Orozco's American Epic

Myth, History, and the Melancholy of Race

MARY K. COFFEY

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For all of my students, past, present, and future

In gratitude to Mishuana, Lourdes, Reena, and Aimee for helping me to see the concerns of our oppressed pasts as my own


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preface

In 2012 José Clemente Orozco's *The Epic of American Civilization* was designated a National Historical Landmark by the Landmarks Committee of the National Park System of the United States of America. It was the second mural and the first work of art executed by a Mexican artist to receive such a designation. This honor took place within the context of Barak Obama's presidential administration and what appears to have been a concerted effort to add to the registry landmarks that testify to the nation's "Hispanic"/Latin American heritage. Despite the political expediency of this gesture during the administration of a president who appropriated the Chicano civil rights' mantra, "sí se puede" ("yes, we can") and enacted important immigration reforms, but who also came to be called the "Deporter in Chief," Orozco's *Epic* was more than worthy of this honor.

Long considered a local treasure, the mural is widely viewed by scholars as one of Orozco's best. It represents a transition from his early frescos to the masterworks of his late career. And it is the most accomplished cycle he executed while working in the United States. As I argue in the pages that follow, the themes of this mural, while continuous with those of his broader oeuvre, also bear distinct traces of his experience on this side of the border. Of all of Orozco's mural cycles, the *Epic* is the one that most reflects his experience as a Mexican in the United States and the many ways that change in location affected his understanding of history, identity, and sovereignty in the Americas. As such, it is as much a monument of U.S. cultural heritage as it is Mexican. In fact, this mural reveals how we have come to imagine this border and why this kind of bordering—national, cultural, racial—is not only historically inaccurate but also existentially and symbolically violent.

Diego Rivera's contemporaneous Detroit Industry Murals (1932) are perhaps more famous, but Orozco's *Epic* is gaining in recognition and praise. This is due to the themes Orozco addresses and to his nondidactic approach to figuration, which is less rooted in what is now denigrated as the social realism of the interwar period and more open to interpretation. His mural

seems to gain relevance, standing up as a work of contemporary art rather than as a curious object frozen in amber. Moreover, as a mural that critiques the triumphalist thrust of national narration, its status as a landmark within the material cultural heritage upon which those narratives are often based and within a nation that assiduously seeks to eliminate any trace of its "Hispanic"/Latin American heritage is all the more surprising and welcome.

This book is dedicated to all of the students, colleagues, and alumni whose interest, passion, and dedication to this mural have opened my eyes to its rich afterlife. Whenever possible, I have credited their insights. However, it is the nature of academic work that singular authors end up taking the credit for what is, in reality, a dialogical process. The nature of interpretation is mysterious, more rooted in contingent circumstance than we care to admit. As one colleague put it, my work on this mural has been a labor of love. And yet my romance with this object began as a consequence of the vagaries of the academic job market. With this book, I bring this dalliance to a provisional close, with the knowledge that the minds I encounter in future courses, tours, and endeavors will inevitably force me to rethink, revise, and renew my passion for Orozco's *Epic* and the America it encourages us to imagine.

acknowledgments

This book has been a labor of love. Many who have contributed to my thinking about Orozco's *Epic* are acknowledged within the text and notes. However, I would like to thank first my colleagues George Edmondson and Klaus Mladek, as well as the many members of the Humanities Institute they convened on "States of Exception," for it was there that this project originated. I would also like to thank the members of the Art History Department and the Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies Program at Dartmouth for their support and for their feedback as I presented work in progress. Similarly, the many opportunities provided by colleagues in other Dartmouth departments to present my work in their courses allowed me to try out ideas as they were evolving on the page. Additionally, the members of the Theory Reading Group, sponsored by the Leslie Center for the Humanities, provided an indispensable space on campus for the fostering of intellectual community. It was through this group and the conversations that came out of it that I encountered much of the theoretical literature that informs this book. Particular thanks go to Aimee Bahng, Alysia Garrison, Christian Haines, Tish Lopez, and Abby Neely. Doug Moody was incredibly generous with me in sharing his documentation and thoughts about the *MEXotica* performance. Without him, I doubt I would have uncovered that connection.

I would be remiss if I didn't also acknowledge the impact my many students have had on the evolution of my thinking with regard to Orozco's *Epic*. Their work is cited throughout the text, and I have dedicated this book to them. Although there are so many more than I can cite or thank individually. CoFIRED, the student organization that formed to support DACA and undocumented students, deserves special mention as their plight, strength, and spirit answers to the command in Orozco's mural. Likewise, the incomparable staff at the Hood Museum of Art, the Baker-Berry Library, and the Rauner Special Collections deserve special mention as their indefatigable labors to support faculty, and my work in particular, knows no bounds. In particular, I want to single out Katherine Hart, Juliette Bianco, Amelia Kahl,

Michael Taylor, John Stomberg, Jay Satterfield, Jill Baron, Meredith Steinfels, and Neely MacNulty for praise. Relatedly, the Manton Foundation has been a true gift to my scholarship. Their selfless support for Orozco's *Epic* has virtually guaranteed that the scholarship and celebration of this great work of art will continue in perpetuity. This book has been funded in part by the Orozco Fund, an endowment established at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, by the Manton Foundation.

The many postdoctoral fellows who have illuminated our community with their fresh ideas, progressive outlook, and cutting-edge scholarship have also fed my thinking over the years. I want to give a special shout-out to Michael Barany, Yesenia Barragan, Nathalie Batraville, Marcela Di Blasi, Laura McTighe, Tatiana Reinoza, Holly Shaffer, Yana Stainova, and Phoebe Wolfskill. I also want to acknowledge the support I have received from Dartmouth's administration, in particular, Deans of the Faculty Mike Mastanduno and Elizabeth Smith, Associate Deans of the Humanities Adrian Randolph and Barbara Will, Associate Dean of Interdisciplinary Programs Dennis Washburn, and Dean of the College Rebecca Biron. My colleagues who work in the administration have always celebrated and promoted my work; they have rewarded my service with fellowships and supported its publication through subvention. Similarly, our department administrator, Samantha Potter, and our curator of visual resources, Janice Chapman Allen, do superlative work. They play an important role in everything I do.

In addition to the many people at Dartmouth, I also want to thank some folks beyond the Green. At the top of any list are my Mexicanist *compadres*, especially Anna Indych-López, Jennifer Jolly, James Oles, Roberto Tejada, and Adriana Zavala. They have been with me from the beginning. They are my best sounding boards and most critical interlocutors. Likewise, the consortium of Latin Americanists who come together annually as part of an ever-expanding *Encuentro* have vetted this project at various stages. While our membership is always evolving, I am particularly indebted to Natalia Brizuela, George Flaherty, Claire Fox, Esther Gabera, Adriana Michele Campos Johnson, China Medel, Sergio Delgado Moya, Adele Nelson, Fernando Rosenberg, and Camilo Trumper. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge a few other scholars whose work and support have aided me along the way, namely Luis Castañeda, Barry Carr, Terri Geis, Michele Greet, Robb Hernández, Jennifer Josten, Rebecca McGrew, and Kathryn O'Rourke.

While I undertook this project, in part, because it allowed me to stay close to home while my children were small, my colleagues in Mexico continue to influence my thinking. As always, I must acknowledge the unparalleled work of Renato González-Mello, whose scholarship on Orozco has been salutary

in every respect. Similarly, Karen Cordero Reiman, Dafne Cruz Porchini, Rita Eder, Olivier Debroise, Federico Navarrete, and Cuauhtemoc Medina have done as much as anyone to shape my thinking about Mexican art. A few other U.S.-based scholars deserve special mention as well: Bill Boyer, who introduced me to Nick Sammonds's work, and Kellen Hoxworth, who rounded out my bibliography on blackface minstrelsy in Mexico.

Finally, it is to those individuals whose love and friendship has sustained me over these many years that I now turn, knowing there is really no way to adequately convey their significance in my life or to this project. Francine A'ness and Laura Edmondson are my rocks. I can't imagine life without them. Katie Hornstein and Joy Kenseth keep me laughing in the hallway; their joie de vivre is contagious. Pam Voekel, Bethany Moreton, Pati Hernandez, and Annelise Orleck keep me energized for the good fight. Eng-Beng Lim's fabulosity knows no limits. Bill Boyer's camaraderie as a parent, and especially his ability to deconstruct animated features, buoyed my spirits more than once.

My family, who get the brunt of my stress and exhaustion, deserve all my praise and more. I am often my worst self at home. And yet it is my home and the love of family that centers me and helps me to come back from the brink. My husband, Jon Zinman, is the most supportive spouse an academic could ask for. We are in the trenches together, in both work and life. My stepdaughter, Ella, has helped me to be more patient, forgiving, and flexible. Her humor and kindness are everything. Elias, my stepson, and I have had some hard years. But I trust that our best years are to come. And Rena, my daughter, my love, and my gift: you have redefined my life. I am my best self in your eyes. It is for you and your generation that I attempt, in my small way, to write the wrongs of our American epic.

In addition to my students, this book is also dedicated to four fierce and brilliant women. Mishuana Goeman has done more than anyone to open my eyes to the centrality of settler colonialism and its violence toward indigenous peoples to any American epic. Lourdes Guttiérez Nájera's tireless efforts on behalf of our Latinx students, and in particular, those who are undocumented, has pushed me to reshape my Mexicanism to accommodate transborder and Latinx points of view. Reena Goldthree's insightful scholarship and activism in the wake of Ferguson helped me to see that the future of my work lies in helping to reclaim Afro-Latino, African American, and Afro-Mexican histories within the American epic. And Aimee Bahng showed me the power of speculative fiction for helping to write the stories we need into the record. These women have all shaped my thinking, but their integrity, compassion, and ability to speak truth to power no matter what the personal

cost is their real example. They have made me braver, led me onto new intellectual terrain, and helped me to clarify the intellectual and political stakes of my work. As I indicate in my dedication, they have helped me to see how the concerns of oppressed pasts are my own. I humbly submit this book in their honor and hope that it lives up to their examples.

I conclude by acknowledging my debt to Gisela Fosado, my editor at Duke University Press. She has been a champion of this project since she heard one of my first presentations on Orozco's Quetzalcoatl. In addition to her expert stewardship, I have also appreciated the help and guidance, particularly with my images, of Lydia Rose Rappoport-Hankins and Jenny Tan. Additionally, I would like to thank Chad Royal and Christopher Robinson for their help with marketing materials; Susan Albury and David Heath for their copy editing; and Julie Allred for her expert guidance throughout the production process. And finally, I want to thank Mark Mastromarino for his work on the index.

While nearly everything in this manuscript represents new work, a few things have appeared in other venues. Part of my argument about Orozco's melancholy dialectics in chapter 1 has been published in "Putting *Prometheus* in Motion: Reframing Mural Art's Meaning for Contemporary Art Practice," in *Prometheus 2017: Four Mexican Artists Revisit Orozco*, edited by Rebecca McGrew and Terri Geis (Claremont, CA: Pomona Art Museum, 2017), 47–89. My discussion of Walter Beach Humphrey's "Hovey Mural" in the conclusion first appeared in "The 'Hovey Mural' and the 'Greening' of Orozco's *Epic of American Civilization*" in *Walter Beach Humphrey's "Hovey Mural" at Dartmouth College: A Cultural History*, edited by Brian P. Kennedy and Katherine Hart (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2011), 79–106. Finally, a part of my discussion of Orozco's figural dialectics from chapter 2 appears in "Myth, Melancholy, and History: Figural Dialectics in José Clemente Orozco's *Epic of American Civilization*," in *What Was History Painting and What is it Now?* edited by Mark Salber Phillips and Jordan Bear (Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 160–81.

INTRODUCTION

José Clemente Orozco painted his twenty-four-panel fresco cycle, *The Epic of American Civilization*, between 1932 and 1934 in the basement reserve reading room of Dartmouth College's Baker-Berry Library (now referred to as the Orozco Room). This mural wraps around the west, north, and east walls of the rectangular corridor, portraying a vision of American history that originates in pre-Hispanic civilization and that seems to culminate in a scene of Christian Apocalypse (figure 1.1). The *Epic* is divided into two wings situated on either side of a reserve desk, which opens up a chasm within the sequence that the viewer must navigate both physically and conceptually as she moves through the corridor (figure 1.2). This breach marks a crisis wherein the Spanish conquest of the Americas cleaves the *Epic* in two. In a niche opposite to the reserve desk, on the south wall, Orozco painted a supplement to the cycle entitled "Modern Industrial Man," where we see a racially ambiguous worker reading a book much as the Dartmouth student checking out reserve materials might (see figure 1.11). The supplement is located within the scission between pre- and postconquest America. As such, it situates the viewer in a charged but ambiguous relationship to the story/history articulated across the cycle. What, Orozco asks, is our relationship to the violence of the Spanish conquest?

