebels, instead concluding Texas' struggle for independence with the capture of the Mexican General Santa Ana (figure 66). Stripped of his military regalia and standing defeated, shoulders slumping slightly inward, Santa Ana is presented to an injured Sam Houston, whose bandaged foot is attended to by a doctor. In the arch over the lunette, captured Mexican soldiers are marched at rifle point while members of Houston's army tend to horses.

At the center of the next vignette Sam Houston, recovered from his injuries, stands framed by the Lone Star Flag, (figure 67). Surrounded by portraits of the first cabinet members, including Stephen Austin, David Burnett, Lorenzo de Zavala, Mirabeau B. Lamar, Tomas Rusk, Juan Sequin, Sean Smith and William Wharton, Houston presides over the First Congress of the Republic of Texas as he lays his sword on the table. The diagonal angle of the blade directs the viewer's gaze towards a seated figure in the midst of writing the Republic's constitution. Military rule cast aside, enlightened reason and the rule of law, symbolized by the book of laws on the table, are revealed as the founding precepts of the new Republic in 1836.

Taming the wild frontier and policing indigenous populations was a constant task for Texas Republicans. Cook reminds viewers of the unceasing heroics of the early Republic in the next panel, where he depicts a tense standoff between Comanche Indians and the citizens of the newly formed republic. Later known as the *Council House Massacre* (figure 68), the image recounts an event of March 19, 1840, when a delegation of sixty-five Comanche Indian men, women and children, gathered in San Antonio to negotiate a peace treaty with the Texas Republic. The treaty would have provided recognition of the borders of Indigenous American land and the return of Texan captives. Cook captured the moment when Matilda Lockhart, one of the Comanche's captives, is presented to a group of gathered Texans. In Cook's fresco, the Comanches are portrayed as deceptive and bellicose figures, concealing weapons under their cloaks as they prepare to attack the unsuspecting Texans.

A closer examination of the historical record reveals the various ways in which Cook's account is creatively reimagined rather than serves as an objective record. In *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land, 1820-1875*, historian Gary Clayton Anderson recounts how Texan authorities, falsely believing that the Comanches held more captives, ordered the Comanches be held hostage until they returned all their supposed captives.<sup>304</sup> When the Comanche attempted to evade capture, a Texan colonel ordered his troops to open fire. The ensuing bloodshed left thirty-five Comanche dead, including five women and children and seven Texans dead, although two of the Texan casualties were a result of friendly fire.<sup>305</sup> A more historically accurate accounting of the *Council House Massacre* would likely have been unsuitable for the postal foyer. As such, Cook reimagines the scene. The Comanches are deployed as a useful foil in the artist's narrative, allowing him to cast the Texan settlers as unflinching defenders of the innocent, as valiant emblems of moral rectitude, and as champions of the Republic's ideals. Cook continues to foreground the enduring importance of the settler-colonialists' spirit to the development of Texas, even as it transitioned from an independent republic to a federal state (figure 69). In the following scene, a settler pioneer drives a Conestoga wagon with his wife and baby seated alongside him. Cook's fresco emphasizes the fecundity not only of the pioneer family, but of the land. Cattle, sheep, goats and, importantly, their progeny are included in the foreground. The family scene, like the one of Austin and his colonists on the opposite wall, had a powerful emotional resonance with

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<sup>304</sup> Gary Clayton Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land, 1820-1875* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005.), 182-184.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

contemporaneous Texan viewers, who surely identified with the images of family and frontier, seeing reflections of their own family histories in the depictions of the common heroic pioneer. The goat closest to the viewer bends his head, seeming to gesture towards the two central figures of Cook's vignette—a man and a woman, the former raising the American flag and the latter taking the lowered Lone Star flag into her arms, a reference to Texas's admission to the Union as the twenty-eighth state in December 1845.

While cattle ranching had long been an important industry in Texas, the annexation of the state ushered in significant growth in the ranching industry, facilitated by the waves of intensive settlement as the federal government made land grants widely available to new homesteaders (figure 70). The ranching industry grew so rapidly that Texas became one of the principal suppliers of beef to the Confederacy.<sup>306</sup> As emblems of the vitality of the ranching industry, two Longhorn cattle look out towards the viewer while dozens of others are herded past by two mounted cowboys, lassoes in hand. In the left overarch, a group of Native Americans hunt buffalo, a rapidly disappearing practice as the ranching industry began to dominate the Texas landscape and eliminate the buffalo, which were competed for grazing resources. The most striking feature about this particular vignette is the tiny confederate flag in the right-hand overarch, the only reference to slavery or to the Confederacy or even to the Civil War in the entire mural cycle. What is more, Cook's inclusion of the flag underlines a startling 'omission': there is not one African American figure in Cook's mural. In effect, Cook writes African Americans out of the history of

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<sup>306</sup> Douglas R. Hurt, *Agriculture and the Confederacy: Policy, Productivity, and Power in the Civil War South*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 36-37.

Texas, despite the fact that it was their coerced labor that built the state and whose male numbers would constitute a significant percentage of the cowboys and ranch hands.

The final panel on the north wall celebrates the industrial age in Texas. A steam train, its gleaming metal smokebox and grate, rushes diagonally out of the composition and into the space of the viewer (figure 71). The bright white light emanating from the train's headlamp not only illuminates the way ahead, but also draws the viewer's attention towards a mounted cowboy, who appears to lead the train forward. Texas experienced a rapid growth of its railway systems in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>307</sup>

Despite the incursion of industrial technology, the Texas cowboy— the intrepid, masculine tamer of the Wild West— remained an important ideological symbol of Texan identity: he occupies a prominent place amongst a group of bourgeois men, women, and children who have gathered to watch the train rush past.

Cook concludes his mural cycle with two scenes that celebrate the modern-day agricultural and oil industries of Texas. Longhorn cattle frame the cowboys in the foreground gathered around a chuck wagon (figure 72). A group of three cattle ranchers, portraits of grit and rugged masculinity are pictured in the foreground. In the overarch, Cook included oil derricks, referencing the booming industry.

The final vignette in the narrative is an image that reflected the stereotypical images of the Mexican immigrant workforce. Circulating amongst agribusinessman, their agricultural laborers are depicted as “peons” because they were, in the worlds of one

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<sup>307</sup> In 1870 there were only 711 miles of railroads in Texas, but by 1919 the miles of train tracks swelled to 16,113 see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 353.

prominent businessman, “docile, ignorant and non-clannish” and willing to work for low wages (figure 73).<sup>308</sup> This was in no way a local prejudice. A 1908 Federal Bureau of Labor Report described Mexicans as ideal laborers, noting that “they work well and are contented in the desert where Europeans and Orientals either becomes dissatisfied or prove unable to withstand the climate.”<sup>309</sup>

The three Mexican farmhands are submissive and diligent. The dark brown of the raw umber pigments Cook used for their skin color and black hair mirrors a depiction of their presumed forebear, the General Santa Ana, who is pictured directly across the foyer. Cook’s use of darker skin tones set these farmhands part from the Anglo settlers who populate the other vignettes. Unlike the white cowboys in the previous panel, who stare out from the fresco into the space of the viewer, the two Mexican workers, who occupy a similar shallow space in the foreground, are utterly absorbed in their work, staring down at the cotton they pick. Moreover, Cook carefully articulates the facial features of the three grizzled cowboys in the previous scene, endowing the figures with a degree of individuality absent in his treatment of the Mexican farm workers. Indeed, two of the figures have their faces entirely obscured and the third, seen in profile, lacks any distinguishing feature; his large and muscled forearm and hand are better defined than his face. Cook’s final vignette, like the rest of his mural, disregards both historical records and concurrent realities.

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<sup>308</sup> Frank Van Nuys, *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (Lawrence, KS.:University Press of Kansas, 2002), 72.

<sup>309</sup> Victor S. Clark, “Mexican Labor in the United States,” *Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics* Issues 78 (September 1908): 466.

Far from the docile and ignorant work force portrayed in Cook's work, Mexican farm workers were actually organizing for better pay and working conditions. In 1938, as Cook was working to complete his fresco, Emma Tenayuca, a self-identified Communist labor leader, organized 10,000 San Antonian pecan shellers, the vast majority of whom were ethnic Mexicans, to strike in the largest labor strike in San Antonio's history.<sup>310</sup> Tenayuca and the pecan shellers demanded an end to the wage differentials between white and Mexican workers, and they opposed racial and gender-based discrimination. The 1938 Pecan Sheller strike prompted a significant amount of fear and anxiety among the Anglo population of San Antonio, particularly within the political class, who believed these strikes threatened to foment interracial class solidarity and, as such, they directed the police force to attack workers who attended pro-labor rallies called by Tenayuca and her supporters.<sup>311</sup>

Cook's shallow pictorial space and flattened composition push the figures against the picture plane and thereby enliven his narrative. Rather than recessing deep into a fictitious space, his figures appear to animate the space in front of the viewer— from the map that Stephen Austin rests in his lap, the angle of which allows the viewer to transport themselves into the space of the coon-skin capped pioneer and participate in the colony's planning, to the apocryphal line in the sand that Travis draws, the tip of his sword pointed

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<sup>310</sup> Zaragosa Vargas, "Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement during the Great Depression," in *Texas Labor History*, ed. Glasrud, Bruce A, and James C Maroney (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2013), 220.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

outward towards the viewer, as if inviting the spectator to join in the defense of the Alamo.

