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“Paradox of Want amid Plenty”: Aesthetics of New Deal Food Rights Performances

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## Abstract

### **“Paradox of Want amid Plenty”: Aesthetics of New Deal Food Rights Performances**

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What can the theatrical use of food accomplish in performances which assert cultural, legal, or moral rights to food production and consumption in a food insecure society? Case studies comprising the USDA’s 1933-34 World’s Fair exhibits, the May 1933 Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool protest, the 1936 Federal Theatre Project living newspaper *Triple-A Plowed Under*, and the 1939 Missouri Bootheel sharecroppers’ demonstration illustrate foods’ potency in disparate performance genres and the experiential difference of real or mimetic hunger, food destruction, and plenty for spectators. The “paradox of want amid plenty,” a Great Depression-era colloquialism that referred to US citizens’ perception of a contradiction between the country’s visible food supply and pervasive hunger, is both the context and rhetoric framing these performances and their responses to the Agricultural Adjustment Acts as an economic program with moral implications. This dissertation theorizes that food use and its marked absence in food rights performances can stimulate spectators’ sense of physical investment in moral, economic, and political debates.

The national debate about US citizens’ mutual obligations and the federal government’s responsibility to all citizens restructures studies of New Deal-era culture, theatre, and politics. Through composite descriptions of the performances, this study shows how performative elements of non-theatrical events (protests and exhibition) and mimetic representation of such incidents (living newspaper drama) revealed the politics of food rights to spectators. Tracy C. Davis’s method of historical sign restoration is applied to the case studies in combination with anthropological theories regarding culturally constructed meanings of food and

phenomenologically-based theories of food as a communication medium. This approach generates hypotheses about reception and spectatorship, demonstrating the ways in which performances prompted spectators' visceral engagement. Food served as these performances' touchstone; spectators' first-hand, commonsense, bodily knowledge about the foods used (or the absence of necessary foods) made the ultimate effects of socio-economic exclusion undeniable and brought consumer-producer-government interdependence to the fore. Exploring dysfunction in the US food system during the New Deal era pinpoints the perceived conflicts between government obligations, citizens' cultural rights, and capitalist imperatives toward the fundamental human right to eat.

## Acknowledgements

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### **List of Frequently Used Abbreviations**

Agricultural Adjustment Act: AAA

Farm Security Administration: FSA

Federal Theatre Project: FTP

National Youth Administration: NYA

Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: STFU

United States Department of Agriculture: USDA

## **List of Repository, Record Group or Collection, and Subgroup Abbreviations**

In initial citations parentheses enclose abbreviation symbols used in subsequent citations.

Abbreviation symbols for file units and individual record items appear in citations and are not listed below.

Fenwick Library, Special Collections and Archives Department, George Mason University,  
Fairfax, VA: GMU

Federal Theatre Project Collection: FTPC

Oral History New Deal Culture: OHNDC

Theatre of the Thirties: TOT

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York: FDR

President's Office File 1650: POF 1650

Library of Congress, Washington D.C.: LOC

Federal Theatre Collection: FTC

Production Records, 1934-43: PR, 1934-43

Technical Studies File, 1935-39: TSF, 1935-1939

US Office of War Information, Overseas Picture Division Washington Sections, FSA-  
OWI Written Records, 1935-1946: FSA-OWI, 1935-1946

Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information, American Memory Project:  
AMP

National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland: NACP

Records of the Extension Services, 1888-1996: RG 33

General Records of the Department of Justice Central Files and Related Records, 1790-  
1989: RG 60



NACP cont.

