“Who’s at Home in Missouri?: The Radical Visualization of Race in Thomas Hart Benton’s The Social History of Missouri in the Missouri State Capitol”

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In 1936 Missouri painter Thomas Hart Benton decorated the House Lounge of the Missouri Capitol with The Social History of Missouri, a monumental mural covering three walls of the room. This paper considers how Benton’s mural differs from the mural cycle in the capitol rotunda created shortly after Missouri’s current capitol was built (ca. 1917-1924). The rotunda murals effectively ignore slavery and race as significant aspects of the state’s heritage, while Benton’s mural argues that race has played a significant role in Missouri’s economic, social, and cultural history. By studying the early reception of Benton’s mural, together with contemporary writings by black cultural scholar, Alain Locke, I argue that the controversy that ensued at the unveiling of The Social History of Missouri was grounded in the artist’s radical re-visioning of Missouri’s history. In today’s age of Ferguson and Mizzou’s “Concerned Students 1950,” the mixed messages of the various murals in Missouri’s state capitol remain relevant, reflecting the schizophrenic nature of a state not quite “at home” with itself.

So what is the story behind the images Missourians see as they gather in the capitol to participate in state government; to celebrate, protest, commemorate, and contemplate their identity as Missourians? Although Missouri takes its name from an indigenous people who occupied the area until the middle of the nineteenth century, the territorial and state governments of Missouri displaced almost all the state’s indigenous peoples by the middle of the nineteenth century. Colonization by France, Spain, England and the United States brought new cultures to the region in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These colonial peoples introduced African slavery into the territory in the eighteenth century. When Missouri applied for statehood in 1819, it already had a large population of enslaved people. After much debate, the so-called “Missouri Compromise” simultaneously introduced Missouri into the Union as a slave state, and Maine as a free state. Missouri thus was founded on ideals that devalued non-whites within its borders.

In 1913 Missouri’s antebellum capitol building burned to the ground and the state prepared to rebuild its architectural seat of government. A team of commissioners led my University of Missouri Art History professor, John Pickard, devised a program consisting of over fifty paintings by more than a dozen artists to represent the history and values of Missouri as understood by these white power brokers in the late 1910s.The most prominent and prestigious location for murals in the new building was the multi-story rotunda. The commission to decorate this space with images celebrating Missouri’s founding values and history was given to the British painter Frank Brangwyn. This space continues to be the prime location in the capitol where Missourians gather for celebrations and protests. To understand the radical nature of the mural Thomas

Hart Benton painted just over a decade later, in is instructive to compare Benton's mural with Brangwyn's. In the rotunda, Brangwyn contextualizes historical images with allegorical scenes celebrating the values and resources of Missouri. Starting with the uppermost painting that fills the dome, Brangwyn painted allegorical figures representing Commerce, Science, Education and Agriculture. Each personification is accompanied by two assisting children, for a total of 12 figures. All have white European features, suggesting that whiteness is the norm.

Moving down into the rotunda, Brangwyn's grand pendentives occupy a large open space of the rotunda's second floor. These monumental murals provide perceived turning points in the history of modern Missouri as a Euro-American State. The first pendentive, Historic Landing, represents the first contact between white explorers and Native Americans. Four foregrounded Indians prepare to confront white explorers in the background.

In the second pendentive, The Pioneers, early settlers trade with the natives. Now three of the 4 foreground figures are white. In the third pendentive, The Homemakers introduces white female figures into the composition, signaling the growing importance of women and families in sustaining the new colonies during the age of settlement. Seven white people occupy the foreground, together with one Indian. The fourth and final pendentive, The Builders, represents modern Missouri of the 1910 and early 20ss with growing cities and trade. White workers are foregrounded, although two marginalized black workers appear in the background.

Finally Brangwyn decorated the under dome on the 1st floor with allegorical figures. Personifications of Education, Art, Agriculture and Science alternate with symbolic scenes celebrating Missouri's resources. 100% of the figures are white. This dominant whiteness thus becomes a visual manifestation of the white privilege and systemic racism. In part because Thomas Hart Benton was given more freedom to determine the program, the Social History of Missouri presents a more subversive vision of the state's history than Brangwyn's mural. Benton organized the program into three "chapters," each occupying a wall that represents an historical epic. Like a William Faulkner or James Joyce text, Benton's narrative is fractured, multi-voiced and incomplete. Disparate actions, some out of order chronologically illustrate snippets of stories without beginnings or resolutions. This Faulknarian vision of history challenges positivistic notions of unity, as scenes overlap in stacked planes and sometimes seem to fall into the viewer's space.