Reflecting on his mural in a 1942 interview in the *Magazine of Art*, Cook notes that

My true aim in the subject matter (of the San Antonio post office) was to present the underlying spirit of the people and the forces which had built up first the Republic and later the State of Texas... express[ing] in terms of color as well as design the excitement and steadiness of exploration and pioneering, the drama and tragedy in the struggle for political freedom, the final opening up of a full, settled life provided by the industry of man and fed by the wealth of natural resources.<sup>312</sup>

Indeed, his mural plan locates the origins of Texas in the successive triumphs of heroic masculinity and the enlightened inheritance of military might and technological prowess — from Cabeza de Vaca’s initial discovery and conquest to the taming and exploitation of the natural resources and the subjugation of nonwhite people. Cook’s mural grounds the viewer in a distinctly regional landscape, filled with cacti, bayous, mesas, and sprawling plains. His work is populated by hardy (white) folk-heroes who are bound to the land. Cook fashions his strapping pioneers as the visible manifestation of America’s Manifest Destiny— these Texan pioneers created a space where they were able to exercise their own self-rule and economic independence.

Seizing on the architectural features of the post office’s lobby, a space which allowed for the mural to wrap around its entirety, Cook represented the foundational myths of a state and nation built on settler-colonialism. He then narrates this compositionally as a linear tale of democratic expansion and progress. Aesthetic tension is created through the juxtaposition of thematically and visually contrasting images— submissive indigenous

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<sup>312</sup> Cook, “Road from Prints to Frescos,” 8.

Americans and intrepid pioneers; valiant Texan defenders of freedom and violent Mexican brutes— which not only endows the work with dramatic spectacle, but advances the prevailing political and cultural narratives of racial hierarchy. Cook's placement of the nonwhite figures not only flattens, collapses, and transforms their identities into tokens of Otherness, but it also underscores their roles as literal and metaphorical foils to white-Anglo progress— they are either obstacles to be overcome or commodity objects to exploit for capitalist profit and white-Anglo economic independence.

While the images of the three Mexican migrant laborers and Cabeza de Vaca's half clothed Native American guide act as temporal markers, denoting the beginning and end of the mural's narrative, they should be read as rhetorical extensions of one another. As such, the kneeling Native American and the three Mexican laborers appear side-by-side, their identities— to the extent that they were known in the first place, as unlike the named and identifiable figures in the rest of Cook's murals they are anonymous types— elided by both their physical proximity and the subservient position they occupy within the fresco.

Racial hierarchies are further accentuated in Cook's work through the juxtaposition of the founding fathers of Texas— Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin— with the various Mexican figures whose identities are consolidated into two types: the dangerous "assassins" at the Alamo and the docile and exploitable workforce. The image of the cotton pickers is in direct and constant dialogue with the battle scenes of the Alamo, which are directly across the lobby. Courageous men, willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of freedom and self-rule, engage in a frenetic and existential

battle at the Alamo. They are juxtaposed against the staid, passivity of the farm workers. Unlike the defenders at the Alamo, these cotton pickers have no control over the crop they produce or even their own labor. Moreover, the fearsome savagery of the Mexican soldiers in the siege of the Alamo— exemplified by the figure who stares maniacally out at the viewer, his gapping mouth and the white of his eyes startlingly noticeable— appears to justify the permanent second-class stature of Mexican laborers. The terrifying images of Mexican soldiers act as a warning to the contemporary viewer about the historical temperament of Mexicans: they are an inherently dangerous people that must be controlled. Ultimately, in Cook's fresco the freedom, economic independence and self-determination, the fresco's core themes, were dependent on rigorously defined boundaries of inclusion and exclusion into American polity.

### **Historicizing Texas: Romantic Revisionism of the Texas Past**

Cook's presentation of Texas history, which centers on the hardy pioneers who transformed Texas— taming the wild-uncivilized landscape into an economically booming engine of American capitalism— must be read as part of a larger attempt to celebrate Anglo-Texas's colonial-settler past and 1930s present. Indeed, Cook's work reflects contemporaneous efforts undertaken by state and local government to fashion a master narrative of Texas modernity, one which was to be grounded on the frontier individualism of Austin, Houston, and their political and cultural descendants. It was to be located and forged within the context of the colonial difference of Mexicans. As Texas historian Walter L. Buenger argues, a resurgent interest in the period of Anglo American colonization and the Texas Revolution began around 1910, profoundly shaping public

perceptions of official Texas history.<sup>313</sup> Historian Gregg Cantrell details the numerous efforts undertaken by the state and local communities during the Progressive Era to shape a new public memory in Texas, one which aimed to distance itself from the Civil War and from the consequential role Texas played in supporting the Confederacy and the institution of slavery upon which it depended.<sup>314</sup> Instead, a new historical memory was to be constructed that emphasized Texas as essentially western rather than southern and quintessentially American rather than Confederate.<sup>315</sup> However, the Texas government did not turn away from the institutional structures that depended on the continued exploitation and degradation of non-Anglo immigrants and African Americans. Curiously, at the very moment when the collective public memory was turning away from the “Lost Cause” ideology, the Klu Klux Klan, growing exponentially in size and power in the early 1920s, was part of the dominant Democratic Party that elected a U.S. senator in 1922 and nearly helped put their candidate of choice in the governor’s mansion in 1924.<sup>316</sup>

Yet, in an effort to distance Texas from the Lost Cause discourse, the state government selectively resurrected parts of Texas’ history to create a case for an

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<sup>313</sup> Walter L. Buenger, *The Path to a Modern South: Northeast Texas between Reconstruction and the Great Depression* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 130.

<sup>314</sup> Gregg Cantrell, “Bones of Stephen F. Austin: History and Memory in Progressive-Era Texas.” in *Lone Star Pasts: Memory and History in Texas*, Cantrell, Gregg, and Elizabeth Hayes Turner eds. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>316</sup> Walter L. Buenger, “Memory and the 1920s Ku Klux Klan in Texas.” in *Lone Star Pasts: Memory and History in Texas*, Cantrell, Gregg, and Elizabeth Hayes Turner eds. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2007), 119.

American past that never existed. In October 1910, Stephen Austin's body was disinterred from a small churchyard cemetery in the coastal county of Brazoria. The state legislature provided funds for Austin's remains to be paraded around the state before they made their way by train to the Capitol, where they laid in state before eventually being reinterred in the Texas State Cemetery in Austin, on the "Hill of Heroes," the highest point in the cemetery.<sup>317</sup> Austin's consciously orchestrated reemergence as a state hero was not an inevitable conclusion in 1910. In the seven decades following his death in 1836, Austin had fallen out of public favor.

In the years just prior to his death, he was perceived as too pro-Mexican, having spent the Texas Revolution in the United States on a diplomatic mission. In sum, he lacked the revolutionary credentials necessary for public veneration. However, the resurgent interest in Austin reflected a burgeoning interest in the history of revolutionary-era Texas. During the three days of a state-sponsored celebration of Austin and his importance to Texas history, thousands gathered to listen to speeches delivered by some of the most prominent Texan politicians, among them the Confederate veteran and district court judge, Alexander Watkins Terrell, and state legislator John T. Curry.<sup>318</sup> As Cantrell documents, during the celebration there was not one mention of the Civil War or Confederacy, nor was the connection made between the history of Texas independence and the institutions of slavery. Rather, speakers emphasized Austin's American rather than his Southern

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<sup>317</sup> Cantrell, "Bones of Stephen F. Austin," 45.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

traits.<sup>319</sup> As Cantrell astutely observes, the pageantry surrounding Austin's interment, which included parades of school children, "was no exercise in romanticizing idyllic days gone by; it was about furnishing the current generation (and the generations to come) with a useable past that pointed the way to a better future."<sup>320</sup> An excerpt from the speech delivered by state legislator Curry only serves to prove Cantrell's point. Curry opines that Austin's grave would become a site of nationalistic memory:

Place where the brainy boys of Texas can come and kneel at his grave and think of the glorious achievements of earth's greatest men and be made strong and patriotic by the study of the teaching and heroic acts of the mind who gave the republic of Texas to the world as one of its greatest commonwealths.<sup>321</sup>

Austin's grave was part of a larger movement that sought to create a mythology of the Texas Revolution and the "heroic" forefathers of the state that might have an active and practical presence in the lives of Texans. A self-consciously constructed past was deployed by state legislators, such as John T. Curry, not to shape how Texans thought of the past, but how they might be persuaded to conceptualize the present.<sup>322</sup>

In the years following Austin's interment, local governments and private citizens redoubled efforts to memorialize Texas's Revolutionary past. Monuments were planned

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>321</sup> John T. Curry, cited in Cantrell, "Bones of Stephen F. Austin," 47.