Records of the Farmers Home Administration, 1918-1975: RG 96

Project Records, 1935-1940: PR, 1935-1940

Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1839-1981: RG 16

General Correspondence of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1906-70:

General Correspondence, 1906-70

[Office of Information] Records Relating to Exhibitions and Expositions, 1889-

1949: OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949

Photographic Prints of USDA Exhibits and Other Exhibits, 1900-1953: RG 16-

EX-51 and RG 16-EX-52

Work Projects Administration Records of the Federal Theatre Project: RG 69

Federal Theatre Project Central Files: RG 69-TC

Federal Theatre Project State Files: RG 69-TS

Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotion Materials, 1935-39: Vassar, 1935-

39

Northwestern University Library, Evanston, Illinois: NU

Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers, 1934-1970 (NC: Microfilming Corporation of

America, 1971) film 17994. Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers, 1934-1970: STFU

Richard J. Daley Library, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois-

Chicago, Illinois: UIC.

Century of Progress Collection: CPC

University of California Library, Berkeley, CA: UC

Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin: WHS-Madison and WHS-Milwaukee

Harry Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960: Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960

Ralph M. Immell Papers, 1908-1960: Immell Papers, 1908-1960

William Theodore Evjue Papers, 1880-1969: Evjue Papers, 1880-1969

Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool Records, 1925-1943: WCMPR, 1925-1943

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## Chapter 1: Theorizing Food Rights Performances in the New Deal Era

The song, “Beans, Bacon, and Gravy,” both laments the inaccessibility of pleasurable and necessary foods and thanks the Lord for what is still available. Written sometime around 1932, following Hoover’s failed 1928 promise to put a “chicken in every pot” and before Roosevelt’s election, the song employs the vernacular term “Hooverized,” slang for the substitution of a lesser item for a desired one:

We have Hooverized on butter,  
 For milk we’ve only water,  
 And I haven’t seen a steak in many a day;  
 As for pies, cakes, and jellies,  
 We substitute sow-bellies,  
 For which we work the county road each day.<sup>1</sup>

“Hooverization” simultaneously expressed the federal government’s obligation and the Hoover administration’s failure to ensure the welfare of US consumers. “For milk we’ve only water” also reveals the inevitable failure of mimesis, which in this case was felt bodily. Water’s smooth liquidity may mimic milk and it may fill the belly, yet water’s thinness, its transparency, and its known absence of nutritional value, i.e. water’s fundamental inability to *be* milk, leaves the consumer dissatisfied, physically unfulfilled.

My project begins when Franklin D. Roosevelt replaced Hoover in 1933 and offered the promise of a New Deal to end years of such substitutions. I consider performances that occurred between May 1933 and January 1939, during a period when widespread vulnerability to

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<sup>1</sup> “Beans, Bacon and Gravy,” *The New Deal: A Documentary History*, ed. William E. Leuchtenburg (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1968) 15.

“livelihood insecurity”<sup>2</sup> existed in the United States. I explore the ways in which groups of US citizens’ and the federal government’s use of food objects and bodies marked by food’s absence asserted the government’s obligation to ensure citizens’ welfare. The performances of rights to food in the May 1933 Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool protest, the Department of Agriculture exhibits at the 1933-34 World’s Fair, the Federal Theatre Project’s (FTP) 1936 production *Triple-A Plowed Under*, and the 1939 Missouri Bootheel sharecroppers’ demonstration offer unique examples for understanding attempts by differently-invested groups to uphold the human right to food and still accommodate capitalism. I argue that by using food objects and highlighting food’s absence these performances stimulated a sense of mutual responsibility for “food security.”<sup>3</sup>

General belief in each food object’s ontological uniqueness and distinct contribution to daily life suggests the potency of its use in performance. Playwright Sarah Woods, whose play *Cake* involves onstage baking of a chocolate cake, cautions fellow dramatists about incorporating food and cooking into drama: ““On stage, activities like making food [and] eating [...] become voyeuristic and make us [the audience] think about ourselves. As a writer you’ve

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<sup>2</sup> Johan Pottier defines “livelihood security” as the “key determinants in food access [food security/stable access and supply]: employment and wage rates, food prices, land tenure” in *Anthropology of Food: The Social Dynamic of Food Security* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996) 26.