In 1933, near the conclusion of this commission, Orozco drafted a statement for Dartmouth's *Alumni Magazine* in which he emphasizes two things. He writes:

> In every painting, as in any other work of art, there is always an *idea*, never a *story*. The idea is the point of departure, the first cause of the plastic construction, and it is present all the time as energy creating matter. The stories and other literary associations exist only in the mind of the spectator, the painting acting as the stimulus.

FIGURE 1.1. View of the Orozco Room, Baker-Berry Library, Dartmouth College. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College.

There are as many literary associations as spectators. One of them, when looking at a picture representing a scene of war, for example, may start thinking of murder, another of pacifism, another of anatomy, another of history, and so on. Consequently, to write a story and say that it is actually *told* by a painting is wrong and untrue. Now the *organic idea* of every painting, even the worst in the world, is extremely obvious to the average spectator with normal mind and normal sight. The artist cannot possibly hide it. It might be a poor, superfluous and ridiculous idea or a great and significant one.

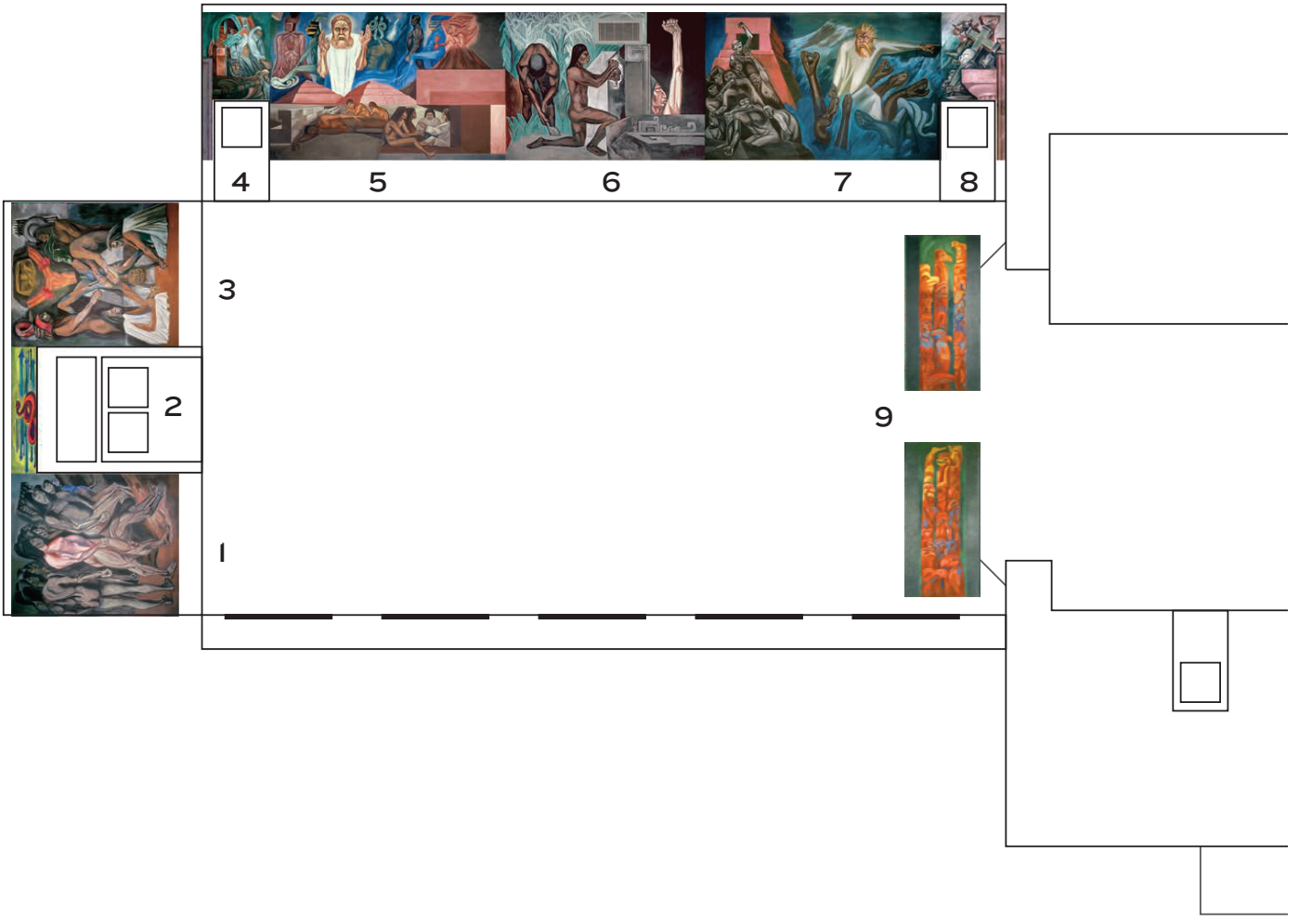
But the important point regarding the frescoes of Baker Library is not only the quality of the idea that initiates and organizes the whole structure, it is also the fact that it is an *American* idea developed into American forms, American feeling, and, as a consequence, into American style.

It is unnecessary to speak about *Tradition*. Certainly we have to fall in line and learn our lesson from the Masters. If there is another way

> it has not been discovered yet. It seems that the line of Culture is continuous, without shortcuts, unbroken from the unknown Beginning to the unknown End. But we are proud to say now: This is no imitation, this is our *own* effort, to the limit of our own strength and experience, in all sincerity and spontaneity.[1]

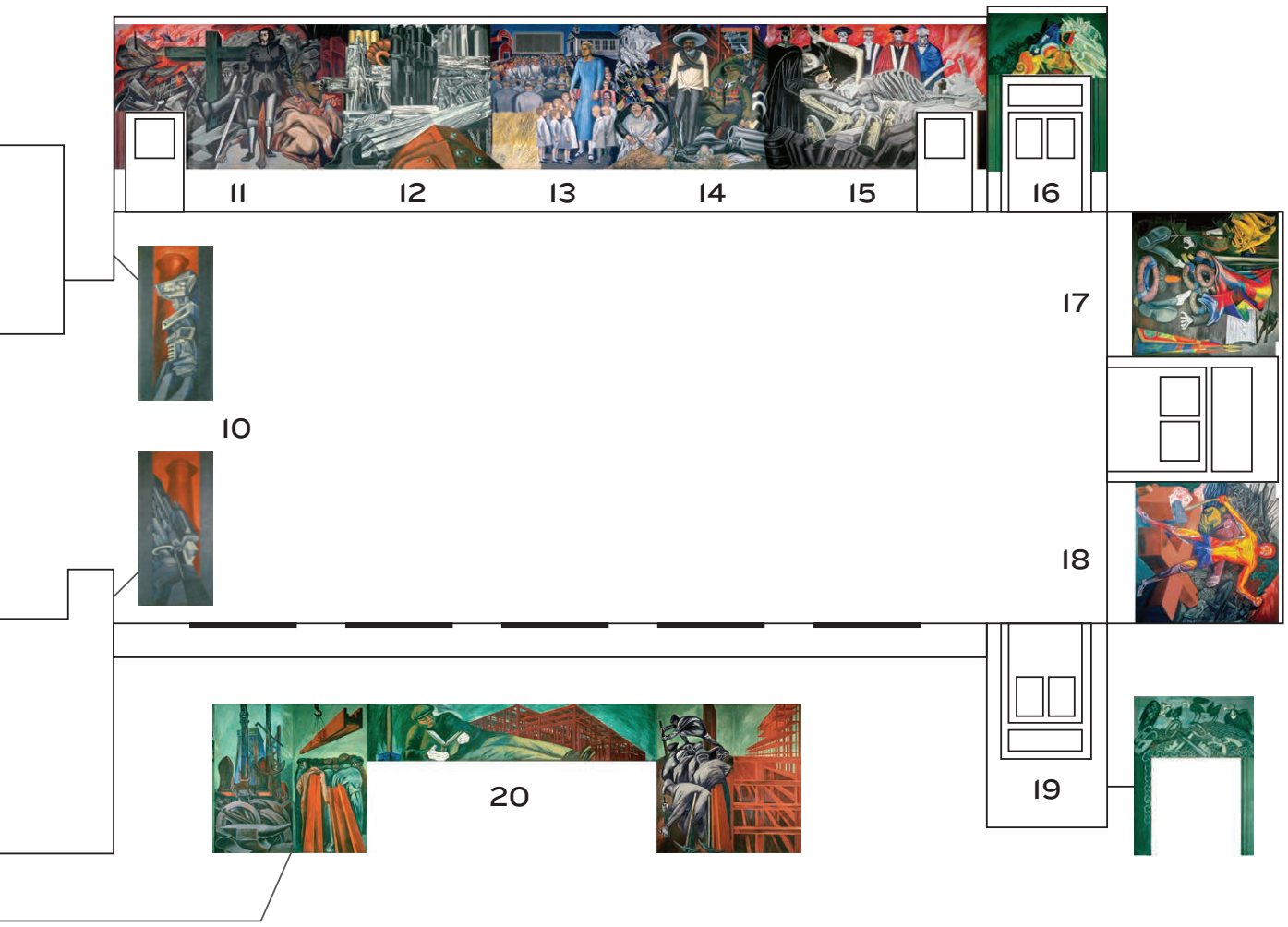
First, he asserts the primacy of idea over story in his mural. Second, he argues that the idea animating his *Epic* is American in "forms . . . feeling . . . and style." The purpose of this book is to pursue the link between these two claims. The first entails questions of form and communication. Orozco declares his antipathy to narrative, raising questions about his invocation of the "epic" along with consideration of the organization of the cycle and its relationship to the architectural structure of the reserve corridor. In short, how are we to read his sequenced imagery as something other than a story or, using the Spanish cognate (*historia*), a "history"? The second statement raises questions about the relationship between form and style on the one hand, and content and meaning on the other. For Orozco characterizes not only the form and style of his mural but also its structure of feeling as American.

Orozco's America is continental. When proposing a topic to the college, he argued that in this mural he would interpret the "forces, constructive and destructive, which have created the patterns of human life in the Western Hemisphere."[2] He selected the myth of Quetzalcoatl, a myth he described as both autochthonous and "living," "pointing clearly by its prophetic nature to the responsibility shared equally by the two Americas of creating here an authentic New World civilization."[3] The myth of Quetzalcoatl refers to a pre-Hispanic prophecy that has been used to justify the Spanish conquest since the late sixteenth century, although today its authenticity is highly debated.[4] According to the myth, Quetzalcoatl, a god/enlightened leader, brought about a highly cultivated civilization among the Toltecs until he was tricked into wanton behavior and rejected by his people. Upon his departure he decreed that he would return to destroy the civilization that rejected him. The Aztecs traced their lineage to the Toltecs, and thereby Quetzalcoatl played a legitimating role in the rise of their imperial civilization. In the immediate postcolonial period, the surviving Aztec leadership and their Spanish interlocutors crafted the myth of prophecy as a prefiguration of the conquest, arguing that Cortés's arrival in the year One Reed corresponded with Quetzalcoatl's much-anticipated return. In this way, a purportedly Toltecan myth appeared to foretell the conquest, suturing Mesoamerican notions of time and history into the linear, historicist, and eschatalogical time of Western Christian empire. From that point forward, the myth of Quetzalcoatl has serviced the construction of Mexican national identity.



1 Migration
2 Snake and Spears
3 Ancient Human Sacrifice
4 Aztec Warriors
5 Coming of Quetzalcoatl
6 The Pre-Columbian Golden Age
7 Departure of Quetzalcoatl
8 The Prophecy
9 Totem Poles
10 Machine Totems

FIGURE 1.2. Overview of José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*, Fresco, 1932–34, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College.



11 Cortez and the Cross
12 The Machine
13 Anglo-America
14 Hispano-America
15 Gods of the Modern World
16 Symbols of Nationalism
17 Modern Human Sacrifice
18 Modern Migration of the Spirit
19 Chains of the Spirit
20 Modern Industrial Man

Epic, National Narration, and Counternarrative

Despite his skepticism about "story," Orozco conceived of his mural as an epic. Because epics pertain to origin stories, Susanne Wofford notes, they are often entailed in the secular narratives of national histories.[5] Even though epics are understood to be "linear and teleological," they are often ambivalent about both origins and endpoints.[6] The linear stories epics relay, she argues, often "begin[ ] *in medias res* and end[ ] *ex mediis rebus*."[7] In this respect, she distinguishes epic from the "origin tale." The latter have clear origins that are marked by violence and a "catastrophic and irreversible metamorphosis that produces . . . the being in question."[8] Thus both the origin tale and epic are concerned with origins. However, in origin tales violence is explicit; in epic, violence is mystified. For, Wofford argues, "those moments in the epic when origins are narrated can . . . sometimes be moments when a submerged counternarrative is allowed to surface."[9]

The myth of Quetzalcoatl is an origin tale that served to justify Aztec imperial power and to forestall any attempts at challenging the social order within that society, even after the conquest, as surviving Aztecs sought to shore up their power within the new colonial regime. However, once its etiology was folded into postcolonial narratives of national becoming, it became part of an eschatological epic that served to mystify the violent origins of the nation-state in the Spanish conquest. In this sense, the myth of Quetzalcoatl demonstrates the very danger that Wofford identifies when the origin tale is incorporated into national epics. While it is meant to naturalize the violence of the conquest, the myth's objectification within the colonial narratives of the national epic has made it available for ongoing demands for justice and the decolonization of the postcolonial nation-state. Orozco's *The Epic of American Civilization* is one such counternarrative.

