

Book Review

Orozco's American Epic: Myth, History, and the Melancholy of Race

MARY K. COFFEY

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Mary K. Coffey's *Orozco's American Epic: Myth, History, and the Melancholy of Race* challenges understandings of linear time, interpreting José Clemente Orozco's Dartmouth cycle from "the space of the crisis, where the 'Modern Industrial Man' reclines with his book" (37). This opens the space for her reading of Orozco's work through the lens of Walter Benjamin's "melancholy dialectics," her focus on the "Modern Industrial Man" implicating readers in Orozco's critique of history. In working through how Orozco implicated his viewers, Coffey's investigation of myth and redemption likewise implicates her readers. As Benjamin and Orozco did, Coffey demands we see "the concerns of an oppressed past as our own" (114).

Coffey's work is particularly innovative in that she distances Orozco's method from his contemporaries Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as it is easy to assume they are motivated by similar political goals. Rivera's and Siqueiros' work is characterized by the translation of tangible history into pure discourse, and an attempt to manifest Marx's material dialectics, respectively. Orozco, however, depicted his ideas as visual constellations, using the excessiveness of images to address the mutability of our past. Orozco's work therefore exemplifies the Benjaminian constellation rather than the traditional dialectics of his contemporaries.

Putting Benjamin's interpretation of historical materialism into practice, Orozco engaged with the continuum of history rather than observing it as a stagnant object of study. Coffey describes his *Epic of American Civilization* as a pure dialectical image that examines the past as dynamic, creating a space for the past to disrupt the present and for critical engagement with repressed events, particularly our complicity as Americans (on both sides of the border) in the violence that inaugurated South and North America. The mural and Coffey's interpretation suggests that we are responsible for reimagining both spaces "the way [they] would have to be imagined at any of its moments in accordance with the idea of redemption" (69).

Chapter two explores the role of myth and its relationship with history. Coffey examines the tensions produced at the moment of contact in 1519 between the eschatological time of Catholic conquistadores and the cyclical time of the Aztecs. Orozco's mural depicts the Quetzalcoatl myth deployed by both the Spanish and the Aztecs to legitimize their political power, illustrating the impossibility of reconciliation following the meeting of these two cultures. Coffey shows that these moments of conflict cannot be overcome by reconstituting a past Indigenous mythos, emphasized by a Quetzalcoatl who is incapable of bridging the gap between the "crisis of the now time" and the "has been" (61).

Addressing the ramifications of political engagement with an "oppressed past," chapter three pursues an interpretation of Orozco's *Epic* as a *Trauerspiel*, or "mourning play." This interpretation sets

Orozco apart from his contemporaries who, in the spirit of Marxist thought, depicted history as a triumphal march of historical progress. Situating modern America as a “traumatic inheritance rather than an enlightened project,” Orozco’s engagement with melancholy dialectics raises questions as to what sort of political actions one might take in the face of the mourning, sorrow, and misery felt in the modern era (122). Coffey’s interpretation serves to “[ground] a different historical materialism... an alternative formulation of messianic politics” (122).

Orozco’s messianism recalls Benjamin’s conception of “weak messianism,” wherein we become material historians by turning *toward* the theological to “win the philosophical game of history” (184). Perhaps to awaken this weak messianism, Coffey analyzes Orozco’s supplement to the *Epic*, “Modern Industrial Man.” The racial ambiguity of the figure (often interpreted as *mestizo*, Mexican, or black) expresses the mutability of the past, the shifting constellations of ideas, and the uniquely “American feeling” each reading suggests. For example, reading the figure as black speaks to “the role that antiblackness [plays in situating] the violent bordering of ‘Anglo-’ and ‘Hispano-America’ and their respective racial imaginaries” (41). This fluidity of “Modern Industrial Man” problematizes identification, disidentification, and relationality, making demands on us to imagine and enact social justice even as we might be unable to “remediate the violence of the past” (41).

The stakes of Coffey’s analysis are offered in two examples of responses to Orozco’s Dartmouth cycle: Walter Beach Humphrey (1939), and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2002). Painted in Hovey Grill in 1937, Humphrey imagined a homogenous group of Dartmouth Men as the hypothetical viewers of his mural. He caters to the Anglo-American male with images of Dartmouth’s founder, Eleazer Wheelock and noble male “Savages” participating in drunken debauchery alongside scenes reminiscent of pinup magazines featuring Native women (topless or completely nude) looking at books upside down or playing with Wheelock’s European garments. A critic of Orozco’s cycle, Humphrey’s mural may be a direct response to the *Epic*. The clash between Orozco’s anti-modern primitivism and Humphrey’s modern primitivism is brought into sharp focus by the panel above the grill’s hearth featuring Wheelock amidst a group of Anglo-Saxon men in redface (272).

Coffey offers the “audiotopia” of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra Collective (LPNC) in 2002 to contrast Humphrey’s stunted response to Orozco. Done against the backdrop of Orozco’s mural, the performance affirms the “melancholia of disidentification that the vestigial blackface of Orzco’s ‘Modern Industrial Man’ puts in play” (261). LPNC engages in the drama of self-construction by creating “ethno-cyborgs” that take on their own life on stage, encouraging the audience to do the same. The performance shifts the understanding of identity as self/other to an inventive process, “rooted in violent fantasy [which is] also potentially transformative,” suggesting we must rethink the structure of “the two Americas” (284).

Coffey’s interpretations are, admittedly, highly speculative. Regardless, the book is a must-read for anyone with an eye toward innovative artistic interpretation, critical theory, or the political stakes of (re)imagining liberation. Synthesizing art criticism, historical analysis, and philosophy, the attention to detail presents a wealth of information that can prove difficult. This is to Coffey’s credit, as her engagement with Benjamin anticipates her rejection of linear narrative form. While initially it seems she only analyzes Orozco’s visual constellations, her writing constructs constellations that offer readers varied modes of engagement with the text. In disavowing Coffey’s interpretation, we find

ourselves trapped inside an immutable America. This fate manifests itself in the desire to “play Indian” reflected in Humphrey’s Dartmouth mural, removed in 2018 amidst protests. Only by becoming material historians ourselves can we create opportunities to decenter and reimagine “Man” and our national identities.

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