<sup>3</sup> I am using this term as Pottier defines it. In 2006, the USDA decided to no longer use the term “hunger,” and instead use the term “food security” with different qualifiers to express the “conditions in the household.” The categories include: “high food security,” “marginal food security,” “low food security,” and “very low food security.” “Very low food security” is defined as: “reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake,” in “Food Security in the United States: Hunger and Food Security,” USDA Economic Research Service, 5 December 2006 <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/FoodSecurity/labels.htm>>. Elizabeth Williamson reported that the Committee on National Statistics of the National Academies recommended the change in labeling because “[hunger] should refer to a potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation,” in “Some Americans Lack Food, but USDA Won’t Call Them Hungry,” *The Washington Post* 16 November 2006, 5 December 2006 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/15/AR2006111501621.htm>>.

got to allow for people's reactions.”<sup>4</sup> Woods expresses the tension between the story and the prop, the potential rupture of an audience's willing suspension of disbelief by an all-too-real aspect of the *mise-en-scène*. The implications of this can be relatively innocuous and even pleasurable in fictional plays performed in cultures experiencing stable access to food. However, when a performance occurs in a society experiencing substantial food insecurity, deals directly with the crisis, and the performance itself already thwarts easy categorization as “real” or “mimetic,” food use in that performance can become morally vexed. This dissertation engages with the effects of blurring boundaries between the symbolic and the “real” when food is used in such performances. I investigate what performances gained from utilizing food to assert rights to food production, regulation, and consumption at a time when hunger and supply were visibly concomitant.

In this introduction, I offer a rationale for choosing to study the use of food in performance. I summarize the Agricultural Adjustment Acts (1933, 1936, and 1938) as they impact each case study and elaborate the “paradox of want amid plenty,” the popular phrase that referred to agricultural surpluses and consumer deprivation,<sup>5</sup> as both the context and rhetoric of the performances. I also define “food rights performance” and explicate the methodological framework that structures my analysis. Finally, I provide an outline of each subsequent chapter and the major theories informing my analysis of each case study.

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Hemming, “A Sure Recipe for Staging Successful Drama,” *Financial Times* 6 January 2004, Arts: 15.

<sup>5</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986) xii.

## Rationale for Study

Scholarship on food in performance is a burgeoning area of study; two special issues of performance journals have been devoted to the subject, a handful of edited books have been published which include performance and theatre as part of interdisciplinary and cultural studies projects on food, and scholars include examination of food use as part of full-length literary criticisms or performance analyses.<sup>6</sup> *Text and Performance Quarterly*'s fall 2006 call for papers concerning food in performance typifies current scholarly concern with the theatrical aspects of food events and use of food as an expression of social relations and hierarchy: "We are particularly interested in essays that consider the performative and aesthetic aspects of food that also incorporate the 'mixings' of race, class, power, sex, and sexuality with politics, history, and contemporary performance culture. Such topics could include but are not limited to food as narrative, the performance of cooking, eating as ritual, and consumption and sex."<sup>7</sup> No doubt,

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<sup>6</sup> Representative examples of special topics issues and edited collections include: Ric Allsopp, Richard Gough, and Claire MacDonald, eds., *On Cooking*, spec. issue of *Performance Research* 4.1 (1999); Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz, eds., *Eating Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen, eds., *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter 2003); Sherrie A. Inness, ed., *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). Stanton B. Garner Jr. has examined food use in performance in *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Numerous scholars study food's use in feminist performance art, and representative articles include: Carrie Sandahl, "Ahhhh Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femaleness in Performance," *Theatre Topics* 9.1 (1999): 11-30; Jennie Klein, "Feeding the Body: The Work of Barbara Smith," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21.1 (1999): 24-35; Marcy J. Epstein, "Consuming Performances: Eating Acts and Feminist Embodiment," *The Drama Review* 40.4 (Winter 1996): 20-36; Elaine Aston, "'Transforming Women's Lives: Bobby Baker's Performance of 'Daily Life,'" *New Theatre Quarterly* 16.1.1 (February 2000): 17-25; Lucy Baldwyn, "Blending In: The Immaterial Art of Bobby Baker's Culinary Events," *The Drama Review* 40.4 (Winter 1996): 37-56. Some genre and media studies include: Günter Berghaus, "The Futurist Banquet: Nouvelle Cuisine or Performance Art?," *New Theatre Quarterly* 17.1.65 (February 2001): 3-17; Pauline Adema, "Vicarious Consumption: Food, Television and the Ambiguity of Modernity," *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 23.3 (2000): 113-23; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Edible Art," *Artforum* (November 1989): 20-3.