In this sense, Orozco's mural is decolonial, following the insights of Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo in the broadest sense. In their writing, they argue that modernity is a colonial project rooted in epistemic violence that centers Europe, constitutes non-European knowledge as irrational, naturalizes capitalism as the necessary and logical outcome of historical economic development, and constructs non-Europeans as inferior and racialized others. They note that despite independence movements to decolonize settler states, we have not achieved the status of being postcolonial because we have not escaped the "colonial matrix of power" through which colonialism emerged. They call decolonial those analytic and political endeavors that seek to expose the coloniality of power by provincializing its universalism, attacking its hierarchies, and denaturalizing it logics.[10]

To best grasp the critical and decolonial capacity of Orozco's *Epic*, I compare it with Diego Rivera's contemporaneous *History of Mexico* (1929–35) cycle at the National Palace in Mexico City, among other important public murals from the 1930s (see figures 1.1–1.4). This cycle, I will show, betrays Wofford's claims about the epic's ambivalence toward beginnings and endings insofar as it presents a linear and tautological narrative of national becoming that seeks to mystify the violence of origins by incorporating the Quetzalcoatl myth into a heroic and monumental story of national historical progress. While Rivera does represent violent episodes from Mexico's colonial and postcolonial history, they are of the special kind that Benedict Anderson ascribes to national narration. "The nation's biography," he writes, "snatches . . . exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts."[11] But, in order for these "violent deaths" to serve the purposes of national narration, they "must be remembered/forgotten as 'our own.'"[12] In Rivera's cycle, the death of the Aztec leader Cuauhtémoc is not remembered as a sovereign act of resistance to Spanish imperialism; the epistemological and sovereign difference between the Aztec empire and Spanish crown is "forgotten" and re-membered as a fratricidal conflict that birthed a Mestizo nation. Cuauhtémoc's death has become "ours," not "theirs," a proto-national martyrdom that serves the official *indigenismo* of the postrevolutionary state and its intellectual left.

Rivera's mural, like the "homogeneous, empty time" of national narration, is historicist, even as the formal and conceptual complexity of its visual dialectics complicates its linear and tautological thrust.[13] It begins *in medias res* with Quetzalcoatl's pacific reign, and through a dialectical process that progresses from the conquest to the Mexican Revolution, it ends *ex mediis rebus* in Quetzalcoatl's messianic return as Karl Marx. Mari Carmen Ramírez asserts that Rivera's *History of Mexico* marks a "historicist" turn among Mexican muralists in the 1930s.[14] During this period many artists intensified their exploration of the nation's past to articulate a unique national identity—*Mexicanidad*—rooted in indigenous culture but reflecting an idealized conception of postconquest racial and cultural mixing, known as *mestizaje*, and culminating in an industrialized future. In this respect Rivera's cycle is part of a tradition whereby history painting has been put in the service of the consolidation of political power and nation formation since the late colonial period.

Rivera began the mural in 1929 during the *Maximato*, the period between 1928 and 1934 when Plutarco Elías Calles—the "Jefe Máximo"—ruled through three proxy presidents (Emilio Portes Gil, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, and Abelardo Rodríguez). During this period Calles consolidated political power in the state through the formation of an official ruling party and exploited

populist rhetoric to convert the revolution from a chaotic civil war into an institutionalized myth that foreclosed further rebellion in the name of national unity. Rivera completed the mural in 1935 after Lázaro Cárdenas became president, declared his independence from the Maximato, and cultivated a messianic persona as a rural populist. Cárdenas brokered a rapprochement with the communist left and enacted socialist reforms that reoriented the ruling party from the liberal bourgeois policies of the Maximato toward more radical ends. Rivera's mural reflects this shift in that it both extols the modernizing agenda of the Maximato while also condemning Calles after his fall from grace. Further, with the introduction of Marx into the mural's program, he took advantage of Cárdenas's political opening and exploited the messianic overtones of his socializing agenda.

My reading of Rivera's National Palace mural is aligned with that of Leonard Folgarait, who argues that it is a state ritual that endeavors to convert its viewers into law-abiding citizens subject to the authority of the new ruling party.[15] David Craven characterizes this mural as the epitome of Rivera's *epic modernism*, a term derived from Meyer Schapiro but inflected by Bertolt Brecht's characterization of "epic theater."[16] Like Folgarait, Craven emphasizes Rivera's canny integration of avant-garde techniques with a dialectical conception of history. However, unlike Folgarait, who focuses on the tendency within Rivera's mural to use these devices in the service of a fundamentally statist agenda, Craven insists that the mural is "open ended" in its narrative, that it is "uneven in its representation of history" as a consequence of his use of metalepsis (reference to one thing through the substitution of another remotely related to it) and montage, and that it is postcolonial because it decenters European culture in its hybrid aesthetics and conception of Mexico's mestizo identity.[17] He asserts that the question that animates the mural is "nothing less than the course of human history, with Mexico being the particular place where this development is concretely known."[18] The National Palace mural, he concludes, "feature[s] a tragic past, an undecided present, and a hopeful vision, which, if realized in the 'classless future,' will redeem all the rest."[19]

Craven and I agree that Rivera's mural proposes a prophetic reading of Mexican history in which its tragic past is redeemed by its proletarian future. However, we disagree about the decentering effects of Rivera's "epic modernism." Like Folgarait, I argue that the mural is less open-ended than its overwhelming scale and copious detail suggest. Its logic is profoundly eschatological and more attuned to the liberal political theology of the state than to the more radical aims of Mexico's working and popular classes. In the chapters that follow, I show that Rivera's National Palace mural is a key

intertext to any analysis of Orozco's *Epic*. If Rivera's allegory of national history is akin to epic theater, as Craven contends, then Orozco's *Epic* is a Trauerspiel, like the "mourning plays" that Walter Benjamin described in his study of Germany's Baroque theater.[20]

Trauerspiel refers to a genre of German tragic theater that emerged in the eighteenth century. The protagonists were often bourgeois individuals, elevating their exploits to a status once reserved for aristocrats. My use of the term derives from Benjamin's reading of the genre as an allegory for the art form's fall from transcendence into historical time, which I discuss at greater length in chapter 1. For Benjamin the Trauerspiel does not so much celebrate the ascendance of the bourgeoisie but rather the decay of sovereignty in the face of history's capacity for meaningless violence.

As Trauerspiel, Orozco's *Epic* is not a national allegory; rather, it languishes in allegoresis (the proliferation of metaphor in the absence of a transcendent truth to anchor meaning). He takes an anti-historicist approach to history and painted dialectics. Through the constructivist principle of montage, he approaches the preconquest past melancholically, acknowledging the barbarism of civilization and the catastrophe of history conceived of as progress. In this sense, Orozco's *Epic* contradicts the messianic politics of both the Mexican state and the communist left in the 1930s. If it *is* an epic, it is one that reveals, rather than obscures, the violence at the origin of the nation-state, thereby "depriving the society of its founding authority."[21]

Mexico, U.S. Antiempire, and the Borders of Identity

It is probable that Orozco used the term *epic* to liken his mural form to poetic composition and to indicate that its subject matter entailed the travails and achievements recounted in epic poetry. In his mural it is the viewer who performs the epic; she, rather than a depicted protagonist, is the hero who undertakes a perilous journey and emerges from the experience transformed. Thus, Orozco's *Epic* is concerned with more than Mexican national sovereignty and the cultural politics of the international left. Unlike Rivera's National Palace cycle, which is sited in a colonial building built atop the Aztecs' destroyed ritual precinct in Tenochtitlán and which has served, since the colonial period through the mid-twentieth century, as the literal seat of federal power, Orozco's *Epic* is located in one of the oldest and most hallowed educational institutions in the United States within the very region—New England—credited for its exceptional character and history.

Dartmouth College was founded in 1769 by Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, a Congregationalist minister, for the "education and instruction of youth

of the Indian tribes in this land."[22] As a consequence, it has long been understood to be a college dedicated to the education of Native Americans. While Wheelock is credited with the institution's founding, it was Samson Occom, a Mohegan man, Presbyterian minister, and one of Wheelock's first students, whose tour through England and Scotland secured the funding for what was originally an Indian Charity School located in Connecticut.[23] Once Occom returned, however, Wheelock all but abandoned his Indian school. He split his educational mission into a grammar school for the training of indigenous children (and some enslaved men and women) in handcrafts and domestic tasks and a college, now intended for Anglo-American youth. He relocated the latter to the Hanover Plain on Abenaki lands along the Connecticut River, granted by Governor John Wentworth of New Hampshire. It was through this feint that Wheelock's charity school became Dartmouth College. Occom broke with Wheelock over this betrayal, and only about twenty Native American students graduated from Dartmouth between the year of its founding and 1972, when President John Kemeny reinvested in the college's original charter and established one of the first Native American studies programs in the country. As with so many U.S. American institutions, Dartmouth and its majority-white student body have long enjoyed the settler proclivity for "playing Indian" without acknowledging the usurpation of Abenaki lands or the reliance on enslaved labor that enabled its foundation within the colonial enterprise.[24]

Orozco pointed to this blind spot with regard to the colonial violence of the American epic in his autobiography, where he writes: "Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, is one of the oldest of educational institutions in the American Union. Several years before the War of Independence it was founded by a missionary who wished to educate the Indians of the neighborhood. Eleazar Wheelock came among them with a grammar, a Bible, a drum, and more than five thousand quarts of whiskey. To the sound of his drum, the Indians assembled, drank his whiskey, and learned the idiom of the New Testament. Today there are no more Indians left to be educated after this admirable plan."[25] Orozco's facts are wrong.[26] Not only was Wheelock a teetotaler but also, despite the efforts of missionaries and the effects of colonization, there were (and are) indigenous peoples, tribes, and nations still living throughout the U.S., including New England. As will become clear in the conclusion, he was likely deriving most of his information from a popular drinking song penned by Dartmouth alumnus Richard Hovey. Nonetheless, he reveals the hypocrisy of the U.S. American veneration of the Indian in the face of the nation's genocidal policies toward indigenous peoples. Despite indigenous survivance and the occasional enrollment

of Native American students, when Orozco was at work at the college he would likely not have encountered any, save for white students donning "war paint" and dressing up as Chief Wa-Hoo-Wah to perform during halftime at football games, or carrying Indian-head canes and breaking "peace pipes" as part of the college's annual graduation ritual.

The *Epic* is, therefore, explicitly addressed to a U.S. American viewer. As such, it is also pointed in its critique of U.S. American exceptionalism and its instantiation in narrative histories that excerpt the settlement of the territorial United States from the broader colonial histories of the continent, and in particular from the spiritual and military violence of the Spanish conquest. María DeGuzmán has dubbed this "fantasy of the United States as independent, isolated, as simply 'America,'" the U.S. "antiempire."[27] Relatedly, it is likely that Orozco was critically engaging popular histories wherein U.S.-based historians, artists, and filmmakers were also claiming the epic. For example, Thomas Hart Benton painted a fourteen-panel "mural" between 1920 and 1928 called *American Historical Epic*. It is unlikely Orozco ever saw Benton's *Epic*, but he surely did know Benton's more prominent public cycles, such as *America Today*, painted for the New School for Social Research in 1931 at the same time that Orozco was painting his New School mural cycle, or Benton's *Arts of Life in America* series that debuted at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1932. These two mural projects reflect Benton's turn toward romantic, highly cinematic, and deliberately mythologizing renderings of the American epic after the failure of his earlier cycle.[28] The most prominent and prolific U.S. American muralist, Benton persistently engaged with the discourses of Manifest Destiny, the "popular arts" and folk traditions of American leisure, and the style of Hollywood filmmaking. He therefore provides a compelling parallel and foil to the seriousness of purpose and avant-garde film aesthetics employed by the Mexican muralists. Benton's contribution to what Austen Barron Bailly has called the "American epics" of the interwar period helps us to better understand the currency of the term among cultural workers in the 1930s as well as the narratives of U.S. American history and audience expectations into which Orozco was likely intervening with his *Epic*.