<sup>322</sup> The celebration of the Texan past, particularly the construction of Austin as a heroic symbol of Texas in 1910 anticipates the influential 1918 essay "On Creating a Usable Past" by the cultural critic Van Wyck Brooks. Driven by a desire to mobilize American memory to achieve a particularly political end, Brooks argued that we should approach the past "from the point of view not of the successful fact but of the creative impulse" (Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial*, Vol. LXIV (January 3 - June 6, 1918): 340). In other words, according the Books, the past should be "usable," leveraged by Americans for their own future.

and erected to the heroes and heroines of the Texas Revolution. In 1911 the Texas Senate approved a bill that would fund a monument to Elizabeth Crockett, the second wife of the Alamo hero Davy Crockett. State Senator, Pierce Ward, the bill's sponsor, argued that because Elizabeth Crockett represented the "continued struggle for Independence" that her husband died defending at the Alamo, her monument would therefore memorialize the state's steadfast commitment to self-governance and hardy pioneer spirit.<sup>323</sup> In 1913, as part of the larger effort to monumentalize the Revolution, then Texas Governor Oscar Branch Colquitt supported a bill in the state legislature that appropriated ten thousand dollars to acquire the land on which the Battle of Goliad was fought and another seventy-five hundred dollars to create a state park on the site where the first shots of the Texas Revolution were fired.<sup>324</sup> Efforts to celebrate the Revolutionary past would continue throughout the 1920s and 1930s, often at the expense of examining other eras of Texas history. San Antonio was elevated as a centrally important site; indeed, between 1935 and 1936 both the state and the federal government would give a combined \$650,000 to "be used in memorializing Texas history as encased in San Antonio," with much of the funds dedicated towards refurbishing the grounds of the Alamo.<sup>325</sup>

Moreover, history textbooks and printed materials actively shaped the historical narrative for generations of young Texans. In 1926, the widely popular *Texas History Movies*, a serialized cartoon narrative of Texas history first appearing in the *Dallas*

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<sup>323</sup> Cantrell, "Bones of Stephen F. Austin," 54- 55.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid, 55-56.

<sup>325</sup> M. H. Crockett, "Remember the Alamo Again Head in Texas: Frank Dobie Expresses His Views Regarding Sculptors and Sculpture," *The Austin Dispatch*, June 10th, 1937.

*Morning News*, was published as a paperback book made available free of charge each year to all 7th graders across the state. Of its 128 pages, two were devoted to the Secession, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, while seventy-five pages were given to the Anglos' colonization and the Texas Revolution. Slaves and free blacks were depicted as caricatures, baboonish, child-like and dependent on the kindness of white people.<sup>326</sup> For example, in a panel depicting Moses Austin and his slave Richmond, Richmond is shown as a clownish dolt, there for comic relief (figure 74). Mexicans were reduced to barbarous brutes. In a frame depicting Anglo-Texan opposition to Santa Ana, a wide-eyed, crazed Mexican soldier on horseback brandishes his sword as he leaps over dead bodies. The caption, "But Cos defeated the Zacatecas Army amidst frightful butchery," reinforces the presumptive lack of moral integrity of Mexicans (figure 75).

The apogee of historical myth making was the 1936 Texas Centennial celebration in Dallas. The selective and prejudicial historical discourse that emerged from the Centennial hinged on the alienation and erasure of claims of historical citizenship of already marginalized African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans. On January 1, 1936, the Governor of Texas, James Allred, in a proclamation marking the Texas Centennial Year, noted that "as we stand upon the threshold of our State's Centennial, we must not forget that its purest concept lies in a reverence for the past and a

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<sup>326</sup> James E. Crisp, "Memory, Truth, and Pain: Myth and Censorship in the Celebration of Texas History," in *Lone Star Past: Memory and History in Texas* Cantrell, Gregg, and Elizabeth Hayes Turner eds (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2007), 81.

devotion to the perpetration of that past through an endless future.”<sup>327</sup> Amidst the deep social and economic wounds inflicted by the Great Depression, Allred’s proclamation was a salve: the glories of the state’s past would guide the state towards a bright future. Eight months before the governor’s proclamation, Texas legislators allocated three million dollars for the Centennial, and two months later FDR signed an appropriations bill allocating another three million dollars in federal monies for the celebration. Following the model of the 1898 World’s Colombian Exposition, the Centennial Exposition celebrated the triumphs of human progress and ambition. In addition to an entertainment alley that featured vendors selling games, food, and souvenirs, the exhibition included displays featuring the latest in automotive technology, an on-site radio studio sponsored by Gulf Oil, and General Electric’s House of Magic, which featured the “domestic life of the future served by electricity.”<sup>328</sup>

The Centennial’s exhibitions of the latest scientific and technological developments, intended to aggrandize the triumphs of Texan modernity, were rooted in exceedingly artificial and tendentious historicity. In an interview in the *Texas Centennial Magazine* about the imminent Centennial celebration, the Commissioner-General of the Federal Centennial Commission, Cullen F. Thomas, articulated the guiding principles of the festivities, noting that “one hundred years of unexampled progress, from barren wilderness to modern commonwealth” can only be understood from the “hilltops of our

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<sup>327</sup> James Allred, “Proclamation Calls Upon All Texans to Observe Centennial; Those Outside the State Urged to Return,” *San Antonio Express*, January 1936 cited in John Morán González, *Border Renaissance: The Texas Centennial and the Emergence of Mexican American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 33.

<sup>328</sup> González, 37.

history” because only through an understanding of Texas’ “incomparable heritage” could one understand the contemporary “triumphs of invention and miracles of science.”<sup>329</sup> According to Thomas, it was the “pioneer men and women who first trekked the unpeopled wilds, with axe and plow and rifle and spelling book and bible” that laid the foundation for Texas’ greatness.<sup>330</sup> Neither Texas’ past nor its future depended upon the coerced labor of black slaves or Mexican tenant farmers. Rather Thomas locates the origins and future of Texas in unsurpassed ingenuity and in the personal initiative of the only immigrants that mattered in Texas: Anglo settlers and their descendants.

Thomas’s commitment to Texas history became a pedagogical imperative. As part of the Centennial celebration, Thomas organized an intensive outreach to school children across the state, distributing Texas history booklets, sponsoring both essay and poetry contests focusing on the Anglo-Texas past and historical pageants. The Centennial’s educational outreach was part of an intense media campaign. Nearly half a million dollars was spent on advertising the Centennial across the state and the nation.<sup>331</sup> The intensive effort invested in the promotion of the official Centennial history to both Texas children and to a larger national audience reflected not only the state’s desire to establish a national mythology of Texas. Texas history, like the history of the United States, was that of what Aziz Rana has termed the “settler empire.” In other words, the Texan ideal of

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<sup>329</sup> Cullen F. Thomas, *Texas Centennial Magazine*, 1935, cited in John Morán González, *Border Renaissance: The Texas Centennial and the Emergence of Mexican American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 38.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

freedom depended upon an imperial ideology, one that in fact required the dispossession of indigenous peoples' land and the use of coerced labor of subordinated groups, foremost among them African slaves. As Rana argues, this embodies a larger duality in American history, its "long standing difficulty in imagining liberty without suppression and free citizenship without the control of subjugated communities."<sup>332</sup> The Texas history presented at the Centennial, populated with Cullen's pioneer men and women, eased the brutality of its settler empire and was meticulously constructed as proof positive of the promise and power of American democracy.

Texas's "incomparable heritage" was made manifest in Humble Oil and Refining Company's Hall of History, an exhibit which featured the "official history" of Texas told, in part, through a series of fourteen dioramas. Whether intentional or the consequence of other ambitions, the Hall of History marginalized and erased the contributions and presence of Mexican and African Americans. The historical narrative presented in The Hall of History failed to discuss slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the attendant white terrorism that followed Reconstruction; however, the state's military role in the Confederacy was celebrated. Moreover, reconstruction was presented as a time of "Negro misrule."<sup>333</sup> The history of African Americans in Texas was excised from the official history sanctioned in the Hall of History.<sup>334</sup> Rather African Americans' contributions to

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<sup>332</sup> Rana, 3.

<sup>333</sup> González, 44.

<sup>334</sup> For a rich discussion about the various ways in which African American history was distorted, deformed, and eased in the Hall of History see René Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society': Aaron Douglas's Mural for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition," in Susan Earle eds, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007), 102-105.

Texas history and their present lived experiences were reserved for the underfunded and poorly constructed *Hall of Negro Life*, which featured a pamphlet written by W.E.B. Du Bois. Like their African American counterparts, Mexican-Texans' contributions to Texas history were consciously erased. Denied a signal exhibition dedicated to their history or cultural experience, Mexican Americans, in fact, did not appear at all; instead, they were represented only as a foreign invading army, antagonistic characters in the narrative of white-Anglo progress in four of the fourteen dioramas in Humble Oil and Refining Company's Hall of History.

Continuing the tradition established during the Progressive Era, nearly one-third of the dioramas, four to be exact, were dedicated to the Texas Revolution and its immediate aftermath, which illustrates the racializing conflicts between Anglos and Mexicans. Two of the dioramas, both dedicated to the Battle of the Alamo, depict Mexican soldiers as marauding savages, killing defenseless Anglo-Texans. In a particularly shocking scene, a group of Mexican soldiers is shown pointing their rifles at an unarmed woman holding a child. Just to the left of the 'Texas Madonna,' a Mexican soldier is on the verge of executing a kneeling Texan, whose arms are raised in a gesture of surrender, while James Bowie, who lies on a bed, is killed (figure 76). The accompanying captions underscore the violent imagery: "Within the church, Joseph Walker is killed at Mrs. Dickenson's feet; Robert Evans is bayoneted as he attempts to fire the magazine; James Bowie is killed on his sick bed."<sup>335</sup> The other Alamo battle scene illustrated Davy Crockett's apocryphal last stand. Two further dioramas depict the

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid, 45.

moments of Santa Anna's capture at the Battle of San Jacinto, where he is shown attempting to evade capture by dressing in the uniform of an army private. By juxtaposing the scene against the adjacent one of stoic Anglo-Texans bravely facing death at the hands of their Mexican captors, the diorama was meant to highlight the cowardliness of Santa Anna and, by extension, of Mexicans in general.