<sup>7</sup> Myron Beasley, Kristin Langellier, and Laura Lindenfeld, Call for Papers for *Food and Performance, Food as Performance* spec. issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly*, email to the author, 11 October 2006. In December 2004, a call for papers for an edited collection, *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food and Meaning*, stated: "We seek submissions for an interdisciplinary collection devoted to the examination of how representations (literary, filmic, artistic, etc.) of food and foodways serve as vehicles for the transmission of ideologies about gender, sex,



these strains of analysis are significant. They stem from the anthropology-derived work of performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who has studied food's function in Jewish communities and elaborated a theory of food as a "medium" of performance. This theory develops food events' analogies with performance – broadly construed as "to do," "to behave," and "to show" – and asserts that food is "already performative and theatrical."<sup>8</sup> Theatre and performance scholarship has taken a phenomenological approach in examining foods' unwieldiness onstage and, importantly, how food's stimulation of visceral reactions functions as a potent vehicle through which audiences engage with issues such as gender- and race-based hierarchy and nationhood. For instance, film scholar Jane Ferry combines the two approaches in her analysis: "What makes food's symbolic message so powerful is that food and eating carry a bivocal structure. On the one hand, food is a biological necessity for survival. On the other hand, it is a symbolic vehicle of communication."<sup>9</sup> My work draws on these studies. However, I not only consider foods' symbolic capacities in terms of social relations, I analyze how belief in the thing itself – what food means to everyday life as a fundamental necessity and important pleasure – can facilitate consumers' critical engagement with control over and rights to food. For instance, milk symbolizes purity, and meat is associated with masculinity, however both were naturalized as essential to biological well-being in the 1930s, and because of this were perceived as the real thing, not just symbols of something else. I examine performances where food – ownership of it, control of it, or the right to consume it – is each performance's impetus

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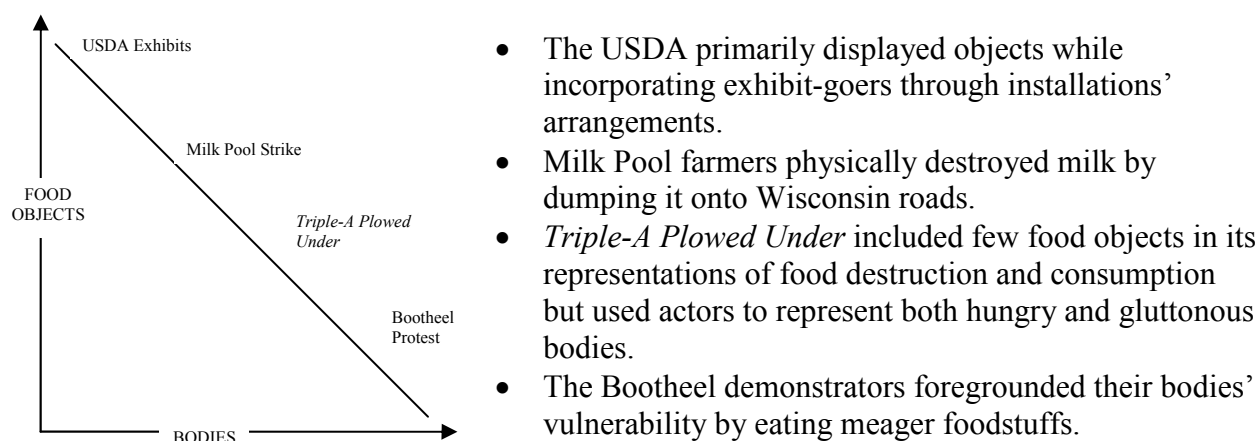
race, class, age, ethnicity, disability, and a host of other identity constructs," Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato, email to the author, 27 December 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium," *On Cooking*, spec. issue of *Performance Research* 4.1 (1999): 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Ferry, *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) 79.

and central conflict. This approach introduces the moral implications of using (and using up) food in performance as a factor that can structure audience perception.