Take, for example, James Truslow Adams's 1931 narrative history of the United States entitled *The American Epic*. In this book, Adams coined the phrase the "American Dream," arguing that despite its current economic and moral crisis, the United States was unique in both the Old and New Worlds for its promise of "opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement."[29] Adams's story recapitulates commonplace themes of American exceptionalism: that its settlers were motivated by "liberty" rather than

territorial conquest; that its national story originates with the "men of destiny" who colonized the Northeast and moved, ax in hand, inexorably West; that its character was shaped by the hardships of the frontier; and that its unique work ethic and material success was fundamentally Anglo-Saxon and Protestant despite the presence of other faiths and ethnicities. Adams likens the course of American Empire to "Old Man River" (the Mississippi), naturalizing its territorial designs and inevitable progress as a "continuous process" wherein "all that happens flows from what has been into what is to be."[30] His narrative is, thus, explicitly historicist, smoothing over every barbarism—slavery, Indian removal, wars, corporate greed, and labor exploitation—with a professed faith in American destiny.

While we cannot know if Orozco was familiar with Adams's book, he certainly understood the broad strokes of U.S. American exceptionalism and its triumphalist narratives of national history as Manifest Destiny. As an artist living and working in the Northeast, he recognized the special place the New England colonies held in stories of national becoming. Moreover, as a Mexican, he was sensitized to the exclusionary racial terms of its white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant imaginary. Whereas Adams relegated Mexico's contributions to the American epic to his prologue, Orozco painted his from a Mexican standpoint wherein what he viewed as an indigenous myth—the myth of Quetzalcoatl—animates the entire drama. In Orozco's cycle it is Cortés's conquest, not the landing at Plymouth Rock, that inaugurates modern history. A man of destiny to be sure, Cortés and his destructive power are not lionized like Adams's woodsman and his ax. Rather, Orozco makes the violent and traumatic foundations of America's settler states unavoidable for any viewer who performs his *Epic*.

Like Orozco, Adams recalls the "legend" of Quetzalcoatl and writes of the pitiless fate of the "savages" at the hands of the Spanish.[31] But he does not fold this Aztec origin tale into his epic; rather, it forms the foundation for a story that lies, literally, with/out the civilizational time of history, in the "time immemorial" of his prologue.[32] It is not the Spanish conquest that brings this prologue to a close and inaugurates his American epic; it is the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. This event not only "sealed" the "fate of the unwitting North American savage," he argues; it also eliminated the threat of Spanish dominion over territories that would become part of the continental United States and confined its cultural influence to an undemocratic, Catholic, and stagnant "Mexico."[33] Adams thus anachronistically instantiates the nineteenth-century political border between the U.S. and Mexican nation-states in the imperial contest between sixteenth-century Spain and England, minimizing the Spanish presence in the territorial United States

and asserting an absolute cultural distinction between Hispano- and Anglo-America, to use the parlance of the day. Orozco, as we will see, calls attention to this bordering practice and its consequences for how America is imagined, as well as to its effects on racialized subjects both within and without the United States.

Orozco does not naturalize his vision of the American epic using flowing metaphors that treat the past as prologue and the future as ordained. His approach is dialectical, wherein the now of the 1930s is constellated with the then of the Spanish conquest interrupting the flow of time and raising questions about the role of the conquest in Mexican national history and identity as well as the role of the Black Legend in U.S. American national formation. In this sense his mural is situated at a discursive, geographical, and symbolic border between Mexican national discourses about mestizo identity and U.S. American national discourses about Anglo-American exceptionalism. It also critically engages the political axis between Marxist conceptions of historical redemption promoted by leftist intellectuals in Mexico and U.S. American celebrations and critiques of industrialization, viewed as the unique achievement of the Protestant ethos. This uneasy political axis was hailed and naturalized through the discourse of pan-Americanism, a binational initiative to constitute Anglo- and Hispano-America as complementary cultures, with U.S.-based commodity production equated with the spiritualized cultural legacies of Latin America's racialized culture.[34] As will become clear, Orozco reworks the contemporary claims of pan-Americanists about the two Americas.

Thus, we might see Orozco's *Epic* as akin to Herbert Eugene Bolton's call for a transnational American epic in his 1932 presidential address to the American Historical Association entitled "The Epic of Greater America." Like Adams, Bolton was indebted to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis.[35] However, Bolton bent it to promote the study of what he dubbed the "Spanish borderlands." He thus characterized the Americas as a "disputed hemisphere rather than a set of fixed national entities," wherein the negotiation between European settlers and indigenous inhabitants within multiple borderlands—not simply on the Western frontier—held the key to national character formation across the Americas.[36] From this vantage, he called out what he saw as the provincialism and chauvinism of U.S. American historians whose focus on the "'Original Thirteen' has been very misleading and even pernicious" in its tendency to excerpt the "American Union" from the larger hemisphere and thereby minimize inter-American relations in the formation of American nation-states over time.[37]

Orozco's *Epic* engages these discursive borders and axes, taking on the eschatological claims of history in Mexico and revealing their role in struc-

turing the U.S. American antiempire as well. Likewise, he eschews the fetishization of U.S. America's machine culture while activating the critical ironies of Mexico's official indigenismo. But his mural does more than engage these national, political, and discursive borders. It also, and perhaps more significantly, speaks to the aporias, encryptions, and silences that structure and haunt them. In particular, his mural raises the specter of race and racialization in the Americas through its melancholic engagement with the borders of identity and with identity as a bordering practice that "displaces the location and polarity of the nation-border . . . [onto] the body."[38] This comes to the fore in his supplement, "Modern Industrial Man," through the critical act he demands of his viewer as she stands within the space of crisis that has founded Anglo- and Hispano-American identity and contemplates her relationship to the ambiguously raced body of the worker who reads. As I argue in the conclusion, Orozco's supplement reconstitutes the viewer as a border-subject and the mural room as a deterritorialized borderscape.

Melancholy, Race, and Performance

How does Orozco's mural do this? To answer this question, I turn to the theoretical concept of melancholy—both as an affective relationship to history and as constitutive of identity formation, crossing Walter Benjamin's "melancholy dialectics" with Sigmund Freud's insights about mourning and melancholia.[39] Orozco and Benjamin were contemporaries, although there is no evidence that either was aware of the other. Both adopted a critical stance toward historicism, and both stayed involved in leftist politics while expressing concerns about the development of Marxism as a political theory and philosophy of history. Likewise, both engaged messianic theology overtly, posing difficult questions about the possibilities for redemption within the political ethos of the modern nation-state and a cultural legacy of barbarism. My uptake of Benjamin's melancholy dialectics is enhanced and modified by critical race and postcolonial theorists who have reinvigorated Freud's theorization of melancholy, showing how it can inform a critical understanding of identity and racial formation in the Americas as well as abet ongoing struggles to decolonize the postcolonial nation state.

I combine insights from Benjamin's *On the Origins of German Tragic Drama* about the sociohistorical conditions of loss that turn tragedy into Trauerspiel (the mourning play) with his insights about the redemptive—"*weak* messianic"—power of the critical historian in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History."[40] Read as Trauerspiel, Orozco's *Epic* speaks to the collapse of eschatological redemption and narratives of national progress that the

conquest entails. As Judith Butler writes, within this context, "History . . . becomes a kind of catastrophe, a fall from which there is no redemption, the dissolution of sequential temporality itself."[41] "As a result of this dissolution," she concludes, "history becomes grasped as a spatial image."[42] Following this insight, I characterize Orozco's *Epic* is a spatial image rather than a historicist narrative. Constellated through what Benjamin calls "figural dialectics," its sequencing does not correspond with the linear logics of historicist time and progress. Rather, it is a constructivist "image," an irruptive "flash," produced through the avant-garde aesthetic of montage.[43]

Benjamin's melancholic conception of history as loss is not cynical or paralyzing. Rather, he imputes to melancholy a critical agency that David Eng describes as "an open relationship to the past—bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present."[44] Eng's characterization of Benjamin's project draws on Freud's insights, insofar as melancholia signals for both a "persistent struggle with lost objects."[45] In his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud famously distinguished between these two modes of grieving the lost object of desire, which for Freud can be "a loved person" or "an abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal and so on."[46] Mourning describes the healthy and productive way that the subject incrementally withdraws libidinal attachment from the lost object in deference to "reality," which shows that "the loved object no longer exists."[47] The melancholic, however, is a pathological figure who not only cannot let go of the lost object of desire but also may not "see clearly what has been lost."[48] Thus the melancholic's loss may be "unconscious," whereas in mourning "there is nothing unconscious about the loss."[49]

Because the melancholic cannot abandon the lost object, she incorporates it into the ego. This, in turn, "establishes an identification of the ego with the abandoned object."[50] As a consequence, the melancholic loses self-esteem, "reproaches" and "vilifies" herself.[51] "In grief," writes Freud, "the world becomes poor and empty; in Melancholia it is the ego itself."[52] In her book *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng points out that for Freud melancholia plays a constitutive role in the formation of the ego, for the "ego comes into being as a psychical object, as a perceptual object, only after the 'shadow of the object' has fallen upon it."[53] In this sense, the subject and object become "intrinsically (con)fused."[54] The consequences of this "psychical drama," Cheng argues, is that the subject must deny loss as loss in order to retain the object, while at the same time not allowing the object to return. Thus, she surmises that "exclusion, rather than loss, is the real stake of melancholic retention."[55]

Cheng extends this insight about subject/object confusion to a consideration of the ontological status of the object. Rather than focus exclusively on the melancholic subject (as Freud and many of his interlocutors do), she seeks to explore the effects of melancholy on the excluded but retained object as well. She thereby argues that the psychic condition of melancholia is a useful framework for theorizing race relations in the United States, where the "dominant, standard, white national ideal . . . is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others."[56] In this sense, the dialectic of loss, retention, denial, and exclusion that melancholia entails describes not only how dominant white identity operates but also the ideological dilemma of racist institutions such as segregation and colonialism. These institutions, she writes, "are internally fraught institutions not because they have eliminated the other but because they need the very thing they hate or fear."[57] Melancholia also describes the condition of racialized people, for as affect it names the psychic effect of the "haunting negativity that has not only been attached to but also has helped to constitute the very category of 'the racialized.'"[58] This affect manifests itself in the intergenerational grief that structures racial consciousness in the United States as well as in the grievances—legal or otherwise—lodged in its name.

Cheng's discussion of the melancholy of race helps us to understand not only why racialized populations are so integral to the symbolic processes of nation-formation within colonial and postcolonial contexts but also why making manifest the ghostly objects of melancholic ego-formation is so important for decolonization. Ranjana Khanna concurs, arguing that "theorizing melancholia involves theorizing a relationship to the other, and the manner in which the other is manifested" within postcolonial national representation.[59] In her book *Dark Continents*, Khanna situates the emergence of psychoanalysis within the context of European colonization, noting in particular the importance of colonial archaeology and anthropology for the metaphors Freud elaborates when theorizing the modern (European) subject. She points out that Freud reconceptualized the ego, from a "topographical model of archeological layers" to an "economic one concerning drives," and links this theoretical shift to changes in his own relationship to the nation-state as the result of anti-Semitism, the rise of Nazism, and exile.[60] It is this experience that formed the backdrop to his theorization of melancholy, and, in particular, the "destructive splitting" of the ego that it describes. His retheorization of the ego opened up the "psychoanalytic critique of the modern nation-state" that Cheng articulates.[61] It also laid the groundwork for the critical decolonial reinscriptions of psychoanalytic theory in Europe and its colonies after World War II. Khanna calls these

decolonial rescriptings "colonial melancholy," an affective relationship to the nation-state form that results from the "inability to introject the lost ideal of nation-statehood."[62] In colonial melancholy, the postcolonial subject is unable to effectively mourn the lost ideal of the nation-state. Instead, it becomes an unassimilable remainder that interrupts and critiques national postcolonial representation.

Following Freud, Khanna reminds us that "what distinguishes melancholia [from mourning] is a state of dejection, and a form of critical agency that is directed toward the self."[63] Conceived of as a form of critical agency, melancholia not only makes the encrypted figures within the ego-ideal of the postcolonial nation-state manifest; its critical agency also works to dismantle both the colonizing subject (the postcolonial national ego) and the colonized object (those retained-yet-excluded racialized groups) at the same time. "This critical identification with the lost object," she asserts, "constitutes the burden of melancholia, and indeed the traumatic undoing of self and lost object as a result."[64]

In this book, Quetzalcoatl represents the critical identification of the postcolonial nation-state with the lost object of ancient indigenous culture configured as the foundation for an independent and sovereign postcolonial nation-state. Mesoamerican culture serves as both a narcissistic projection, or "ego-ideal," for the postcolonial nation-state and as a specter of the colonialism that haunts and delegitimates it. Quetzalcoatl's return was used to justify the conquest. However, the incorporation of his prophecy of return into the national epic opens national history to critical counternarratives. In this sense, Quetzalcoatl's return also alerts us to the unanswered call for justice. As an unassimilable remainder that haunts the postcolonial independent nation-state, it makes ethical demands on the future. For as Khanna reminds us, "In the context of new formerly colonized nation-states, the critical response to nation-statehood arises from the secret embedded in the nation-state formation: that the concept of nation-statehood was constituted through the colonial relation, and needs to be radically reshaped if it is to survive without colonies or without a concealed (colonial) other."[65] This, I argue, is the "responsibility shared equally by the two Americas" that Orozco intimated when describing Quetzalcoatl's "living" myth.