The dioramas of the Battle of the Alamo were so offensive that the Mexican government successfully petitioned the Centennial organizers to have them removed from the Hall of History; however, they did appear in *Twice Told Tales of Texas*, a narrative guide given to visitors to the exhibit. *The Twice Told Tales of Texas*, coupled with the dioramas, effectively reduced Mexicans to a "crucial foil of colonial difference past and present that made legible the Anglo-Texas narrative of racial progress."<sup>336</sup> The narrative of Texas history that emerged from the Centennial was constructed not to better understand the past, but to make the present legible. The romanticized discourse of the Texas Centennial was constructed *ex post facto*, leveraged to justify the lived experiences of the Texan present (the 1930s, that is), to legitimize the dispossession of indigenous land, to nationalize the disenfranchisement and exploitation of African American and Mexican American labor, and to warrant the Jim Crow laws that defined the daily existence of white and nonwhite Texans.

When read within the context of the Texas Centennial and early efforts to memorialize the period of Anglo-American colonization and the Texas Revolution, Cook's startling deformation of Texas history is not aberrant. Rather, it conforms to

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid, 6.

prevailing historiographic trends. Cook's selective remembrance—the obfuscation of the Confederate past and the disappearance of African American representation, the insistent celebration of Anglo-American colonization and the Texas Revolution—acknowledges only the parts of Texas history that were politically expedient at the time of the commission. In other words, Cook's frescos should be interpreted as an extension of a larger effort underway in Texas, one that aimed to create sites of collective memory that self-consciously reconfigured the past in order to create a symbolic Texan identity, one that affirmed the racial hierarchies threatened by the social, economic, and political turmoil engendered by the Great Depression. Indeed, Cook's frescos, exploiting the “othering” of the Mexican identity in particular, ensured that the narrative of white-Anglo dominance in Texas would not only be visualized in important sites of government, but that the narrative would be historically justified.

### **Policing the Americanness: Immigration Policy and the Construction of the Border**

In the three decades preceding Howard Cook's Treasury Section Commission, eugenicists issued countless blistering attacks on the thousands of Mexican Americans and migrant laborers living and working in the United States.<sup>337</sup> American eugenicists worried that Mexicans, native born or otherwise, took jobs from white Americans and threatened the purity of the Anglo-American racial stock. As one Nordicist feared, the presence of Mexicans in the United States would inevitably produce “a hybrid race of

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<sup>337</sup> See Martha Menchaca, *Naturalizing Mexican Immigrants: A Texas History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Frank Van Nuys, *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Lee Bebout, *Whiteness on the Border: Mapping the U.S. Racial Imagination in Brown and White* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Arnoldo De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

people as worthless and futile as the good-for nothing mongrels of Central American and Southeastern Europe.”<sup>338</sup> Denouncing Mexicans as “sizzling with disease,” Texas U.S. Congressman John C. Box described them as “cheap, nasty, diseased, criminal labor.” These beliefs laid the rhetorical foundation for the expulsion of 400,000 Mexican nationals and American citizens of Mexican descent, which began in 1929 under the Hoover administration, but continued throughout the 1930s. While the exact numbers are difficult to determine, an estimated sixty percent of the “repatriated” were children or American citizens of native birth.<sup>339</sup>

By the time that Cook unveiled his murals to an enthusiastic Treasury Section and local crowd, Mexican identity was nearly impossible to separate, in the minds of Anglo Americans, from the term “illegal alien.” That Mexicans, whether American citizens or otherwise, would emerge as the archetypal illegal alien was neither an incidental result nor an inevitable conclusion of federal immigration policy. Rather it was a conscious and methodical attempt to confine them to a permanent class of non-citizen, an attempt rooted in both the need for cheap and disposable agricultural labor and the particular legal structures that defined Mexicans as technically white. To understand the mechanism by which the federal government successfully mapped the idea of illegality on the Mexican identity, it is necessary to briefly recount the history of immigration and deportation policy in the United States, as the shifting stance towards immigration reflects the various attempts to preserve the white settler content of the American national identity.

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<sup>338</sup> Cited in Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 53.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

Since colonization, the government— colonial and federal alike— sought to define the boundaries of social desirability and by extension, inclusion and exclusion into the polity. Since the colonial era, local governments were able to expel the unwanted through the use of poor laws. However, as Mae Ngai observes, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nation operated for the most part without any federal regulation of immigration.<sup>340</sup> The federal government’s *laissez faire* approach to immigration policy, reflected the belief that the migration of cheap (and often coerced) labor was necessary to economic and industrial development.<sup>341</sup> In fact, for much of the nineteenth century, the growth of the nation depended upon an aggressive effort on the part of the federal government to recruit European immigrants to settle the frontier. Paul Frymer meticulously documents the widespread use of homesteading and the federal granting of land to white settlers, both Anglo-American citizens and European immigrants alike, on the frontier as an instrument of empire building, one which would ensure that the United States would be a white nation.<sup>342</sup>

While the first federal legislation aimed at restricting entry into the United States was passed by Congress in 1875, banning persons convicted of “crimes involving moral turpitude,” the first federal law mandating the removal of “aliens” was not passed until 1891. The 1891 Immigration Act established the authority of the government to remove

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<sup>340</sup> The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 of course is a glaring exception to this *laissez faire* approach. Interestingly, in the majority opinion allowing the law, the Supreme Court articulated a definition of immigration regulation as a matter of national security as the basis for the qualitative selection or exclusion of certain individuals.

<sup>341</sup> Ngai, 58-59.

<sup>342</sup> Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 128-171.

those “aliens” who became public charges within the first year of their arrival.<sup>343</sup> Congress, however, did not appropriate funds for the removal of unwanted migrants; rather the cost would be shouldered by the shipping company that brought the individual to the United States. In 1917 the law was updated, adding six additional categories of excludable immigrants and extending the period of deportability from one year to five. However, as Ngai has calculated, between 1892 and 1907 the Immigration Service only deported a few hundred people a year; and between 1908 and 1920 only about two thousand persons yearly were apprehended, mostly from asylums, jails, and hospitals.<sup>344</sup> The relatively low number of deportations, particularly when considered within the context of the millions of immigrants arriving in the United States, reflected an approach to immigration that emphasized assimilation, an ability to work one’s way into ‘Americanness.’ Guided by this general principle, the idea that immigrants would be expelled from the country after they had assimilated was inconceivable.<sup>345</sup> Of course, the ability to transition from foreign immigrant to American citizen hinged on not only one’s ability to work one’s way into the polity through productive labor and gainful employment, but it was contingent on one’s proximity to whiteness— that is, one’s ability to blend into the Great American Melting Pot.

The 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act signaled a far more restrictive approach to immigration. The Act not only reaffirmed the American nation as one of Western

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<sup>343</sup> Ngai, 59.

<sup>344</sup> Ngai, 59.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

European descent, but it also created a new class of people: “illegal aliens,” who needed to be contained and controlled. The Johnson-Reed Act mandated that a quota system based on country of origin be instituted as the guiding principle of immigration policies. The new immigration system allocated quotas based on the proportion of Americans who could trace their origins to those specific nation-states recognized by the U.S. government. Affirming that America was a nation of white European settlers, the Johnson-Reed Act specifically excluded non-white people living in the United States from the population used to calculate the quotas. The act disallowed from the countable population of the United States those groups of inhabitants identifiable as “aliens ineligible for citizenship or their descendants;<sup>346</sup> descendants of slave immigrants; or the descendants of the American aborigines.”<sup>347</sup> This quota system created an explicit hierarchy of racial desirability. It helped shape and define the boundaries of whiteness as well as the contours of Otherness.

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<sup>346</sup> This included Chinese, Japanese, and South Asians, even those who were American citizens by birth. In 1790 Congress restricted naturalized citizenship to “white persons,” making whiteness a prerequisite to citizenship. However, the definition of “white person” was ill-defined and as Ian Haney Lopez meticulously examines in his work *White by Law* the ambiguity of whites led scores of people to argue that their racial identity was white in order to naturalize. As Haney Lopez has charted, between 1878, the year of the first prerequisite case until 1952, the year racial restriction for citizenship was removed, fifty-two racial prerequisite cases were reported, including two argued in front of the United States Supreme Court. The Court established that applications from Hawaii, China, Japan, Burma, and the Philippines, in addition to all mixed-raced applicants were not white, while the courts ruled that Mexicans and Armenians were white, but wavered over the whiteness of Syrians, Indians and ‘Arabians.’ In these cases, the courts were not only expected to define who was white, but to articulate the rationale for why they were white—was it measured by a petitioner’s skin color, culture, language, national origin, the pseudoscience of phrenology, etc. These court cases reveal the unstable and contingent nature of whiteness and the extent to which the legal system was not only complicit in the construction and perpetuation of white supremacy but also deeply foundational to it (Haney-Lopez, *White By Law*, 3-6).

<sup>347</sup> Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, Sec 11(d).

The Johnson-Reed Immigration act fundamentally transformed the government's approach to deportation: the new law dissolved the statute of limitations for deportation and for the first time made entering without a valid visa or without inspection a deportable offense.<sup>348</sup> By 1929, Congress passed legislation that made illegal entry into the country a federal misdemeanor; violators were subject to one year in jail and/or a one thousand dollar fine. Congress also allocated significant resources towards enforcement efforts aimed at preventing illegal entry into the United States; namely by creating the Border Patrol in 1924. Grounded in an artificially constructed racial hierarchy, which prioritized an immigrant's ability to assimilate a Anglo American citizen, the national immigration policies of the mid-1920s drew morally arbitrary boundary lines around 'deserving' and 'undeserving' immigrants. In effect, as Ngai argues, the construction of a national immigration policy "created a new class of persons within the national body, the illegal alien,"<sup>349</sup> whose presence in the United States constituted an existential threat to the idea of that America was absolutely a white-Anglo country.