Instead of framing historical scenes with Brangwynesque allegories, Benton's schematic systems recalls Medieval and Renaissance murals and altarpieces. Scenes isolated in lower predellas depict events that epitomize or form a foundation for the framed scenes in the upper part of the composition. For example, on Benton's introductory wall, the artist represents the early colonial history of Missouri. His imagery resembles that of Brangwyn's pendentives with Indians and traders, homesteaders and builders. The predellas, however, introduce less comfortable aspects of Missouri's history into the

program, such as slavery, violence, and intolerance. Enslaved men work under the lash, and Mormon's are violently expelled from Missouri, in part because of their opposition to slavery. The scenes metaphorically underpin Missouri's colonial history, reminding viewers of the role race and violence played in the state's foundation. Hovering above the narrative action of the colonial wall, Mark Twain's mythic characters Huck and Jim serve as emblematic personifications of Missouri's colonial population. Jim stands like a Greek god over Huck, offering the boy a fish, a creature with interesting Christian and sacrificial implications. Benton's imagery suggests that Twain's story of an enslaved man's journey to freedom figuratively embodies the social, economic, and cultural history of antebellum Missouri. Set at night, this "Missouri mythology" as Benton called it, takes place during" dreamtime," that liminal psychic space between memory, illusion, and imagination. Its location in the room overshadowing the door leading to the office of the state's most powerful legislator: the Speaker of the House, privilege this image over all others, reinforcing the idea that race and the legacy of slavery are foundational issues that continue to shape the socio-political lives of Missourians.

Mythic night-time scenes occupy the spaces over all the entrances and exits into the room, and "framing figures" around these doors mediate between the framed myths and the continuous, if fractured, narrative space of the mural. Benton's doorway figures are descendants of architectural caryatid and atlas figures. As beautiful male bodies mediating between illusionary spaces, they call to mind the idealized nudes or ignudi of Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling. As Benton's doorway figures activate the space between image and viewer, their ideal form embodies Benton's own "Genesis" story for Missouri. On the wall representing the history of colonial Missouri, two pairs of male figures flank the Speaker's door. A white trader stands over an Indian, trading whisky for furs, and a white man works with a black man to build Missouri. The superior positions of the white figures reflect historical power relationships, yet in the "dreamtime image," it is Jim who towers over Huck.

In the next "chapter" or Benton's mural, the artist pictures the development of political and socio-economic institutions in Missouri during the State's first hundred years. We see a campaign rally and a courtroom, as well as scenes picturing agriculture, logging, mining, and homemaking. The predellas depict interstate communication and commerce with images of the Pony Express, and a Steamboat. The "dreamtime" image above the door represents Jesse James, a former Confederate guerilla who continued to terrorize Missouri as a train and bank robber during Reconstruction. James became a folk hero to those who felt disenfranchised by the poet bellum economy, and the social politics of emancipation that followed the Civil War. James came to epitomize an anti-government frontier mentality that continues to be a powerful force in Missouri and the nation. Benton exploits this myth, but also shows Jesse James' train robbery as disrupting the robust interstate commerce the steam train had come to represent. This is significant since communication, mobility and commerce are celebrated in the predellas of this section.

As symbol of white male independence, rage, and backlash, Jesse James overshadows the "whitest" section of the mural. The scarcity of black figures in the post Civil War section of the mural may reflect Benton's conscious or unconscious awareness that many African Americans migrated from Missouri in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries. This migration was felt most profoundly in rural areas. The two doorway guardians are male farmers. One ploughs a field with his back to Jesse, while the other pitches hay into Jesse's space---metaphorically providing "fuel" for the Jesse James mythology.

The last chapter of Benton's mural pictures urban Missouri in the mid-1930s. Here Missouri's African American population was on the rise, making up close to 40 percent of the populace in some areas. The narratives depict the urban vibrancy of St. Louis and Kansas City. Female office workers, businessmen, chemists and factory laborers vie for space along the wall. In the predellas, Benton pictures African Americans musicians entertaining a white audience while an impoverished black woman gleans coal in a rail yard.

In the dreamscape above the door, Frankie, a wronged African American woman, shoots Johnny, her boyfriend who "did her wrong". This mythic tale of domestic violence came out of St. Louis' black community. In 1899 Frankie Palmer, shot her abusive lover Allen "Albert" Britt, and was tried for murder. The jury determined that the shooting was an act of self-defense. At the time of the trial, black songwriter Bill Dooley composed a song chronicling the tale, originally called Frankie and Albert. The tune was copyrighted by the white composer, Hughie Cullen in 1905. By showing Frankie's revenge as a modern Missouri mythology, Benton reflects the culture of sexual division and violence in Missouri's urban communities, but it also celebrates the vibrant jazz, blues and ragtime culture of Missouri, suggesting that black artists had taken the lead in the creation of cultural mythology.

In the doorway below "Frankie and Johnny," a white laborer in a St. Louis brewery pauses for a drink while a black stockyard worker in a Kansas prepares to slaughter a cow. The imagery suggests European and African Americans have an equal share in Missouri's urban workforce.

In summary, Brangwyn's rotunda murals depict a vision of Missouri's social history framed by allegorical murals. No images represent violence or the realities of slavery, and less than 3% of the figures are black. The few black people pictured are marginalized, and 100% of the idealized allegorical figures are white.