As we will see, however, the responsibility that inheres within Quetzalcoatl's prophecy not only alerts us to the colonial politics of Mexico's official indigenismo. As a specter of colonialism and justice that haunts the postcolonial nation-state, the myth of return also inflects Orozco's grappling with the racial politics of the American dream. As Cheng points out, despite its claim that "all men are created equal," U.S. America has repeatedly betrayed

this founding ideal through a series of legalized exclusions, from the colonization of indigenous inhabitants and the enslavement of Africans to the exclusion of the Chinese, the repatriation of Mexicans, or the internment of the Japanese, to name only a few.[66] These racialized groups are the buried but formative ghosts in the Constitution, as a founding document, and in the constitution of American national history and identity. Citing scholars such as Michael Rogin and Eric Lott, Cheng asserts that "the dominant culture's relation to the raced other displays an entangled network of repulsion and sympathy, fear and desire, repudiation and identification."[67] The racialized worker in Orozco's supplement is one such "serviceable ghost" of U.S. American national representation.[68] He conjures a host of excluded but retained objects of melancholic ego formation within the white racial ideal of U.S. American nationalism.

Given the importance of race to my analysis of Orozco's *Epic*, it behooves us to consider the term not only in its U.S. framework, where a black/white dichotomy structures notions of racial categorization and where whiteness is the marker of belonging, but also within a Mexican context wherein mestizaje, or race-mixing, is the dominant trope through which race relations are imagined and where the mestizo, not "whiteness" per se, is upheld as the national ideal. Race as a category of identification or categorization is an ideological construct that nonetheless has real effects insofar as it imputes social, cultural, and biological differences to groups based, typically, on visible traits, such as skin color. While the biological differences purported to race have been discredited, race continues to be a powerful social category invoked not only by racists who would seek to demean entire groups of people but also by the very people who have been racialized to advance the cause of group rights in the face of legal, civil, and symbolic disenfranchisement. Racialization thereby refers to "the signification of race through social practices . . . [those] processes by which real or imagined characteristics are used to identify a group as a 'racial' collectivity, and cultural, political, or ideological situations where race thinking is invoked."[69]

Race management was central to the Spanish colonial project due to the radical mixing that occurred between people of Spanish, indigenous, and African descent.[70] The Catholic ethos of evangelization and colonial governance mitigated, but did not preclude, the enslavement of indigenous peoples. Moreover, New Spain was the recipient of the vast majority of slaves brought to the Americas up until the late seventeenth century. These populations comingled in social space, intermarried, and engaged in forms of sartorial and legal passing that resulted in a large and hybrid population of people of mixed or indeterminate social status and lineage. During the

colonial period an elaborate system of erudite classification, called *castas* (castes), was developed to categorize and fix peoples of mixed lineage within a hierarchy that placed intermarriage with the Spanish at the top and intermarriage between *indios* and *negros* at the bottom.[71]

Like the colonial United States, Mexico was involved in the slave trade from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. However, unlike in the United States, slavery was abolished with independence in 1829, when not only people of African but also indigenous descent were granted formal equality with creoles (people of Spanish descent but born in the colonies).[72] After independence this colonial system of classification was reduced to a three-part system of creole, indigenous, and mestizo, while blackness dropped out altogether. By the twentieth century, with the publication of José Vasconcelos's *La Raza Cosmica* in 1924, racial fusion was hailed not as a stigmatized artifact of colonization but rather as the means by which Latin America would surpass Anglo-Saxon America. "We in America," he wrote, "shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: The final race, the cosmic race."[73]

Due to texts like Vasconcelos's, the mestizo was asserted as a normative ideal of imagined community. However, despite his paean to "a new race," mestizaje does not signify all racial mixes but rather a carefully calibrated combination of Spanish and indigenous. Thus, other racially mixed groups, such as Afro-mestizos, or immigrant populations such as the Jewish or Lebanese who began migrating in the late nineteenth century, do not register at all within discourses about the Mexican people.[74] In spite of these exclusions, the ideology of mestizaje has long been understood, within Mexico, as a form of anti-racism leveraged against the United States. For, as Vasconcelos emphatically claimed, "*they committed the sin of destroying those races* [Indians and blacks], *while we assimilated them*."[75] Thus, Mexicans are often blind to the ways that antiblack racism has structured their own national imaginary, viewing it as a pathology that originates within the United States.[76]

Orozco certainly held this view; as a middle-class mestizo, he would have understood himself as a non-racialized person. And thus it must have come as quite a shock to find that when on the other side of the border, his Mexicanness rendered him not only a foreigner but also a racialized subject. In this sense he would have found himself grappling with the same problems U.S.-born Latino/as face when trying to plot themselves along the white/black color line (I will return to this in the conclusion when discussing Mexican artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña's migration experience).[77] And while it is unlikely that Orozco would have identified with African Americans, or

even as a person of color, the experience of being reclassified—of shifting from the privileged position of mestizo normativity to the humiliation of being treated as a racially subordinate non-American—must have provoked a glimmering awareness of the psychic complexities of race as a lived category of difference within the U.S. national imaginary.

One of the goals of this book, therefore, is to explore how the racialized figure of "Modern Industrial Man," who lies with/out the history/story that Orozco's *Epic* seems to reify, manifests a "presence" that is encrypted within that very history/story nonetheless.[78] As a figure of repudiation (a racialized subject) and identification (a reader engaged in the very same act we, the viewers, are presumably in the reserve corridor to undertake), he makes manifest the psychic conflicts of race in the U.S. American national imaginary. The responsibility of the performative epic we undertake as viewers thereby lies not in an easy identification with the utopian ethos of Mexican mestizaje—an idealized formulation of racial and cultural mixing—or in the multicultural fantasy that we can see ourselves in the "other" that prevails in U.S. liberalism. The "psychical paradox" inherent in identification (the melancholic subject's identification with the lost object, its self-flagellation as a consequence, its desire to exclude coupled with the necessity of retention) makes happy formulations of multicultural identification problematic.[79] To paraphrase Cheng's argument about the performance art of Anna Deavere Smith as a point of identification for the viewer, Orozco's "Modern Industrial Man" "destabilizes, rather than confirms, the critical or spectatorial we."[80] Following Elin Diamond, she argues that this kind of identification "provokes rather than disguises the historical contradictions within a social status quo implied by a homogeneous notion of the audience-as-one."[81]

It is in this sense that I see the racialized worker in the supplement as a provocative point of identification for the Dartmouth viewer, and one that troubles, rather than confirms, the status quo of an audience imagined as homogenous. He offers the viewer not a point of easy identification but rather a challenge to undertake the melancholic task of disidentification. As José Muñoz conceived it, the disidentifying subject, like the melancholic, "works to hold on to th[e lost] object and invest it with new life."[82] While his argument can apply to any colonial subject (and I will argue that the supplement offers the white subject an opportunity to disidentify with whiteness), for Muñoz, melancholia is not only the pathological retention-yet-exclusion of the lost object that characterizes the psychic conflicts of the white, heteronormative subject vis-à-vis racialized populations. More importantly, it is a "structure of feeling" that "individual subjects and different communities in crisis can use to map the ambivalences of identification and the conditions

of (im)possibility that shape . . . minority identities."[83] Like Cheng, Muñoz recognizes melancholia as an affective response to racial grief/grievance. And like her, he explores the dialectic of fantasy and identification that compels minoritized subjects to organize their sense of self through majoritarian representations that wound as much as they compel.

This "identity affirming 'melancholia'" helps to explain why students who self-identify as minorities at Dartmouth often find Orozco's *Epic* affirming, despite the colonial narratives it recycles, its near exclusion of women from its iconographic program, and its reticence on matters of sexuality.[84] And it helps to distinguish the difference between student identification with Native Americans at Dartmouth, best exemplified by the "Hovey Mural" (1939), and the critical interrogation of racial identities that students working with Guillermo Gómez-Peña and members of the Pocha Nostra collective produced in their collaborative performance, *Orozco MEXotica*, in 2002. I discuss both of these responses to Orozco's *Epic* in the conclusion.

Orozco's *Epic* thus crosses the melancholy of race in the United States with the colonial melancholy of Mexican nationalism. It brings the postcolonial critique pioneered by subaltern scholars to bear upon U.S. America's antiempire. In turn, it situates the ethos of Mexico's postrevolutionary mestizaje in relation to U.S.-based discourses on race, racialization, and racism, opening the concerns of Mexican muralism to those of critical race theorists in the United States. The mural thereby asks its (presumed) U.S. American viewer to recognize the coloniality of power, while at the same time asking Mexicans to recognize the racism that structures their national imaginary as well.

Idea, Intention, and the Melancholy Art

My methodological and theoretical engagement with melancholy concerns more than the racial politics of Orozco's *Epic*. As intimated at the outset, it also concerns the mural's formal properties—its montage aesthetic—as well as my conception of the critical possibilities that inhere in the mural as a work of political art. In her work on Benjamin's relationship with Freud's theory of melancholy, Ilit Ferber characterizes his understanding of the philosophical enterprise as a "struggle for the presentation of ideas."[85] Like Cheng and Khanna, she argues that Benjamin shifts Freud's emphasis from the subject to the object, characterizing the work of melancholy as the "sad work" of "rendering the object *present, and not absent* (as the mourner does)."[86] Whereas work for Freud "effaces all traces of loss," Benjamin, Ferber notes, "emphasizes" the "traces of loss and destruction" through the metaphor of

the "mosaic as an image of the philosophical idea."[87] The mosaic—or what I call constellation throughout this text—is a fragmented, "ruin-like" image composed as much of the pieces it montages as it is of the seams of adhesive that hold it together. The marks of the adhesive make present what was destroyed and lost. The manifestation of the idea, then, is "produced from a condition of loss," and thus "will always bear its traces."[88] It is in this sense that the spatial image of Benjaminian melancholy makes loss present not for the purpose of freeing the subject but rather to free the *object*, to bring it to rest by coming to terms with it.

Orozco's *Epic* is not decolonial because it abets the "normal" work of mourning and thereby frees the colonizing subject from her libidinal attachments to the abstracted objects of postcolonial national desire. It is decolonial because of the way that it makes present the lost objects of postcolonial national representation, the way it inhabits what Richard Iton calls the "problem space" of the "modern/colonial matrix."[89] It does so through the constellation of the fragments of Mexican and U.S. American nationalisms into a mosaic that foregrounds loss rather than the phantasmagoria (*Scheinwelt*) of progress toward a redeemed national state. It makes loss present not only through the visual seams, physical rupture, and temporal discontinuities that signal the mural's montage aesthetic but also by emphasizing, iconographically and spatially, the very wound that colonial narration seeks to suture and thereby mystify. In this way the mural-as-constellation manifests an idea, not a story, by making present the lost and buried objects encrypted within the hoary epics and smooth flow of historicist national narration in both Mexico and the United States.

By asserting this, I am not attributing the manifestation of idea in Orozco's *Epic* to his intentions. Following Benjamin (and, I believe, Orozco as well), I see idea as already extant within the material world—in this case the mural itself, as a material object—that the critical historian engages melancholically. My reading of the mural shifts ambivalently between Orozco's context and concerns and those of my own, as a U.S. American citizen-subject writing from the location of the early twenty-first century. Following Michael Ann Holly, I understand the work of art history to be a "melancholy art."[90] For Holly, even though works of art persist in their "thingliness" through time, they index a lost time that the historian attempts to make present through the pretense of empiricism. But this is "not where the *art* of art history comes from."[91] The *art* of art history, she asserts, is both "haunted and animated" by the irretrievable loss of distance and time. Our writing, she concludes, becomes a compensatory mechanism to make present what is absent, to revivify the object by generating new meaning, not restoring

original meaning, even as we recognize that that meaning is arbitrary and contingent upon our own desires.