Nevertheless, because Mexican labor was indispensable to the economy of Texas and other borderland states,<sup>350</sup> agribusiness aggressively lobbied Congress to exclude Mexicans from the racial quotas. As a result of this economic and political pressure, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act exempted Mexico along with other countries in the

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<sup>348</sup> Ngai, 60.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>350</sup> Between 1920 and 1930 the ethnic Mexican population the United States doubled, fueled mostly by the growing need for cheap labor. By the late 1920s farmers in Texas established that 98 percent of the agricultural workforce in South Texas were Mexicans.

Western Hemisphere from the numeric quota system. Yet, despite their exemption from racialized immigration quotas, Mexicans (both native and American-born) were constructed as the consummate illegal aliens, their assumed illegality and foreignness irrevocably tied to their ethnicity. Edward Hanna, the president of the Commission of Immigration and Housing of California, citing statistics which he claimed demonstrated that “Mexicans as a general rule become a public charge under slight provocation,” argued in his annual report to the Commission of Immigration and Housing of California that because Mexicans were “for the most part Indian” they were “very low mentally and are generally unhealthy.”<sup>351</sup> Hanna’s remarks reflected the widespread anti-Mexican rhetoric that defined Mexicans as an un-assimilable class of criminals, or as idiots, and certainly as indolent public health hazards. The “Mexican Problem” became a popular refrain in the debates surrounding the quota system, with the 1928 article in *Saturday Evening Post* proclaiming:

How much longer [are] we going to defer putting the Mexican Indian under the quota law we have established for Europe...Mexican laborers often have nine children, or even more. At the nine-child rate, any of these Mexicans who are coming in by the trainload might be expected to average 729 great-grandchildren...No temporary considerations of expediency should carry the smallest weight in preventing the proper economic protection of our own flesh and blood.<sup>352</sup>

The “Mexican Problem,” according to the author of the *Saturday Evening Post* article, is that not only are Mexicans pouring across the border unabated, but once settled in the United States have far too many children. A prolific birthrate among Mexican Americans

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<sup>351</sup> The annual report of the Commission of Immigration and Housing of California cited in Claudia H Roesch, *Macho Men and Modern Women: Mexican Immigration, Social Experts and Changing Family Values in the 20th Century United States* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter GmbH, 2015), 185.

<sup>352</sup> Cited in Ngai, 53.

and immigrants threatened to upend the country's Anglo majority and their political, social and economic hegemony, irrevocably changing the very character of the United States.

Mexicans became a "problem" not merely as the result of their exception from the 1924 racial quotas. There were deeply rooted historical prejudices intimately tied to the annexation and colonization of Mexico by the United States that fed into the demonization of Mexicans. After the Mexican-American War of 1848, Mexico ceded nearly sixty percent of its land to the United States. The United States moved quickly to establish a monopoly of power and territorial sovereignty, ascribing American citizenship to almost all the inhabitants of the newly acquired land. As part of the arrangements negotiated in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexicans remaining in the former Mexican territory who did not declare their intention to remain Mexican citizens or leave the territory within one year of the treaty's signing would automatically become citizens of the United States.<sup>353</sup> Importantly, this ascriptive citizenship did not apply to black Mexicans, as their citizenship would have threatened the institution of slavery.

In an uncanny twist of fate, the ascriptive citizenship established by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo necessitated that the newly minted Mexican Americans legally be considered white (as one had to be white to be a naturalized citizen of the United States). Mexican-Americans' whiteness was contingent upon a legal technicality and, as such, deeply unstable. In fact, there was a tremendous effort to distance ethnic Mexicans from the privileges of American citizenship in order to maintain the Anglo-American political,

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<sup>353</sup> Martha Menchaca, *Naturalizing Mexican Immigrants: A Texas History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 20.

social, and economic hegemony. Throughout Texas, Jim Crow laws were established to keep ethnic Mexicans socially and economically marginalized. Social spaces were segregated, with ethnic Mexicans denied service at restaurants, drug stores, and movie theaters. Neighborhoods were racially segregated as well, with Mexican Americans and migrants often forced to live in substandard *colonias*.<sup>354</sup>

Through poll taxes and in some cases all-white primaries, Mexican Americans were excluded from participating in the political system. This systematic exclusion from the polity was profoundly consequential, shaping the lived experiences of Mexican Americans as well as Mexican migrants. Mexican-Texan laborers made an average yearly income of just over seven-hundred dollars, one-thousand dollars below the federal poverty line. This suffocating poverty contributed to significantly higher mortality rates for ethnic Mexicans, compared to their Anglo counterpart, Mexican mortality was six times greater.<sup>355</sup> Moreover, farm workers, an overwhelming majority of whom were ethnically Mexican, were excluded from a number of New Deal social policies, such as the National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, and the Fair Labor Standards Act. Denying farm workers, and by extension Mexican American and migrant laborers (not to mention African Americans) access to the social welfare and labor protections of the New Deal guaranteed their political, social and even cultural exclusion from the American polity.

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<sup>354</sup> Gonzales, 18.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

The Border Patrol reinforced the racial Otherness of Mexicans by using ethnicity as a proxy for illegality. As the historian Kelly Lytle-Hernandez has extensively documented, the Border Patrol agents employed what the Supreme Court would later describe as “Mexican appearance” as their chief tool for identifying illegal border crossers. Lytle-Hernandez unearthed documents from the chief patrol inspector of the Border Patrol’s El Paso station to show that regardless of their formal citizenship, people of Mexican heritage were described as Mexican in court filings.<sup>356</sup> The Border Patrol’s intense policing of Mexicans, which hinged upon racialized ideas of citizenship as an imagined ideal of who was white enough to be included in the fabric of American life, was deployed as another tactic to ascribe illegality to the Mexican identity. While Mexicans were exempted from the racial quota laws of the Johnson-Reed Act, crossing the increasingly militarized border was made a humiliating experience intended to further equate Mexicans with foreign Otherness.<sup>357</sup> Despite requiring all prospective immigrants to present their medical certificates to the US consulate during the visa application process, upon arrival along the southern border Mexican immigrants were subjected to bathing, delousing, and a medical-line inspection, which required individuals to strip naked, have their hair shorn and their possessions fumigated.<sup>358</sup> These disgusting inspections were inflected with racial bias— Ellis Island eliminated line inspections in

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<sup>356</sup> Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Migra!: A History of the U.s. Border Patrol* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010), 48.

<sup>357</sup> Although by 1919 Mexicans crossing the border were required to apply for admission at designated check-points, the 1924 Immigration Act subjected Mexican immigrants to increasingly degrading procedures.

<sup>358</sup> Ngai, 68.

1924 and at the El Paso checkpoint all Europeans and first-class rail passengers were exempted.<sup>359</sup> Once in the United States, Mexican immigrants were required to report to immigration stations once a week for bathing, reinforcing the stereotype that Mexicans were filthy and presented a public health hazard.

American immigration policies operated, as Lytle-Hernandez argues as regimes constructed “not simply as a matter of keeping immigrants out...but as a formal system of inequality within the United States, because beyond questions of basic political enfranchisement various social welfare benefits are distributed according to immigration status.”<sup>360</sup> As such, immigration policy is a profoundly significant system of power that not only defined inequality, the distributions of rights, protections and benefits, but functioned as the fulcrum determining the conditions of Americanness and racialized Otherness. Despite a historical legacy that technically categorized Mexicans as racially white, in Texas and throughout the Southwest, immigration policy was deployed as part of a deeply consequential political effort to collapse the distinction between Mexican ethnicity, illegal alien, and disposable commodity labor.

### **Painting Belonging: Cook’s Migrants Labors and the Construction of Iconic Illegal Alien**

Cook’s mural was thus part of a larger strategy of governing, one that reflected the various ways in which Mexicans’ historical citizenship –their contributions to and presence in Texas—were erased, thus excluding them from their historical claims of

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Lytle Hernandez, 9.

belonging and casting their foreign and illegal status as both immutable and inherited. In Cook's mural, Mexicans are constructed as one of two types: a foreign invading force or a docile, migratory laboring cadre. The first reimagines Mexicans' relationship to Texas as one of authoritarian violence, antithetical to the American values of freedom and individual liberty. Cook's fresco in San Antonio was not the only example of a Treasury Section-sponsored mural to engage in this particular narrative. Minette Teichmiller's Smithville post office mural *The Law— Texas Rangers* (1936) (figure 77) depicts a mounted Texas Ranger in the midst of capturing two bandits; their stolen goods—jewelry, money, gold— lay at their feet. The bandit on the right is meant to be read as Mexican; his darker skin tone and sombrero were popular visual markers of Mexicanness.

