

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.