The relationship to the past that we seek to enliven, then, is not empirical, but ethical. Quoting Benjamin, Holly writes, "Past objects are 'dead' only until they are enlivened by the present's commitment to them."[92] It is in this sense that the art historian's art is melancholic. She recognizes both the impossibility of objectivity and the impossibility of not seeking objective truth in the fragmentary ruins the past has bequeathed to us. In the art historical subject's "rendezvous" with the lost objects of her desire, she is "reminded of something never cognitively apprehended but existentially known."[93] My argument in this book, therefore, represents as much my scholarly and political desires as an embodied subject as it does my adherence to the historical methodologies of my discipline. I have attempted to enliven the past—1930s Mexico and the United States—by bringing the concerns of the present to bear upon it. Those concerns are complex and surely not entirely transparent to me. And yet I will sketch some of them here to acknowledge my situatedness in time and space and to credit a few of the experiences that have contributed to my understanding of the mural.

This project began when I arrived at Dartmouth in 2004 and was immediately folded into a community of staff, alumni, students, and scholars who are deeply attached to the mural and eager to promote its significance at Dartmouth and beyond. In the years that ensued, I have taught multiple courses on the *Epic*, conducted countless lectures and tours, written or recorded pedagogical materials, and made extensive study of its commission, production, and reception through access to preparatory works and archival documents at the Hood Museum of Art and the Rauner Special Collections Library. And while I arrived with a relatively developed understanding of the mural as a consequence of my training as a specialist on Mexican muralism, several key experiences at Dartmouth impacted the trajectory of my argument here.

The first was my participation in a Humanities Institute at the Leslie Center for the Humanities on "States of Exception" in 2009, where I was introduced to Benjamin's writing. Up until that point, my theoretical tool kit had largely consisted of poststructural theorists. And while I had read abridged versions of Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," I had encountered little else within his oeuvre. In that seminar, I conducted a tour of the mural for the other research fellows, and it was at that point that I began to consider the relationship the mural stages between myth and history. I returned to Benjamin's writings, finding in them a compelling and contemporaneous corollary to what one scholar calls Orozco's "*via negativa*."[94] In short, Benjamin's theorization of

melancholy became a way for me to theorize Orozco's dark vision of history. Moreover, as I reread Orozco's sundry statements and published texts, it became clear that he shared a similar mistrust of historicism and a similar ambivalence about the truth in painting. Several years later I was invited to give the inaugural lecture in what is now an annual lecture endowed by the Manton Foundation. The origins of this manuscript lie in that early text.

Dartmouth College was rocked by the culture wars in the 1980s and 1990s, and to this day it remains a tradition-bound place always teetering on the precipice of another conservative backlash. Nonetheless, the campus has become more inclusive in the decade and a half that I have taught here. My students are now more likely to be Latinx or black-identified than they were fifteen years ago. They have pushed me to shift my relationship to the mural, from a position of theoretical distance to one of subjective entanglement. Their investments in the mural have also encouraged me to read it not only through my training as a scholar of Mexican cultural politics but also through the lens of U.S. American cultural history and the contemporary politics of race. The mural has become a part of my identity as a scholar, as a member of the Dartmouth community, and as a white U.S. American woman grappling with the legacies of racial violence that have enabled my privilege. And in that time, the nation elected its first black president and witnessed the spectacularization of violence against people of color with the advent of cell phone videos, social media, and body cams, to name only a few of the technologies that have become ubiquitous; the emergence of #blacklivesmatter and new forms of campus activism around racial bias, gender violence, and social justice; and the traumatic resurfacing of white racial nationalism, military aggression, and homicidal xenophobia, exacerbated by the election of Donald J. Trump. This trajectory from hope to horror has been the political backdrop throughout the writing of this book, and it has had a profound impact on my desire to articulate the mural's radical potential and to foreground the question of racial justice. Within this context, the mural's engagement with the political crisis of the 1930s seems all the more timely as we face so many of the same threats.

Relatedly, I have been inspired by our students, who routinely look to the mural as they devise creative and powerful actions to protest bias on campus and in the nation more broadly. One particularly moving tribute was the staging of a mock funeral for the many faculty of color who have either been denied tenure or who were not aggressively retained by Dartmouth's administration (figure 1.3). The students processed across the Green to a gravesite where they laid flowers and read aloud statements from these scholars, all of whom have gone on to have impressive academic careers elsewhere,

FIGURE 1.3. Dartmouth students reading statements by former faculty of color about their experiences at the college, at a mock gravesite where they symbolically buried their books and articles as part of a protest over the college's failure to retain and promote faculty of color, May 27, 2016. Photo by Mary K. Coffey.

about their experiences at the college. In this act they converted a mock graduation ceremony into a macabre funeral in ways that echoed Orozco's "Gods of the Modern World" panel (see figure 3.19). This, along with groups like CoFIRED (Coalition for Immigration Reform, Equality, and DREAMers), Dartmouth's #blacklivesmatter group, the Native Americans at Dartmouth, and the demands students put forth in the 2014 Freedom Budget have pushed me as a scholar to articulate the ways Orozco's mural exists for us today and, in so doing, far exceeds the artist's concerns.

In the many tours I have conducted over the years, I have come to recognize the significance of a number of things about the mural that I often dismissed in my early writing and public presentations. Many of these observations, questions, or silences have come to structure the questions I address here. For example, I am often asked why the Mesoamerican god Quetzalcoatl is "white." Likewise, viewers routinely identify the "Modern Industrial Man" as "black" and focus on his white gloves, hoping I can tell them what they mean. The former question is easy to explain, as will become clear in chapter 2. The latter, however, opened up contemplation of the racial ambiguities of this final figure, a figure that is anomalous in Orozco's oeuvre. Early on I identified the reading worker as mestizo, viewing his significance through the celebratory discourses of Mexican racial and cultural mestizaje. Over the years I have become reluctant to pin down his racial identity. As will become clear in chapter 4, I explore the significance of his self-evident racialization without definitively determining his racial

identity, keeping open the possibility that he, in fact, can be read as black, among other options not signaled within the mural proper. His white gloves are central to my current thinking about what Lott has identified as a "racial structure of feeling" in America. This "American feeling," to quote Orozco, manifests itself in what Lott calls the dialectic of "love and theft" that has constituted U.S. American popular culture since the nineteenth century. Lott is referring to white appropriations of black culture in the invention of blackface minstrelsy. Nicholas Sammond argues that in the 1930s, oversized white gloves, which are a ubiquitous feature of animated characters like Mickey Mouse, are markers of "vestigial blackface."[95] I elaborate on his insight and link it to Orozco's mural in chapter 4. In reading Orozco's mural through this framework, I not only honor visitors' insights that the figure's racial identity is somehow linked to his white gloves but also suggest ways that scholars of Mexican mestizaje might reframe our analysis of period indigenismo as a racial structure of feeling similar to that which animated the invention of blackface minstrelsy.

Relatedly, students nearly always describe the children and citizens gathered in the "Anglo-America" panel as "zombies" (figure 3.17). I initially viewed this observation as anachronistic, more a reflection of the so-called postmodern zombie of contemporary popular culture than an index of popular uptakes of this figure in the 1930s. As will become clear in chapters 3 and 4, I have come to see this reading as symptomatic of white America's sublimated fear of racialized people.[96] In Orozco's "Anglo-America," the zombies are white, not the enslaved Haitians whose rebellion initiated this cultural trope. However, Orozco's iteration of the "white zombie" trope anticipates the current tendency in the formerly colonized world to reappropriate the zombie and "put it to work in opposition to the domination of First World economic models."[97]

Moreover, Orozco limns several other figures in the Modern half of the *Epic* who might also be perceived as the "walking dead." In so doing, he shifts our tendency to conceive of humanity through the Western liberal subject called Man toward a consideration of "enfleshment" and suffering as constitutive of human community instead.[98] Read this way, Orozco's zombies speak to the suppressed history of racism and exploitation in the American epic, a history that Alexander Weheliye argues "determine[s] the hierarchical ordering of the *Homo sapiens* species into humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans."[99] As a figuration of racialized populations in the Americas—the not-quite-human, the nonhuman—the phantom zombies that populate Orozco's *Epic* speak to both the vulnerability of racialized people to violence and to the ways that violence is justified through the

racializing assemblages of the modern/colonial matrix through which American civilization was formed.

While these questions/comments arise on nearly every visit to the cycle, other features of the mural remain unnoticed by visitors and scholars alike. For example, viewers rarely ponder the truly anomalous fact that Orozco has included a Last Judgment scene in his mural (see figure 3.29). This panel was cited as one of the mural's most controversial in the outcry that erupted over the commission in the 1930s. At that time it was the perception that Orozco's Catholic sensibilities were out of place in a Protestant institution. However, even then, no one seemed to notice how unorthodox, even heretical, this iteration of divine justice is. Since then, scholars routinely mention the scene, and some have even suggested that Orozco's vengeful Christ represents a Marxist worker because of his upraised fist.[100] But they do not linger on how the scene deviates from convention beyond noting that Christ chops down his cross. In chapter 3, I devote considerable space to the unprecedented nature of this image within the mural renaissance of the 1930s. I argue that Orozco's engagement with eschatology cannot simply be chalked up to his Catholic heritage. Rather, as the penultimate scene in the Modern half of the mural, it represents one of the most cogent features of his critique of history and, thereby, sovereignty in the Americas.

While audiences are eager for information about the Quetzalcoatl sequence, they rarely know anything about this mythologem. I too did not know much about what I erroneously assumed was a Mesoamerican myth, and I originally found Orozco's rendering of the myth hard to unpack. Attempts to find answers in the existing scholarship only steeped me further in the "scholarly despair" that Gesa Mackenthun attributes to the woefully heteroglossic nature of the Quetzalcoatl myth.[101] I am convinced that Orozco's esoteric handling of the myth was deliberate and that it contributes to our difficulty in interpreting it to this day. This difficulty is one of the key ways that he introduces colonial melancholy into the mural's seemingly nationalist program.

Contemporary scholars have definitively cast doubt upon the Quetzalcoatl story, demonstrating the extent to which it is the product of pre- and postconquest mythmaking rather than being an authentic Mesoamerican story or a reliable explanation for Moctezuma's capitulation to Cortés. Thus, in chapter 2, I refract Orozco's visualization of the myth through this contemporary scholarship despite the fact that Orozco surely would not have understood this in the 1930s. In so doing, I emphasize the ironies of empire that inhere within the Quetzalcoatl mythologem regardless of the intentions of those groups or individuals that have manipulated its meaning to claim or contest power.

The Quetzalcoatl legend was probably more familiar to U.S. American audiences in the 1930s than it is today, but even then it would have been understood as a Mexican story and thus as foreign to the historical concerns of most of Orozco's U.S. audience. Given this, it is even more imperative that we meditate on why Orozco would anchor his entire program in a mythologem that was considered ex-centric to the historical narratives of his presumed audience and one that was so implicated within the colonial nationalist project in postrevolutionary Mexico. Rather than taking these thematic choices for granted—as something we might expect a Mexican artist to do—I linger upon the way Orozco takes them up, showing that, far from tailoring his mural to the expectations of nationalists or reifying Mexico's colonial historiography, his uptake of both the myth of Quetzalcoatl's prophecy and the eschatological narrative of the Spanish conquest of the Americas intervened in the national narration of Americans in both Mexico and the United States.

Summary of Mural, Chapters, and Argument

Before concluding with an overview of the argument, it is necessary to summarize some of the basic information regarding the mural, its commission, and the space in which it is located. Orozco painted *The Epic of American Civilization* in true fresco between June of 1932 and February of 1934, while employed as a visiting professor in the Art Department (a post anonymously subsidized by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller).[102] The commission was brokered by two art professors, Artemas Packard and Jerry Lathrop, for the walls of the reserve reading room in Baker Library, a Georgian revival building that had been completed in 1929. President Ernest Hopkins, as Orozco's patron, wrangled financing for the mural, but he exerted little oversight other than to approve its ostensible subject—the "American myth" of Quetzalcoatl.

As part of their lobbying effort, the art professors invited Orozco as a guest lecturer, during which he demonstrated the technique of fresco, which was experiencing a period of revival due to the widely publicized Mexican mural renaissance and to growing interest within the United States in establishing a similar federally funded public art initiative. He thus painted a somewhat uninspired test panel titled *Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life* (1932) in the corridor that leads from the reserve reading room to Carpenter Hall, which housed the Art Department at that time (figure 1.4). Today this "secret mural" is located in a passageway mostly frequented by employees of the library, as the corridor was walled off and modified through a sequence of additions in 1941, 1957–58, and then again when

FIGURE 1.4. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life*, 1932, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College; P.932.12.

the library underwent the Berry expansion in 1967. Even though it is separate from the cycle, this panel encapsulates one of its central themes, insofar as it represents a heroic male figure rising up from a pile of industrial machine parts, tools, and weapons. The figure stands in profile, facing what was once a row of windows (but is now a wall) with his hands raised in the same gesture as those of the Assyrian king and his attendants depicted on relief panels from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud (883–59 BCE), in Dartmouth's possession since 1856. This detail reveals Orozco's interest in situating his art within a broad "tradition." The seeming "whiteness" of the figure reveals that at this point Orozco was beholden to the universalizing discourses of Man wherein the white male embodies the human subject. This contrasts markedly with the racialized worker the artist depicts across from the reserve desk, a transition in the artist's racial politics that I discuss in great detail in chapter 4.