Moreover, Cook's historical depictions of Mexicans as foreign invaders, rather than citizens of a territory that would be colonized by the United States, fits within a larger pattern of Treasury Section murals in Texas. In John Warren Hunter's *South Texas Panorama* (figure 78), created for the Alice, Texas, post office, the three Mexican laborers are marked as nonnative by the clothes they wear. The cotton-picker is dressed in the stereotypically Mexican white cotton clothes<sup>361</sup> and sombrero, while the woman who weigh the bales of cotton covers her head with a *rebozo* or mantilla, another stereotypically marker of a gendered Otherness.<sup>362</sup> Charles Campbell's *Christ for the Mill*, like Hunter, employs stereotypical dress to emphasize the Otherness of Mexican

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<sup>361</sup> See for example Olin Dows, *Steps, Taxo, Mexico*, 1933, woodcut; Paul Strand, *Men of Santa Ana, Michoacán*, 1933, gelatin silver print.

<sup>362</sup> See Lowell Houser, *Aijic Maidens Carry Water Jars*, 1925, oil on canvas; Doris Rosenthal, *Sacred Music*, 1938, oil on canvas.

cotton pickers. While Cook avoids the stereotypical markers of Mexicanness, his three farm laborers dressed simply in earth-colored cotton shirts and pants, their sudden appearance within the historical narrative of San Antonio reflects their migratory status. Cook's migrant laborers are anonymous bodies, commodity objects meant to serve the needs of large agribusinesses. They are constructed as the antithesis to the Jeffersonian ideal, which was not only championed in Doris Lee's Washington, D.C. mural, but across Treasury Section murals in Texas.

In *Rural East Texas* (figure 79), Thomas M Stell Jr.'s oil on canvas work for the Longview post office, an individual farmer, presumably the property's owner, sits atop a tractor surrounded by other conspicuous symbols of his wealth— a full cartload of cotton, well-fed cattle, his cabin. His success is emblematic of the promise of the myth of the Agrarian Democracy of Thomas Jefferson, built upon the industrious labor and prosperity of the individual landowning farmer.<sup>363</sup> It was not uncommon to show white Anglo-farmers atop gleaming tractors, such as in Julius Woeltz's panels for the Amarillo post office, *Gang Plow* and *Disk Harrow* (figures 80 and 81); each underscores the farmer's wealth, his technological sophistication and his command over the land. As Nick Foley has argued in *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*, poor whites who worked as sharecroppers competing with both Mexican and black workers, were racially identified as inferior whites. They, too, were represented as threatening to the strictly enforced racial hierarchy, just as they were perceived as

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<sup>363</sup> Thomas Jefferson celebrated the landowning yeoman as the guardian of America's democratic republic. According to Jefferson, as the landowning yeoman owned his own land and labor, he therefore could maintain political independence.

underscoring notions of a Nordic whiteness.<sup>364</sup> As such, Anglo-Texans in Cook's murals did not depict white-Anglo sharecroppers, as this would have indicated a racial slippage in which (poor) whites might be grouped socially with blacks and Mexicans, thus exposing the socially constructed nature of the racial hierarchy on which the Southern and American economy depended.

Although hardy white Anglo-Texas pioneers are shown migrating to the vacant and open lands of the Texas prairie in dozens of murals across Texas, they were never perceived to be foreign migrants. Rather these first Texans settled vast swaths of inhabited Native American land, to which they asserted a God-given claim to ownership. Through their industrious spirit, these pioneers performed "acts of original approbation" exerting their own labor upon the natural resources of the Texas landscape and thus in a Lockean way claimed permanent ownership. Unlike the farmers in Stell Jr. and Woeltz's murals, the migrant workers in Cook's murals labor for the benefit of an unseen landowner. Cook's migrant workers do not sit atop tractor nor do they use the latest agricultural machinery. Instead, they are bent over at the waist, picking cotton by hand. As a consequence, they are excluded from both modernity and, because they do not own the fruits of their labor, from the Lockean labor theory of value. Hence, they cannot possess the land permanently or the wealth it generates.<sup>365</sup> As such, even if Mexicans were white by law, Cook's murals recast their role in American life as the "alien citizen," that is, according to Mae Ngai, a person who is "American by virtue of their birth in the

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<sup>364</sup> Foley, 35.

<sup>365</sup> Peter C. Dooley, *The Labour Theory of Value*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 44-47.

United States, but who [is] presumed foreign by mainstream American culture and at times by the State.”<sup>366</sup> The citizenship status of the alien citizen is constantly questioned and undermined by virtue of his or her race. His mural is a deliberate attempt to preserve a collective memory of Texas history that erases ethnic Mexicans’ historical claims to citizenship, racializing their indignity to preserve their othered status. Cook’s work operates as ideological reassurance to Anglo-Texans— reminding viewers that the turmoil of the Great Depression would not disrupt the existing racial hierarchies. As Cook himself affirmed,

I firmly believe that now— given the opportunity— the mural artist can be of greater service to his country. For all the people to see, to derive heartening inspiration from, and to be sustained by during the days of terrible trials ahead, murals in public places can portray the meaning of democracy for which we are fighting, the hopes and ideals of our people, the ultimate desire for a fruitful brotherhood of mankind.<sup>367</sup>

In a sense, Cook’s murals did what the law could not—cast Mexicans, both native and foreign born, as cultural and racially unfit for membership in the American polity.

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<sup>366</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 135.

<sup>367</sup> Cook, “Road from Prints to Frescos,” 10.

## Conclusion

Although post offices are no longer the vital centers for community development, throughout most of their history, post offices functioned as an important, and sometimes as the only source of contact between the federal government and its populace. Despite decades of Congressional neglect and underfunding, “those little cultural centers,”<sup>368</sup> as Treasury Section administrator Edward Rowan affectionately termed them, were crucial sites of governing. The post office was a locus where the rituals of citizenship and many governmental functions were visualized and performed. Seizing on their cultural and political import, the Treasury Section envisioned a monumental cultural undertaking through which to illustrate, encourage, and actualize the varied functions of government itself, namely, through a comprehensive artistic embellishment of thousands of post offices across the nation. Acting under the belief that the murals commissioned would function as a great “civilizing force,”<sup>369</sup> the Treasury Section asked artists to create a “panorama of American triumph,” which would champion *the* American spirit and its history.<sup>370</sup> This dissertation has aimed to re-center the history of postal murals by retrieving them from the art historical periphery and repositioning them at its nucleus and by engaging these works within the larger discussions of race and national identity, which continue to be vital issues within the field of American art. The three case studies focused

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<sup>368</sup> Speech delivered by Edward Bruce on the occasion of the opening of the Section of Fine Art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, November 2, 1939. Reprinted in the Section of Fine Art Bulletin, No. 20, November, 1939 (Washington D.C: Section of Fine Arts, Public Building Administration, Federal Works Agency), 10. In Section of Fine Arts selected administrative records and correspondence, 1934-1943. Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid, 9.

on close examinations of contemporary labor, as labor struck me as the most revelatory theme through which the country understood itself and defined its citizenry. I explored the different ways racialized identities were created, contested, and consolidated within the context of larger debates about the relationship between labor and citizenship in the 1930s. Ultimately, I have argued that post office murals can best be understood as instruments of knowledge and communication, deployed by the federal government to create consensus around the meaning of a particular social and cultural order. In other words, the murals functioned as a device to legitimize a particular social system— one which would both memorialize and extol the ideal citizen as one who is white, male and, importantly, in possession of his own labor. American identity was thus produced and sustained by discourses and infrastructures of citizenship that cast nonwhite (and non-male) people as social outsiders, who did not enjoy the requisite qualities for political and social recognition necessary for the full participation in the American polity.

### **Theorizing Citizenship in Public Art**

While the foundational works of Karal Ann Marling, Marlene Park, and Gerald E. Markowitz are invaluable for their documentation of post office art, their interpretations rest on a belief that the art produced under the auspices of the Treasury Section was necessarily an extension of both the progressive principles of the New Deal and of democratically inclusive notions of citizenship. As such, these works tend to eschew substantive discussions of race and its complex relationship to citizenship. Accordingly, in these texts, citizenship is conceived of as a universal and binary status— that is one is either a citizen or not— and all citizens share the same rights, irrespective of their

individual particularities. In this dissertation, I have argued that a better understanding of the systems of citizenship in the United States— how these systems were created and visualized and the mechanisms by which they were deployed to sustain a racialized caste system — gives one critical insight into the art produced during a decade where profound concerns with “defining things American”<sup>371</sup> pervaded popular and scholarly imaginaries alike.<sup>372</sup> As I have contended, the concept of citizenship is an important axis upon which debates over substantive belonging to the American polity are organized. Citizenship is one way in which people may meet as equals to engage in collective politics and participate in defining the nature of Americanness.<sup>373</sup> As such, interrogating the nature of citizenship aids our understanding of an important preoccupation of the Treasury Section and the art it commissioned, and also helps to contextualize the art produced under its auspices within the larger trends of 1930s American art and culture. As I have demonstrated through the various case studies, citizenship is neither a universal nor binary status. Rather, citizenship is deeply stratified, containing multiple subject positions that are grounded in existing hierarchies of race, class, and gender.<sup>374</sup> In other words, citizenship does not confer equality to each member of a citizenry. In fact, the

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<sup>371</sup>See Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>372</sup> Artists began to take up this definitional task. Albeit in profoundly different ways, artists from Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe to Aaron Douglas and Charles White began to explore the contours of Americanness and to give visual expression to fantastical myths of America’s origins and identity in the case of the former or forgotten and neglected histories in the case of the latter.