My case studies operate along interrelated continua [see fig. 1.1]. Each performance highlights human performers and food objects to a greater or lesser extent:



**Figure 1.1. New Deal food rights performances' use of food and actors.**

The performances also overlap in terms of genre: the USDA's exhibits and the Bootheel demonstration employ museum conventions; the Bootheel demonstration and the Milk Pool strikes are culturally understood as protests; the USDA's exhibits and *Triple-A Plowed Under* are mimetic events. Studying the aesthetics of an array of disparate performances concerned with a predominating social crisis enables inquiry into why different groups (regardless of power, whether engaged in resistance or acting from a position of authority), utilize quotidian tools to legitimate claims. Consideration of multiple performance genres enables examination of spectators' experiential difference of real and mimetic hunger, food destruction, and plenty, as well as investigation into what the use of food objects suggests about US citizens' ways of knowing and communicating their moral order. Additionally, the multiple constituencies (property-owning farmers, the federal government, sharecroppers, and WPA theatre

practitioners) represented in this study illuminate citizens' and the state's felt obligations to one another and the difficulties in negotiating material mutuality.

My inclusion of the Federal Theatre Project's *Triple-A Plowed Under* in this cross-genre project offers a new paradigm for the study of this WPA program. Foundational studies of the FTP generally concentrate on innovations in dramatic literature and stage techniques, or the problems with US government-sponsored theatre. Additionally, the two existing studies which deal directly with *Triple-A Plowed Under* do not consider the text's concern with the Agricultural Adjustment Act.<sup>10</sup> I examine the dramaturgy of *Triple-A Plowed Under* as engaged in the national debate over food rights and as an attempt at a democratic consideration of the national situation. I show how its representation of the contemporary moment situated it as an act of political intervention, not *merely* theatre.

The 1933-34 Chicago World's Fair has received significant attention from scholars. Scholarship focuses on architectural innovations in fair buildings and design, imperialist agendas of nations' expositions, representations of race and actual race relations, bureaucratic constraints, and general histories. To my knowledge, no secondary study of the USDA's exhibits at the 1933-34 World's Fair exists. My examination of USDA-sponsored exhibits demonstrates how the New Deal government harnessed the spectacular potentials of the fair in an attempt to garner popular support of its agricultural program.

The Bootheel protest and the Milk Pool protest have been studied in the fields of regional, agricultural, and social history. Two short articles, published in 1951 and 1961, are the

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); John O'Connor, "The Drama of Farming: The Federal Theatre Living Newspapers on Agriculture," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* Vol.15 (1990): 325-58.

only significant investigations of the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool protest.<sup>11</sup> Numerous histories of the Missouri sharecroppers' roadside demonstration exist. Most notably, Louis Cantor's book *Prologue to the Protest Movement* is a comprehensive study of the sharecroppers' protest, and Nicholas Natanson's *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* offers a detailed account of Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographer Arthur Rothstein's documentation of the protest.<sup>12</sup> Historian Jarod Roll's dissertation chapter on this protest "explore[s] the roadside demonstration from the perspective of those in the roadside camp;" the dissertation is a study of Bootheel agricultural culture.<sup>13</sup> These histories offer invaluable foundations for my work. However, a performance-based study shows the significance of theatrical strategies for each group in gaining public or government support. And in the instance of the Bootheel demonstration, a performance-based study shows how detractors used explicit association of the sharecroppers with the theatrical as a strategy to discredit the protest.

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<sup>11</sup> William A. Hوجلund, "Wisconsin Dairy Farmers on Strike," *Agricultural History* 35.1 (1961): 24-34; Herbert Jacobs, "The Wisconsin Milk Strikes," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 35.1 (Autumn 1951): 30-35.