While there are thematic overlaps between *Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life* and the Modern half of the *Epic*, the test panel's

static composition reveals the limits of dynamic symmetry, Jay Hambidge's compositional system that Orozco was experimenting with in the early 1930s. Finally, the palette in the upper quadrants is inconsistent, and we see passages where the day work has been chipped out and repainted. These "mistakes" were likely the by-products of the image's function as a teaching tool. However, as I will argue in chapters 1 and 4, Orozco's tendency to reveal rather than to conceal his labor was part of both his montage aesthetic and his modernist ethos.

Once the commission was secured, Orozco began to work on the *Epic*. His original contract specified payment of $5,200; however, by the end of the project he had received $10,000. While this amount was modest by comparison with what Rivera was garnering from his corporate patrons, it was the most money Orozco had received for a mural to date, making his experience at Dartmouth one of his best. The mural was engulfed in local controversy before it was complete, however. President Hopkins defended it even as Rivera's contemporary mural in the RCA tower at Rockefeller Plaza was being chipped off the wall. In the conclusion, I chronicle the controversy that erupted at Dartmouth.

Orozco began the mural in 1932 with the panel entitled "The Prophecy" (see figure 2.8). He then left for a three-month trip to Europe, his first time off the American continent. While there, he traveled to London and Paris and then through southern Italy and Spain. He saw the frescoes of the Italian Renaissance as well as the powerful paintings of El Greco. Likewise, he saw an exhibition of Picasso's work and was surely exposed to other artists at work in the European avant-gardes.[103] Orozco had been academically trained, and even prior to his trip to Europe he was well informed about both the masterworks of European art and the early twentieth-century avant-gardes. However, his firsthand exposure to the monumental works of Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and Tintoretto seems to have liberated him from his brief adherence to Hambidge's theories. After his return, his style opened up again. His brushwork became freer; his sense of scale expanded to really hold the wall. And his expressionist use of color, dramatic highlighting, and formal distortion came to the fore. The latter was exacerbated midway through his work on the *Epic* with the introduction of synthetic pigments, whereupon he began experimenting with a more acrid and unnaturalistic palette.

Orozco worked with minimal assistance despite having the use of only his right hand. He made numerous sketches, color studies, and to-scale compositions.[104] He did not make extensive use of cartoons or the ancient technique of pouncing his designs into the wet plaster before beginning. Rather, he selected details from carefully worked compositional drawings,

typically of feet, hands, and faces, and drew them to scale onto tracing paper. He would then place the paper on top of the wet plaster and use the end of a brush to incise the compositional lines into the wall. From these details he would fill in the rest of the image freehand and go from there. The resultant imagery has an improvisational feel despite the careful, and in some cases copious, preparatory works associated with each scene. Similarly, Orozco devised an unconventional use of the fresco medium. He mixed putty into his pigments, which gave them an opacity and plasticity that is atypical for the medium. This allowed Orozco to work from dark tones to light, rather than starting with fields of lighter color and then layering on the detail in darker tones. The benefits of his reverse technique are most apparent in the dramatic highlights that suggest rather than delineate anatomical forms, such as Quetzalcoatl's pointing finger in the "Departure of Quetzalcoatl" scene, lending the mural an energy that is lacking in the more controlled work of Rivera (see figure 2.3).[105]

From its inception Orozco's mural has been popular with students, alumni, and interested persons from the region and farther away. Artists like Jackson Pollock made special trips to view the mural when it was new. And to this day, artists, community groups, college classes, and school groups from the region visit the mural regularly.[106] Alumni routinely schedule tours for their class reunions. And on any given day, one can find a surprisingly large number of visitors in the corridor looking on their own or following along to one of several recorded tours they can check out for free at the reserve desk. Additionally, there are online resources for the mural that make it available digitally to users far beyond Dartmouth.[107] And finally, professors at the college routinely integrate the mural into their course curriculum.[108] In this book, I emphasize the work I have done with my students on this mural, but many of the insights included herein derive from tours I have conducted with groups or individuals from outside the college, ranging from visiting ambassadors, curators, and scholars to students from Freedom University to social activists from Bikes Not Bombs to documentary filmmakers and reporters from local public radio stations. Then, as now, the mural enjoys a robust audience, drawing interest from a wide swath of the public with diverse levels of education, financial resources, and identity formations.

The Epic of American Civilization presents a sequence of images that I describe here with minimal interpretation. While I identify each image with its conventional title, it is important to note that Orozco did not provide these titles. He authorized Artemas Packard to name each mural in a correspondence that took place between March and April of 1934.[109] Therefore, while they are generally descriptive, they are not prescriptive, having been

FIGURE 1.5. View of the west wall of the Orozco Room, Baker-Berry Library, Dartmouth College. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*: "Migration" (Panel 1), "Snakes and Spears" (Panel 2), and "Ancient Human Sacrifice" (Panel 3), 1932–34, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College; P.934.13.1, P.934.13.2, P.934.13.3.

added retrospectively. Throughout, I use the title that registrars at the Hood Museum of Art request for publications, online resources, and publicity materials. Given that I am following what has become standard convention on campus, I have not changed the spelling of proper names like "Cortez" in the titles, even as I use the Spanish spelling "Cortés" in my text. Relatedly, I have opted to use quotation marks for the titles of individual panels, reserving italics for the title of the mural as a whole. I do this to remind the reader that these titles are conventional, not definitive.

The west wall sequence includes "Migration," where nude male bodies trudge grimly forward, directing the viewer toward the next scene, "Ancient Human Sacrifice" (figure 1.5). Here Aztec priests restrain a masked sacrificial victim while cutting open his chest to pull out his beating heart. "Snakes and Spears," a "decorative panel" executed in the bright palette associated with the scenes in the Modern wing, is located above the door that separates these two episodes. The cycle continues onto the north wall, a long, flat expanse that details the myth of Quetzalcoatl (figure 1.6). A small panel over a doorway, "Aztec Warriors," inaugurates the north wall sequence. These figures wear symbolic dress and face east, across the expanse of the wall. The following three scenes detail Quetzalcoatl's Golden Age.

In "The Coming of Quetzalcoatl," the bearded white god rises up at the crossing of the pyramids of the sun and the moon at Teotihuacán. Behind

FIGURE 1.6. View of the Ancient Wing of the north wall of the Orozco Room, Baker-Berry Library, Dartmouth College. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*: "Aztec Warriors" (Panel 4), "The Coming of Quetzalcoatl" (Panel 5), "The Pre-Columbian Golden Age" (Panel 6), "The Departure of Quetzalcoatl" (Panel 7), "The Prophecy" (Panel 8), 1932–34, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College; P.934.13.4, P934.13.5, P.934.13.6, P.934.13.7, P.934.13.8.

FIGURE 1.7. View of the Modern wing of the north wall of the Orozco Room, Baker-Berry Library, Dartmouth College. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*: "Cortez and the Cross" (Panel 11), "The Machine" (Panel 12), "Anglo-America" (Panel 13), "Hispano-America" (Panel 14), "Gods of the Modern World" (Panel 15), 1932–34, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College; P.934.13.13, P.934.13.14, P.934.13.15, P.934.13.16, P.934.13.17.

him an array of pagan gods is displaced, while below him ancient Americans awake from slumber and begin peaceful communication. "The Pre-Columbian Golden Age" presents three indigenous figures harvesting corn, carving a stele, and striving toward the heavens. These scenes of peaceful civilization are followed by "The Departure of Quetzalcoatl," where a mass of primitivized men violently gesture and pull away from a wild-eyed and wizened Quetzalcoatl. He reaches out a long arm and points dramatically toward the final image along the north wall in the western half of the corridor. "The Prophecy" depicts conquistadors on horseback in reference to the reported belief among the Aztecs that Cortés was Quetzalcoatl returned.

The mural breaks with "The Prophecy" and continues on the other side of the reserve desk with "Cortez and the Cross," a second representation of the Spanish conquest (figure 1.7). In this scene, Cortés stands impassively amid the destruction of Mesoamerican civilization and a heap of dead bodies. He is accompanied by a friar who stakes an enormous cross into the rubble, announcing the spiritual conquest of the Americas. The scenario then jumps in time to the twentieth century with "The Machine," a highly compressed

FIGURES 1.8, 1.9, AND 1.10 (*opposite and above*). View of the east wall vestibule of the Orozco Room, Baker-Berry Library, Dartmouth College. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*: "Symbols of Nationalism" (Panel 16), "Modern Human Sacrifice" (Panel 17), "Modern Migration of the Spirit" (Panel 18), "Chains of the Spirit" (Panel 19), 1932–34, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College; P.934.13.19, P.934.13.18; P.934.13.21, P.934.13.20.

landscape of industrial machinery that feeds off of the destroyed bodies at Cortés's feet.

"Anglo-America" and "Hispano-America" follow. In "Anglo-America" a desultory schoolteacher looms possessively over a sea of zombie-like children. To her right businessmen in gray flannel suits and frowning blond women gather before a red barn and white Protestant schoolhouse for a New England town hall meeting. In "Hispano-America" a doomed guerrilla stands stoically amid the tumbling mass of Mexican, U.S., and French generals who vie with greedy businessmen to possess the golden coins of Mexico's mineral wealth. In the final scene of this sequence, "Gods of the Modern World," a group of skeletal academics preside over a macabre graduation as fetal skeletons donning mortarboards are delivered from a decayed maternal carcass.

The final four images are in a vestibule marked off by support columns at the east end of the corridor (figures 1.8–1.10). Their location mimics that of the altar in liturgical architecture. It is thus fitting that it is here that Orozco invokes the Last Judgment, situating it within a suite of images that speak

FIGURE 1.11. View of the supplement on the south wall of the Orozco Room, Baker-Berry Library, Dartmouth College. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*: "Modern Industrial Man" (left, central, and right panel, 3 of 3, Panel 20), 1932–34, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College; P.934.13.22, P.934.13.23, P.934.13.24.

not to God's glory but rather to the dissolution of redemptive certainty within the secular struggle for power that characterizes the rise of nationalism. "Symbols of Nationalism" is situated above the door on the north wall of the vestibule; it depicts a heap of brightly colored military regalia and eagles. "Modern Human Sacrifice," and "Modern Migration of the Spirit" flank a doorway on the east end of the vestibule, directly across from their ancient counterparts at the west end of the corridor. In "Modern Human Sacrifice," Orozco's penchant for social satire reaches its peak, as he makes use of the *calavera* to satirize the official glorification of the deaths of "unknown soldiers." In "Modern Migration of the Spirit," a crucified Christ stands astride a fallen cross, with one arm raised in a fist and the other wielding an ax. And finally, a small panel entitled "Chains of the Spirit" is situated above a doorway on the south wall of the vestibule. Here we see vultures in clerical collars perched atop a pile of chains with paddle locks and revolvers.

The southern expanse of the corridor consists largely of windows; however, at the midpoint there is a large niche across from the reserve desk where we find five images collectively entitled "Modern Industrial Man" (figure 1.11). This sequence is centered around a long horizontal panel in which Orozco depicts a racialized worker reading a book in front of a building under construction. To his right a cluster of workers huddle with their backs to the viewer, and to his left a group of workers labor to construct a modern steel-frame building. Additionally, there are four more "decorative panels" located on either side of the support walls at the center of the corridor. "Totem Poles" faces west toward the ancient half of the cycle and depict Native Northwest coast totem poles in homage to indigenous civilizations

FIGURE 1.12. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*: "Totem Poles" (2 panels, Panel 9), 1932–34, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College; P.934.13.9, P.934.13.10.

within the territorial United States (figure 1.12). "Machine Images" faces east toward the Modern half of the cycle and lampoons the modern idolatry of weapons and machinery (figure 1.13).

I have chosen to organize the chapters of this book in accordance with the main divisions of Orozco's mural, with chapter 2 focused on the Ancient half, chapter 3 on the Modern half, and chapter 4 on the supplement. While this is a logical way to read the mural sequence, as I argue in chapter 1, the *Epic* is better apprehended not as a narrative that moves from the past to the future but rather as a constellation wherein a "then" and a "now" are montaged together. With this insight in mind, I argue that the place from which one might "begin" the *Epic* is not with what we suppose to be the first scene—"Migration"—but rather by standing within the space of crisis, where the "Modern Industrial Man" reclines with his book.