<sup>373</sup> Elizabeth F Cohen, *Semi-Citizenship in Democratic Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>374</sup> Kate Hepworth, *At the Edges of Citizenship: Security and the Constitution of Non-Citizen Subjects* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 2.

very concept of citizenship can, as Elizabeth F. Cohen notes, “institutionalize both differences and inequalities.”<sup>375</sup> Substantive American citizenship was and continues to be undergirded by an ideology that is both inegalitarian and ascriptive — by which I mean, citizenship is contingent on particular traits such as race, religion and gender.<sup>376</sup> Each of my case studies, in turn, examine how the varying subject positions that exist within the larger rubric of American citizenship — from the ideal citizen, to anti-citizen, to the alien citizen — were visualized in an effort to better understand how race shaped the complexities of American national identity in the 1930s.

In chapter one, I demonstrated how the federal government sought to visualize its ideal citizen-subject. Adorning the walls of the symbolic and literal nexus of governing, the murals in Washington, D.C.’s postal headquarters make visible the central ideological precepts that defined the boundaries of inclusion into the American polity. The American citizen, one who was worthy of substantive inclusion into America’s political economy, was an economically productive white man, who was able to maintain control of his own labor. This abstract rhetorical construction found its visual form in the farmers in Doris Lee’s *Country Post*. Lee’s farmers, industrious and independent, till the land that they *own*, harvesting the fruits of their tireless labor, and as such maintain a level of self-reliance conferred to one who is in complete control over his own labor (and the labor of his wife and children). By the 1930s, the growing urbanization that was initiated from the last third of the 19th century drastically changed the character of the American

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<sup>375</sup> Cohen, 12.

<sup>376</sup> See Rodger Smith’s discussion of citizenship in *Civic Ideals* and Evelyn Nakano Glenn’s use of Smith’s work in *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

workforce. While the small land-owning farmers were still considered to be foundationally important to the civic mythos surrounding American identity, the rapid urbanization drove thousands into cities and factories. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues, the demographic change led to a shift in the definition of free labor.<sup>377</sup> By the end of the 19th century one need not (in fact, in some cases, one could no longer) be a Jeffersonian farmer to engage in the productive, free, and independent labor required for substantive citizenship. To be a good citizen simply could mean, as Judith Shklar argues, that one had the “opportunity to work and be paid an earned reward for one’s labor.”<sup>378</sup> One did not necessarily need to earn one’s livelihood as an independent farmer; other forms of work, so long as they allowed one to be economically independent, would confer good standing within the American polity. Recognizing the demographic composition of the American workforce, Lee’s Washington, D.C. murals document various forms of productive, free labor, even if they still celebrate the Jeffersonian farmer.

The postal workers in both Alfred Crimi and Reginald Marsh’s Washington, D.C. murals portray men who, through their service at the post office, were active participants in public life. Crimi’s murals recognize the technological progress and modernity of the federal government while simultaneously depicting the skilled laborers who operated its machinery. Marsh’s murals acclaim masculine brawn as well as the men’s steady and reliable activities as breadwinners, embedding these qualities at the heart of ideal citizenship. These four murals celebrate civil servants, those who participate in public life

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<sup>377</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 28-29.

<sup>378</sup> Judith Shklar, cited in Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 89.

by serving the federal government and working for an agency long considered an important part of a democratic society. These murals thus performed a dual function. On the one hand, Lee's, Crimi's, and Marsh's murals depict the labor and civic virtue of the urban and rural laborer alike. On the other, the works obfuscate or ignore the role of women and nonwhite workers, whose long history of coerced labor allowed for the astonishing growth of the American economy and the staggering wealth it amassed (and which ornaments the walls in Washington, D.C.). The near erasure of African American figures (Marsh does include two African American figures in his murals *Sorting the Mail* and *Unloading the Mail*), not only rewrites the integral role of African American labor in postal service, but distorts and erases African Americans' historical agency, excluding them from the political, economic, and social parity conferred upon others. In other words, by omitting black labor from the murals in Washington, D.C., the figure of the black body was posited as something that existed apart from the American experience, or as Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor notes, something "incompatible with the unimpeded social mobility, the pursuit of happiness and equality for all"<sup>379</sup> available to free white citizens. Their noticeable absence from the Washington, D.C. murals finds expression in chapter two, where I argued that African Americans are constructed as oppositional figures to the ideal citizen.

In chapter one, I demonstrated how the visual politics of citizenship revolved around productive white masculinity, and yet, these murals were commissioned and executed at a time when scores of white men were unemployed. The Washington, D.C. murals make

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<sup>379</sup> Keeanga-Yamatta Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016), 8.

space available within the contours of ideal citizenship for the political and economic realities of the Great Depression by visually defining who could be counted among the ranks of the deserving poor, worthy of our sympathy, and who would be classified as undeserving, those whose poverty gives one license to scorn. Alexander Brook's murals *Writing the Family Letter* and *Reading the Family Letter* reinforce the symbolic images of the deserving poor, those who did not bring poverty onto themselves because of intractable moral or cultural deficiencies, but rather whose poverty was caused by external factors outside of their control. Brook's murals became visual manifestations of the discursive boundaries that existed around those who merited the assistance of the federal government and those who did not. The muscular and robust white men in *Reading the Family Letter*, who were willing to undertake the rigorous work of the Civilian Conservation Corps, along with his devoted mother in *Writing the Family Letter*, who was placed firmly within the domestic space, are the emblems of the deserving poor. The profoundly racialized notion of the deserving poor underscore the belief that so long as one was white and (preferably) male, one had the potential to become a wage earning contributor to society. Poverty or joblessness amongst the male and deserving poor did not exclude them from substantive political inclusion and access to citizenship.

In chapter three, I examined how Howard Cook's San Antonio mural reinforced the ideological contention presented in the Washington, D.C. murals cycle— that is, all white men had the potential to be productive, even propertied, free laborers. According to Cook's account in *San Antonio's Importance in Texas History*, the pioneers, courageously venturing out to settle the "vacant lands" of the West, transformed the landscape through

their labor. Under the careful ministrations of the colonial settlers the unproductive, wild hinterlands were transfigured into the well-ordered and productive “fertile crescent” of America. Through their violent expropriation of indigenous land and exploitation of Mexican labor, Cook’s white figures were elevated from landless pioneers to landowners. Exercising their *own* labor (and the careful control of others’) upon the natural resources of the landscape, Cook’s pioneers could claim permanent ownership of the land according to a Lockean labor theory of value. The triumphalist narrative of Cook’s *San Antonio’s Importance in Texas History* celebrated the hardy white pioneers, those robust and courageous frontiersmen (and it’s always, only *men*), who deployed their innate ingenuity and moral rectitude, which was rooted in the cultural strength of their Anglo-Saxon identity, to civilize the West. Cook’s white figures reinforce the symbolic representation of the ideal American subject, creating consensus around the meaning of the particular social and cultural order of the New Deal, which cast white men as the normative and universal subject of American citizenship. Yet Cook, through the introduction of figures that exist at the margins of the image — principally the Mexican farm laborers — visualized another type of citizenship: the alien citizen.

Mexican Americans, despite being legal citizens, whose claims of citizenship can be traced back to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which established the foundation for their technical whiteness, continued to be reduced to a condition of a racialized “alien-hood,” a status that always eclipsed their legal one. Mexican Americans existed in a perpetual condition of exclusion, their skin color marking them as inexorably and unmistakably out of place in a landscape populated by white pioneers. Cook’s mural

consciously memorializes a shared history of Texas that erased ethnic Mexicans' historical claims to citizenship, racializing their indigeneity to preserve their "othered" status and the racial hierarchies of the New Deal. Importantly, while Cook's mural is firmly grounded in local histories and local identities, the narrative he re-presents of the westward expansion by a "chosen people," is a universal story, reflecting larger narratives of America's mythic origin story. The history of Texas Cook presented was a microcosm for a totalizing history of the United States, visualizing the racialized categories of belonging and exclusion.

The meaning of full citizenship and its attendant visual rhetoric embodied in the Washington, D.C. post office murals gained meaning through various frameworks of exclusion. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the very notion of citizen is in part defined by creating categories of people who lack the requisite qualities to exercise citizenship. However, the alien citizen is just one rhetorical opposite of the citizen; the other is the anti-citizen, a concept I explored in my second case study. Centering upon a close examination of Philip Evergood's *Cotton — From Field to Mill*, I posited that his murals reflected the larger historical process by which black bodies were determined and then constructed to exist outside of the American experience. Within the political, economic and social order of the New Deal, African Americans were marked as persons undeserving of full inclusion into the American polity. Instead, they were constructed as a threat to the existing social order. Like the Mexican farmers in Howard Cook's mural, the African American figures in Evergood's mural are constructed as collectively constituting an Other who is never allowed to speak. Evergood, claiming a well researched and

intimate knowledge of the South (and more specifically of cotton farming with its reliance on African American laborers), which he refers to in his correspondence with federal and local officials, created an imaginative re-presentation of the black cotton farmer. His work, whose apparent veracity was conferred by the authority of the federal government, relies very little on the experience of black people and their labor conditions. The reality of the lived experiences of black people is displaced and then replaced with an imaginative re-presentation of the American South, one that casts the field as the natural place of black folks, permanently fixing them as a dependent group within the social and economic order of the South. The figures in Evergood's mural act as symbolic boundary markers, meant to reflect and reinforce a cultural order that depended on the exploitation of black people. His work thus embodied the racialized social system of power — one which was grounded in plantation politics — that undergirded not just Southern but all American institutions and political imaginaries. The African Americans in Evergood's mural were abstracted from their material conditions and presented as flattened figures, obscuring their history and robbing them of their role as agents in American history. Like the Mexican laborers in Howard Cook's mural, Evergood's African American workers were depicted as part of an army of laborers, whose place in the American economy was in the fields as a cheap and exploitable work force, one which was desperately needed to maintain the economic demands of capitalism. In other words, rendering black laborers as a perpetually dependent, exploitable instrument of the American economic order generally, and of the South in particular, Evergood's mural animates not only the racial caste system of the New Deal but the way that the drive to

maximize economic profits of cotton fields was achieved through the social production of racial difference.