<sup>12</sup> Louis Cantor, *A Prologue to the Protest Movement: The Missouri Sharecropper Roadside Demonstration of 1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1969); Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). Other published studies of the Bootheel demonstration include: Lorenzo J. Greene, Gary R. Kremer, and Antonio F. Holland, eds. *Missouri's Black Heritage*, Rev. ed., (1980; Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1993); Arvarh E. Strickland, "The Plight of the People in the Sharecroppers' Demonstration in Southeast Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review* 81 (1987): 403-16. Erik Gellman and Jarod Roll examine the centrality of religion to Owen Whitfield's activism among Missouri's landless farmers in "Owen Whitfield and the Gospel of the Working Class in New Deal America, 1936-1946," *Journal of Southern History* 72.2 (May 2006): 303-348, Expanded Academic ASAP, Northwestern University, 15 March 2007 <<http://find.galegroup.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu>>.

<sup>13</sup> Jarod Roll, "Road to the Promised Land: Rural Rebellion in the New Cotton South, 1890-1945," diss., Northwestern University, 2006, 296.

## The Agricultural Adjustment Acts

My case studies span the New Deal era and each engage directly with the three Agricultural Adjustment Acts (AAA). The AAA was originally passed in 1933, ruled unconstitutional in 1936, replaced within two months of that same year by a similar program called the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act (SCDAA), and revived in 1938 as the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The legislation aimed to raise agricultural commodities' prices to parity with production cost plus profit. The government paid farmers a subsidy to remove acreage from cultivation; the USDA anticipated that decreased available commodities would increase demand, and in turn, increase the market price of agricultural products and farmers' purchasing power. This agricultural legislation was designed to work in concert with legislation intended to benefit industry. However, the acts failed to please several constituencies. Agricultural price improvement did not keep pace with the rising cost of industrial goods; consumers blamed the AAA for the rise in food costs; farmers feared that the voluntary basis of the program worked to the advantage of those not participating; and some citizens, both farmers and consumers alike, could not reconcile the reduction in agricultural output with the immediate needs of hungry people. Despite ongoing criticism of the adjustment programs, by 1939 78% of farms had AAA contracts and the legislation served as the basis of US farm policy into the late-twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

Agricultural historians have thoroughly documented the successes and shortcomings of the Agricultural Adjustment Acts in terms of the legislation's assistance to various agricultural

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<sup>14</sup> Michael W. Schuyler, "New Deal Farm Policy in the Middle West: A Retrospective View," *Journal of the West* 33.4 (1994): 52-63. Gary Libecap demonstrates that that AAA was the foundation of US agricultural policy until 1996 in "The Great Depression and the Regulating State: Federal Government Regulation of Agriculture, 1884-1970," *The Defining Moment: The Great Depression and the American Economy in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Michael D. Bordo, Claudia Goldin and Eugene N. White (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 181.

constituencies, applicability to various commodities, ability to actually raise farm prices, creation of agricultural dependency on government funding, expedition of capital investment and technological advancement on farms, and consolidation of farms. Some scholars elaborate the difficulty of making a definitive conclusion about the AAA, and even the New Deal itself, because of US engagement in World War II.<sup>15</sup> My project does not assess the merits or limitations of the Agricultural Adjustment Acts; rather it looks at how citizens and the federal government assessed this economic program in moral terms through performance. Each performance I consider contends with distinct aspects of the AAA, though there is significant overlap. The following is a brief sketch of the elements of this legislation with which the performances engaged.