In order to understand why this is so, chapter 1 is devoted to elucidating the politics of Orozco's formal and conceptual approach to mural art, which I read through what Max Pensky calls Walter Benjamin's melancholy

FIGURE 1.13. José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949, *The Epic of American Civilization*: "Machine Images" (2 panels, Panel 10), 1932–34, Fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College; P.934.13.11, P.934.13.12.

dialectics. To do this, I situate Orozco's *Epic* with respect to the period debates over the mural form. In particular, I relate the highly publicized polemic between Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros in order to explore the various modalities of visual dialectics in the 1930s and the political stakes of these aesthetic choices.

Unlike Rivera, Orozco avoided publicity, and unlike Siqueiros, he declined to polemicize. We have, therefore, very few textual guides from which to deduce Orozco's opinions on these matters. And what we do have is often written in a sardonic voice that requires careful exegesis. Nonetheless, I have found much to work with in four key texts: Orozco's 1929 manifesto, "New Worlds, New Races, New Art;" his statement about the significance of his Dartmouth frescoes from 1933 (reproduced at the outset); his "explanation" written with regard to his portable fresco, *Dive Bomber and Tank*, from 1940; and his autobiography.[110] The latter refers to a series of articles that Orozco dictated to his wife for serialized publication in the Mexico City periodical *Excelsior* between February 17 and April 8 of 1942. It was

subsequently compiled and published as an autobiography in 1945. Despite its title, it bears only a passing resemblance to this genre. Its tone is casual, its prose crisp, swift, and often caustic. As a retrospective look back, it reflects the deep skepticism Orozco felt toward all orthodoxies in his later life. Taken together, these documents suggest a consistent, if darkening, position on public art, politics, and form.

Chapter 2 shifts from questions of form to those of history, myth, and messianic nationalism. Taking Orozco's claim that the myth of Quetzalcoatl points "clearly by its prophetic nature to the responsibility shared equally by the two Americas of creating here an authentic New World civilization," I ask, what does this quintessentially Mexican origin story have to offer its U.S. American audience? In order to unpack Orozco's version of the myth, I survey the basic features—visual, mythical, and historiographic—of the myth as it has evolved over time. I explore both its dialogic formation within the context of the Spanish defeat of the Aztecs as well as its reinvigoration by intellectuals, politicians, and artists in postrevolutionary Mexico as part of the official indigenismo of mestizo statecraft. In particular, I compare Orozco's iteration of the myth with Rivera's messianic version on the north wall of his *History of Mexico* cycle at the National Palace. Through this comparison, key differences emerge that help us to appreciate how Orozco's iteration of the myth not only allegorizes it within the context of colonial violence but also brings the irony of empire that inheres within the mythologem to the fore. Orozco's handling of the Quetzalcoatl mythologem, therefore, introduces a critical colonial melancholy into the *Epic* that sets the stage for his radical revision of American modernity, sovereignty, and identity, which are the topics of chapters 3 and 4.

In chapter 3, I shift to the Modern half of the mural, focusing on Orozco's rendering of the Spanish conquest as its inaugural scene. Orozco's montage aesthetic intensifies in the Modern half of the mural, marked, most obviously, by the radical leap in time from the scene of Cortés's conquest to a sequence of images that speak directly to American life in the 1930s. Thus, in this chapter, I take up Orozco's call for the viewer to become a radical *monteur* and break my analysis into three discreet but related sections in which I shuffle and rearrange the scenes to bring out "unexpected" possibilities.[111] Each section circles back to the scene of the historical conquest and its meaning within both Mexican and U.S. American conceptions of history, progress, and sovereignty. In this way, the entire chapter explores the many facets of the modern/colonial matrix, a "problem space" in which various forms of relationality are denied—the relation between the Spanish conquest and the U.S. antiempire, the relation between the victims of conquest

and the contemporary viewer, the relation between "Anglo" and "Hispano" America, and the relation between what Weheliye identifies as the "liberal humanist figure of Man" and those "subjects excluded from this domain."[112]

In part I of chapter 3, I situate the Spanish conquest within Mexican historiography in order to explicate the theological temporality of Western conceptions of history that subtend national narration. Again, through an instructive comparison with Rivera's representation of the conquest in his National Palace mural, I draw a distinction between what Roberto Esposito calls "philosophy as history" and "history as philosophical event."[113] In this sense, Rivera's historicism subordinates historical events to a philosophy of history, whereas Orozco's melancholy dialectics situate the conquest as an event within a philosophical contest of meaning in postrevolutionary Mexico.

In part II, I turn from the Mexican context to the U.S. American one, by placing Orozco's characterization of industry and the two Americas within period pan-Americanism. Again, comparison with Rivera's murals, in this case his U.S. commissions in San Francisco and Detroit, proves useful, as both artists engaged this theme through gendered metaphors that mark the biopolitical concerns of the period with what Esposito dubs the immunitary ethos of racialized communitas. Whereas Rivera's murals offer ambivalent messages about hemispheric cooperation, particularly with respect to the technocratic management of life, Orozco's mural is unambiguously critical of the discourses of pan-American communion. He draws attention to the violent bordering that the U.S. antiempire enacts between so-called Anglo- and Hispano-America, and thereby the thanatopolitics of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant nationalism. In this context, Orozco's reference to the conquest recalls the Black Legend as a bordering device for establishing the United States as exceptional within the Americas, and in turn for constituting "Hispanic" Americans as outside of its political imaginary.

Part III returns to the discussion of theology introduced in part I but shifts from a consideration of its role in the philosophy of history to a consideration of the Christian genealogy of modern political theory, or what Carl Schmitt calls the "political theology" of modern sovereignty.[114] Here the melancholic allegoresis from chapter 1 returns, as I explore Orozco's representation of Christ in the penultimate image of the Modern wing. While his decision to culminate the mural with an image of the Christian Messiah would seem to ratify the Christian eschatology of the Spanish conquest, I argue that Orozco's Christ is not a redeemer. Rather, he is the critical material historian who destroys the phantasmagoria of modern sovereignty and

calls on the viewer to enact her weak messianic power to respond to the claim the oppressed past makes upon us. In this sense, I read the Modern half of the *Epic* as a Trauerspiel, or mourning play, wherein "history—as a narrative of the human march towards redemption on the Day of Judgment—loses the eschatological certainty of its redemptive conclusion, and becomes secularized into a mere natural setting for the profane struggle over political power."[115] Following James Martel, I characterize Orozco's political theology as a "dissipated sovereignty" that counters the political idolatry of Rivera's messianic Marxism, raising the question of what a nonidolatrous sovereignty in the Americas might look like.

Chapter 4 focuses on the supplement, "Modern Industrial Man," and shifts to the melancholy of race in the Americas. Arguing against an iconic interpretation of the worker who reads as either indigenous or mestizo, I engage in a series of readings that explore his non-iconic qualities with respect to the most ubiquitous tropes of Mexican national identity. However, my reading does not stop at the level of signification; it also delves into the symptomatic and reads this figure as an encryption of all that lies with/out U.S. and Mexican national representation, Orozco's mural included. In this vein, I push further into the speculative, taking seriously the U.S. American visitor's tendency to interpret the figure as black and asking how this identification speaks not only to the figure of the slave encrypted within U.S. American discourses of freedom but, more significantly, how it speaks to the role that antiblackness, a legacy Lorgia García-Peña situates as a "fear of Haiti" within the Americas, plays in the violent bordering of "Anglo-" and "Hispano-America" and their respective racial imaginaries.[116] Concluding with a return to the performative demand the mural makes upon its viewer(s), I explore both the uncomfortable forms of problematized identification and the radical politics of disidentification and relationality that this figure commands as a specter of social justice that cannot remediate the violence of the past but that is nonetheless already here.

In the conclusion, I explore two of the many uptakes of the mural that have transpired in the eighty-plus years since Orozco painted it. The first, the "Hovey Mural," began before Orozco had completed the *Epic*, and the second, *Orozco MEXotica*, was a two-hour performance that took place over two nights in May of 2002. Through this comparison, I demonstrate that the call for justice encrypted within Orozco's *Epic* has and has not been heeded. These two examples lend credence to Orozco's claim in his "Statement" that the idea in a work of art is energy, creating matter, and that it is released by the critical labors of the viewer, with the painting acting as stimulus.

notes

Introduction

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2 Handwritten statement written by Orozco during his second visit to Dartmouth in early May 1932 for a press release issued on May 25, 1932. Cited in Jacquelynn Baas, "*The Epic of American Civilization*: The Mural at Dartmouth College (1932–24)," in *José Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927–1934*, edited by Renato González Mello and Diane Miliotes (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, 2002), 158.

3 Baas, "*The Epic of American Civilization*," 158.

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8 Wofford, "Epics and the Politics of the Origin Tale," 244.
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12 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 206.
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21 Wofford, "Epics and the Politics of the Origin Tale," 242.
22 See "The Charter of Dartmouth," accessed October 7, 2017, http://www.dartmo.com/charter/charter.html.
23 For a biography of Occom and the documentation pertaining to his role in the college's founding, see "The Occom Circle" project at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~occom/.
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25 José Clemente Orozco, *José Clemente Orozco: An Autobiography*, translated by Robert C. Stephenson (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1962), 157–58.
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31 Adams, *The Epic of America*, 9.
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98 "Enfleshment" is Alexander Weheliye's proposed alternative to the heuristic of "Man" put forth in his treatise, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

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100 Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Party* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

101 Mackenthun, *Metaphors of Dispossession*, 101.

102 Orozco's Dartmouth commission has been chronicled in a number of extant sources from which my summary has been derived. See Baas, "*The Epic of American Civilization*"; Laurance P. Hurlburt, "Dartmouth College, 1932–34," in *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 56–88; and Sharon Lorenzo, "The Walls of My Dreams: The Commissioning of José Clemente Orozco's Mural *The Epic of American Civilization* at Dartmouth College," in *Men of Fire: José Clemente Orozco and Jackson Pollock*, with contributions by Mary K. Coffey, Sharon Lorenzo, Lisa Mintz Messinger, and Stephen Polcari (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, 2012), 55–63.

103 See Orozco, *José Clemente Orozco*.

104 For full access to every preparatory work that the college owns, see Dartmouth's Digital Orozco website (http://www.dartmouth.edu/digitalorozco/). Orozco likely prepared many more studies for this mural. However, we do not know of or have access to the remaining sketches, assuming they still exist.

105 See Hurlburt, "Appendix A," in *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 253–56, for a discussion of the various media and techniques used by the Mexican muralists.

106 The Hood Museum of Art manages tours for late elementary, middle school, high school, Geisel Medical School, Tuck Business School, teachers, docents, and adult groups from the community on an annual basis. Tour statistics have been collected since 2010 that show numbers served running between 700 and 1,200 annually, with an uptick since 2015 when the museum was closed for renovation and this kind of education was oriented almost exclusively through the Orozco room. In addition to the museum's programming, the development office and alumni affairs contract tours with faculty for their purposes. Professors from surrounding colleges and universities regularly bring their students to the mural. These tours are not counted in the museum's statistics.

107 See the Digital Orozco website, which was created in 2012, and see the Hood

Museum's website dedicated to the mural, http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/explore/news/jose-clemente-orozco-epic-american-civilization.

108 As with the statistics cited above, those for curricular use have only been tabulated since 2010. However, in that time the number of tours the museum has coordinated for Dartmouth courses ranges from about two to nine annually, serving between 29 to 140 students in any given year. These numbers are low, as many of the curricular uses of the mural are managed by professors rather than museum staff. I, for example, integrate the mural into nearly all of my courses, as do many of my colleagues in the Art History Department and in other fields such as anthropology, theater, women's, gender, and sexuality studies, Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean studies, English, comparative literature, studio art, history, and Spanish and Portuguese, to name only a few.

109 Correspondence between Artemas Packard and José Clemente Orozco between March and April 1934, Box DL 34 (2) in folder 13, "Orozco Murals, 1934–35" file, Rauner Rare Book Room, Dartmouth College.

110 Orozco, *José Clemente Orozco*; José Clemente Orozco, "Orozco 'Explains,'" *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 7, no. 4 (1940): 2–11; José Clemente Orozco, "The Orozco Frescoes at Dartmouth," in *The Orozco Frescoes at Dartmouth*, edited by Albert I. Dickerson (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, 1948); and José Clemente Orozco, "New World, New Races, and New Art," in *¡Orozco! 1883–1949* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 46.

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113 Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, translated by Rhiannon Noel Welch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 100–111.

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115 Peter Osborn and Mathew Charles, "Walter Benjamin," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, accessed on May 26, 2013, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/benjamin/.

116 García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad*.

Chapter 1: Orozco's Melancholy Dialectics

Epigraph: Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 34.

Walter Benjamin, "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," in *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 466.

1 *Lamadito* was Orozco's derogatory term for his early paintings. According to one of his Dartmouth assistants: "*Lamido* is what a dog does when he licks his wounds. 'Lamidito,' applied to painting, means that the artist goes over