### **Lines of Further Exploration and Inquiry**

I have endeavored to foreground what has been (art) historically ignored and marginalized: the preponderance of raced bodies embellishing the wall of post offices across the country. Leveraging the long history in American political discourse that links productive forms of labor to political and social inclusion, I selected examples of contemporary sense of non-white labor. Through my careful readings of Alexander Brook's, Aldred Crimi's, Howard Cook's, Philip Evergood's, Doris Lee's and Reginald Marsh's murals, I offered a counter-narrative to the overly celebratory interpretations of the past, providing an interpretation that offers a deeper meanings to what has been – and was, as I have suggested likely intended by the government to be – an affirmation of American mythologies of citizenship.

I have offered an interpretation of the Treasury Section's post office murals that positions the works as active loci in the production of race. More specifically, I have demonstrated how the murals reinforced the racialized definitions of citizenship. While the *symbolic racial identity* of America has long been understood to be white, and while the idea of whiteness as a theoretical concept runs through each of my case studies, I have not included a case study devoted specifically to whiteness. However, one could imagine that an entire chapter devoted to examining the contingency of whiteness. As the usually “unraced race,”<sup>380</sup> as Nell Irvin Painter demonstrates in her work *The History of White*

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<sup>380</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, “Ralph Waldo Emerson's Saxons,” *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 4 (2009): 977-85.

*People*, whiteness is a deeply unstable and historically contingent term, easily modified by class, gender, and/or geography. Indeed the idea that there is a unified white race in America only emerged in middle of the 20th century, becoming a hegemonic concept during decades between the New Deal and World War II.<sup>381</sup> The historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, observing the precipitous decline in the perceptions of differences among white ethnic Others (that is, those considered Celts, Slavs, Teutons, etc) between the 1920s and the 1960s, argues:

Immigration restriction, along with internal black migrations, altered the nation's racial alchemy and redrew the dominant racial configurations along the strict, binary line of white and black, creating Caucasians where before had been so many Celt, Hebrews, Teutons, Mediterraneans, and Slavs.<sup>382</sup>

Yet as Painter, Frye Jacobson, and other historians of whiteness have persuasively demonstrated, the assimilation of ethnic Europeans into the category of 'whiteness' required the racial exclusion of others. One of the central concerns driving an exploration of whiteness in New Deal post office murals would therefore necessarily be an exploration of the historical circumstances and mechanisms that enabled the multitude of white identities to be consolidated into a unified "caucasian" whiteness. During the early decades of the 20th century, labor unions were often sites where whiteness was constructed and maintained.<sup>383</sup> Indeed, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn, David Roediger,<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

<sup>382</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 14.

<sup>383</sup> Glenn, 24.

<sup>384</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 199-234.; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007), 95-133.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant<sup>385</sup> have argued, labor unions helped working class men create identities as white citizens through their engagement with what they established and defined as productive and free labor.<sup>386</sup> A number of Treasury Section murals, particularly in the Northeast, are adorned with images of white factory laborers, a number even depicting unionized labor. One could easily imagine building upon the existing case studies in this dissertation to include a chapter that theorized the evolving and consolidating understanding of whiteness in the 1930s through a close examination of the images of white unionized labor in the Treasury Section murals that dot the Northeast.

As unionized labor is the principle subject matter of Ben Shahn's Bronx post office mural, *Resources of America* (1939), his work would make a convincing addition to this dissertation. *Resources of America* encourages a discussion of both working-class whiteness in general and also of the role that the working class had in creating racially exploitative practices. As such, a case study would necessarily need to invite an examination of the intersections of Shahn's laboring bodies that appear in his *Resources of America*, his own status as a racialized other, and his left-leaning political commitments in order to interrogate how whiteness was constructed and implemented in the creation of class consciousness and how ideas of whiteness shaped the emergence of leftist labor movements in the 1930s. Shahn's mural, because of his inclusion of women laborers, would also enable a productive exploration of the gendered dimensions of whiteness and labor in the context of the gendered restrictions placed on New Deal

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<sup>385</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 53-74.

<sup>386</sup> Glenn, 29.

citizenship. During the New Deal's expanded definition of citizenship, white men were constructed as right-bearing individual members of a national and liberal body politic. Women and particularly non-white women, on the other hand, were treated as role-oriented subjects whose constructed identities perpetuated their gender roles and status as marginalized others.<sup>387</sup> A close reading of Shahn's *Resources of America*, centering on the women laborers, would further help to elucidate the ways in which Treasury Section post office art helped to perpetuate and naturalize the gender and racial differences at the heart of New Deal citizenship.

### **Selective Remembrance: The Making and Remaking of America's Origin Story**

Despite the abundance of historical figures represented on the walls of post offices throughout America — from the settler colonial Puritans on the walls of New England post offices to the settler pioneers and homesteaders in the West and Mid-West— I chose to center my investigation on scenes populated by figures grounded in the 1930s, figures whose lives and labors would be have been instantly recognizable to their contemporary viewers. These contemporaneous depictions of labor allowed me to interrogate the intimate relationship between labor and citizenship at a moment in American history when the federal government began, for the first time, to extend the rights of social citizenship to *selected* Americans. Although my work has been a project of historical recovery, aiming to carefully illustrate the socio-political milieu within which these murals were created, I have not drawn explicit equivalences to our present. However, these parallels are never far from the surface. The contemporary resonance of these

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<sup>387</sup> See Suzanne Mettler's *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

murals come into stark relief when we consider that they now exist as part of our cultural inheritance, continuing to occupy a privileged position as instruments of national identity making. What were once contemporary expressions of Americanness now exist as part of a usable past, helping to create and sustain collective memories while authenticating particular myths of Americansim. In other words, the murals continue to shape the narrative of American exceptionalism, participating as active agents in the larger cultural-historical transmission of a particular national origins story and continuing to demarcate and circumscribe the context within which both personal and collective identities are established and supported.

Conferring onto our present moment the ability for us to “disremember” our past, these murals, to borrow a phrase from Eddie Glaude, “blot out the pain of past events.”<sup>388</sup> We can instead turn to these murals as sites of celebration, where we venture to bask in the liberal ideals of our white settler nation. The Treasury Section’s murals are monuments that champion the industrious Jeffersonian farmers, the rugged individualism of the pioneers, and the brawny strength of industrial workers as our rightful -- and only -- historical precedents. Yet they are also places that normalize our current racial caste system and the economic inequalities it produces. It is a convincing deception, one which hides the consciously constructed policies of the New Deal that were specially designed to prevent certain groups from attaining full and substantial citizenship. As such, the essentializing functions and consequences of the exclusionary New Deal policies are veiled and presented as facts of history (and perhaps of nature, too). Now, over eighty

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<sup>388</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr. *Democracy in Black : How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown, 2016), 47.

years after the federal government extended the rights of social citizenship to some Americans, the inequalities engendered by these selective policies are all too often experienced as a function of birth, not traceable to any consciously crafted human act. The federal government's complicity in the subjugation of America's non-white citizens is displaced, thus seemingly relieving the constituted authority of responsibility. As such, to believe the national origin story and narrative of American life presented in the Treasury Section murals, we have to consciously ignore the lived experiences of millions of black and brown people in this country, of poor people, of women, of immigrants and refugees and members of the LGBTQI community. We have to disremember and distort our past, for our national origins do not exist apart from or without the dispossession of indigenous lands, coerced labor of African slaves, lynching trees, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, an economic system built on the structural oppression of the poor, a continued commitment to white supremacy, and sexually normative behavior. The pervasive and continued power of these post office images are rooted, in part, in the Section's insistence that these murals, along with the other federally sponsored art programs reflected the "best tradition of the democratic spirit."<sup>389</sup> Indeed, the Treasury Section asserted that these murals would belong to the American people because they were created under the "democratic lines that are kindred to the structure of American

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<sup>389</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Only Where Men Are Free Can the Arts Flourish and the Civilization of National Culture Reach Full Flower," Radio Dedication of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, May 10, 1939, cited in *The public papers and addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt 1939 volume, War-and neutrality: With a special introduction and explanatory notes by President Roosevelt* (New York : Macmillan, 1941), 337.

life.”<sup>390</sup> Yet the Section’s rhetorical embrace of universal equality masks the exclusion and hierarchy that is embedded within the content of the postal murals themselves. The wall paintings confound historical fact with fantasy. They artfully displace and disappear the specific histories of imperialism and oppression that served (and mostly still serve) as the foundations on which the country was built. The partisan and partial stories these murals offer fail to chronicle fully and forthrightly our nation’s past, allowing the patron of the post office to ignore the mechanisms by which we have arrived at our present moment. Absent a deep and sustained consideration of the manner in which post office murals intersect with existing social and political practices, we risk interpretations of our civic autobiography that conform rather than confront the frameworks of empire and oppression that continue to cast a long and haunting shadow over our present moment.

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<sup>390</sup> United States Congress House Committee on Patents, *Department of Science, Art And Literature-- April 15, 16, 23-25, 1935* (Washington: U. S. Govt. print. off., 1935), 2.

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