A sizable minority of farmers immediately objected to the 1933 AAA on the grounds that the legislation did not ensure parity with production costs. Some also felt that the reduction of food production was absurd in light of the visible need.<sup>16</sup> The Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool protested immediately after passage of the AAA. Their milk dumping expressed dissatisfaction

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<sup>15</sup> In 1965, the journal *Agricultural History* featured several articles on the Agricultural Adjustment Act, including: Paul Abrahams, "Agricultural Adjustment During the New Deal Period, The New York Milk Industry: A Case Study," 39.2 (April 1965): 92-101; Henry C. Dethloff, "Missouri Farmers and the New Deal: A Case Study of Farm Policy Formulation on the Local Level," 39.3 (July 1965): 141-6; Van L. Perkins, "The AAA and the Politics of Agriculture: Agricultural Policy Formation in the Fall of 1933," 39.4 (October 1965): 220-9. Other assessments of the Agricultural Adjustment Act include: Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Vintage, 1969) 263-88; John Donald Black, *The Dairy Industry and the AAA* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1935); Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); Lynnita Aldridge Sommer, "Illinois Farmers in Revolt: The Corn Belt Liberty League," *Illinois Historical Journal* 88.4 (1995): 222-240.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Choate studies six farm organizations in the Middle West that opposed New Deal agricultural policy in *Disputed Ground: Farm Groups the Opposed the New Deal Agricultural Program* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2002). John Shover's history of the Farm Holiday Association, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, examines this radical farm union's protests against the Agricultural Adjustment Act. See also Theodore Saloutos's and John D. Hicks's definitive history, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1951).

with the federal government's failure to protect farmers' property rights because the AAA did not *guarantee* at least cost of production.

In June 1933, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration undertook an emergency program to prohibit a surplus cotton crop; it paid farmers to plow under one-quarter of cotton planted prior to the legislation's enactment.<sup>17</sup> In August 1933, the administration again employed agricultural commodity destruction to reduce the anticipated surplus pork that would be available in 1934. The federal government purchased 6 million hogs for slaughter (but not entirely for public distribution of pork) and paid corn farmers to plow under a portion of the corn crop, destined for use as hog feed. This decision created public ire. Roger Lambert describes a range of citizens' multifaceted negativity towards the measure:

People ranging from the naive and humanitarian to the lunatic fringe immediately assaulted the killing of little helpless pigs, the slaughter of 'expectant mothers,' and the floating of dead pigs down the rivers. The superstitious warned that such an unnatural act would bring down the wrath of a vengeful God upon a sinful nation. Others protested the attempt to achieve farm prosperity through starving the consumer into paying higher prices and the killing of sows at a time when many farmers were without sows to produce pork. One angry critic felt that anyone pushing such a scheme should be 'examined pronto for "bats in the belfry" and sentenced to slow starvation.'<sup>18</sup>

The USDA's 1933-34 World's Fair exhibits promoted the legislation's capacity to restore plenty (i.e. stable access to food) by restoring economic prosperity, while attempting to assuage

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<sup>17</sup> Poppendieck 109.

<sup>18</sup> Roger C. Lambert, "Slaughter of the Innocents: The Public Protests AAA Killing of Little Pigs," *The Midwest Quarterly* 14.3 (April 1973): 247-8.

citizens' concerns about the pig slaughter. In *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the images evoking crop and livestock destruction became a central factor in examining the dysfunction of the food system and federal attempts to fix the "paradox of want amid plenty."

Initially, a processing tax levied on processors and manufacturers was used to fund payments to farmers participating in the AAA reduction program. Many farmers believed that processors offered lower market prices for agricultural products in order to offset the cost of the tax.<sup>19</sup> Republican Senator Daniel O. Hastings expressed scorn for the processing tax:

Does anybody in America agree with the administration of the Agricultural Adjustment Act? [. . .] the worst of all this is found in the processing tax upon the food we eat and the clothes we wear, thus imposing a tax upon one class of persons for the benefit of another, a tax upon people in one territory for the benefit of people in another territory. And the significant thing about this is that the farmers for whom the benefits are intended are, because of its regimental characteristics, as much opposed to it as other people who bear the burdens.<sup>20</sup>

Senator Hastings's comments reflect the embattled state of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, particularly the complaint that agriculture benefited to urban populations' detriment. Hastings pinpoints the processing tax as a primary culprit in the undemocratic distribution of government benefits and citizen obligation. Initially, consumers blamed farmers for the rise in food costs, but following the Supreme Court's January 1936 decision declaring the processing tax (and thus the

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Choate's chapter, "National Farmers Process Tax Recovery Association," discusses 1935 Senate Hearings in which testimony was given regarding farmers' receipt of lower prices due to the processing tax.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel O. Hastings, "Battle of November," *Today II* (1934), *The New Deal: A Documentary History*, ed. William E. Leuchtenburg (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1968) 194.