In contrast, race, slavery and violence are depicted as fundamental forces in Benton's mural. Of the 96 primary figures, 17% are black, and violence and slavery are major themes. When Benton's mural was unveiled it was initially criticized by many politicians and members of the press. The imagery prompted one reporter to ask the artist if he were proud of his state, and a few outraged legislators threatened to have the painting white washed. Benton painted a Missouri that didn't feel like home to many white

Missourians. A reporter for the Jefferson City Daily Capitol wrote: "We do not admire the mural in the House lounge . . . it does not in our judgment fairly represent the social life of Missouri." The Kansas City Star claimed that "Leading citizens" were complaining that the mural did not show "the valiant, sturdy men who were concerned in the making of Missouri;" and the Columbia Daily Tribune announced that Benton's mural exhibited "cruelty to the citizens of the state [and is] neither truth nor art..."

Benton's assistant on the mural, Lawrence Adams, recognized the racial anxiety that the mural aroused in the white establishment, telling a reporter for the Columbia Missourian, "The only thing that's causing all this row over the painting is the fact that Benton has broken with tradition and really said something . . . . Who can deny the existence of slavery in Missouri?"

In the public space of the capitol, "the people's house," images seep into the subconscious and affect viewers' understanding of their value in the culture. The emphasis on the African American experience in Benton's mural challenged accepted notions of white dominance and privilege. For white audiences used to seeing a history that reinforced notions of white supremacy by erasing and marginalizing black lives. More scholarship is needed to determine exactly what black audiences thought of Benton's mural in the 1930s. We can, however look at contemporary writings on Benton by the black cultural historian, Alain Locke. In his 1936 book, Negro Art Past and Present, Locke wrote:

> "[Benton's work] has a revolutionary racial significance in that the Negro appears as an integral part of American activity, with full justice as to his share and relative position."

Locke went on to marvel at Benton's willingness to confront the violent realities of slavery in an age when many white Americans either ignored or sanitized the institution's role in American history. Locke specifically praised Benton's Slaves panel from his American History Epic:

> "In 1925 Benton did a startling mural in oil entitled The Slaves that for all its broad sculpture-like treatment, says the vital things about slavery in a way never painted before. The horror, cruelty, exploitation and bigotry of it are there almost as though blood, pain, shrieks and curses were in the canvas."

Though Locke is describing an earlier mural, his critique is applicable to Benton's predella panel in The Social History of Missouri.

Benton was aware of Locke and owned a copy of Negro Art: Past and Present, which still stands on his bedroom bookshelf at the Benton Home and Studio Historic Site in Kansas City. In my study of the mixed messages communicated by the state-sanctioned art of Missouri's capitol, it seems fitting to close by quoting Locke's personal inscription to Benton on the title page:

> "To Thomas Benton, in deep appreciation of his sense of the artistic values of Negro Life. Alain Locke, 1937"

On December 10, 1820, shortly before Missouri became a state, the territorial assembly passed a Resolution concerning the extinguishment of the Indian Title to Lands within Missouri's borders. This law also asked that the U.S. Congress to dismiss all Indian land claims in the Missouri territory. This bill sanctioning Indian removal requested that Congress dismiss all Indian claims to land within Missouri, Congress ignored the request, but the resolution reflects the anti-Indian attitudes of Missouri's early lawmakers. See Territory of Louisiana-Missouri, The Territorial Papers of the United States, vol. 15 1815-1821, compiled and edited by Clarence Edwin Carter (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 195), 682, 706.

For bibliography and an annotated overview of the issues surrounding Indian removal in Missouri, see Billy J. Mcmahon, "Humane and Considerate Attention: Indian Removal from Missouri, 1803-1838", MA Thesis, Northwest Missouri State University, 2013. The Otoe Missouri were removed to the Big Blue Reservation in the South-East region of the modern state of Nebraska in 1855. In 1881 they were relocated to the Red Rocks area of modern Oklahoma where the nation is situated today.

For information related to the expulsion of Mormons from Missouri, see William G. Hartley, "Missouri's 1838 Extermination Order and the Mormons' Forced Removal to Illinois," Mormon Historical Studies vol. 2, no. 1 (2001): 5–27 and John P. Greene, Facts Relative to the Expulsion of the Mormons or Latter Day Saints, from the State of Missouri, under the "Exterminating Order" (Cincinnati, Ohio: R. P. Brooks), 1839.

The song was inspired in part by the October, 15, 1899 murder of Allen "Albert" Britt by Frankie Palmer. Palmer claimed she acted in self defense and was acquitted. Scholars believe the original song, Frankie and Albert, was originally composed by the black St. Louis songwriter, Bill Dooley, in 1899, but that it was first copyrighted by the Hughie Cannon in 1905.

For the history behind the song Frankie and Johnny see Cecil Brown, "Frankie and Albert/Johnny". In Jessie Carney Smith, Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture vol. 1 (ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, California, 2011), 542-546.