1933 AAA) unconstitutional prices failed to drop. Processors, who had pointed to the processing tax as responsible for the rise in costs, were seen as culpable.<sup>21</sup>

*Triple-A Plowed Under* opened in the weeks after the 1936 AAA had been declared unconstitutional and legislators passed the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act as a replacement. Like the 1933 AAA, the 1936 SCDAAs removed acreage from cultivation in order to reduce agricultural output, but it used general tax revenues to fund farmer payments and emphasized conservation by paying farmers to plant soil regenerating crops on a portion of their land. As a whole, the play neither condemns nor lauds the AAA. However, it stages Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace's inflammatory statements against the Supreme Court's ordered return of monies from the processing tax portion of the AAA to processors and manufacturers. Manufacturers and processors had shown uninterrupted profits since the Depression's beginning. Wallace stated that this ruling enacted the "greatest legalized steal in American history!"<sup>22</sup> Wallace fought repayment of the processing tax through the end of the decade. By 1938, the USDA granted cotton, tobacco, and potato processors refunds, but Wallace continued to oppose refunds to hog processors because he felt they had received higher prices as a direct result of the AAA. In 1941, a bill to refund hog processors passed in the Senate but failed to make it out of committee in the House.<sup>23</sup>

The 1938 AAA continued conservation programs, but tried to guard against surpluses (increased fertility and good growing conditions produced a bumper crop in 1937) and natural

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<sup>21</sup> Saloutos and Hicks 506.

<sup>22</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.63; Triple-A Plowed Under Production Record NYC (T-A PR NYC); Production Title File, 1934-39 (PTF, 1934-39); Production Records, 1934-43 (PR, 1934-43); Federal Theatre Collection (FTC); Library of Congress, Washington DC (LOC).

<sup>23</sup> Choate 106-15.

food scarcity (droughts occurred in 1934 and 1936) by establishing crop storage programs.<sup>24</sup>

The 1938 cotton contracts also increased sharecroppers' and tenant farmers' share of federal payments. Missouri Bootheel sharecroppers asserted that this provided landowners with incentives to evict tenants and croppers and hire them back as day laborers. AAA subsidies were to be distributed to both the owners and the farm workers. The subsidy was meant to ease the immediate loss of income to farm owners, who were producing fewer crops, as well as tenants and croppers, whose reduction in work resulted in lost crop-share. Day laborers were excluded from the AAA. The legislation designated only those with a stake in the crop itself as recipients of subsidy payments. Rather than allocating the payment in accord with the AAA, farmer owners and landlords often evicted tenants and croppers, who were compelled economically to return to farms as day laborers. Though federal administrators attempted to safeguard against these abuses by legislating the withholding of payments to farm owners who participated in such actions, the local committees overseeing the AAA often consisted only of owners and landlords, rendering the croppers powerless to make official complaints.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, it was not the AAA alone that stimulated changes in cotton culture or agriculture in general. Increased mechanization during the decade reduced the number of people needed to work the land. Agricultural historian Pete Daniel notes that the more than 100,000 tractors, used for the first time in cotton farming during the 1930s, replaced between a half-

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<sup>24</sup> Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982) 255-6.

<sup>25</sup> Robin Kelley discusses the efforts of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union to obtain rights for tenant farmers and croppers in *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). Theodore Saloutos in *The American Farmer and the New Deal* describes the controversy regarding the evictions of tenants and croppers, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's efforts to secure tenant-owner agreements despite AAA acreage reduction, and the resulting administrative purge of those most avid about tenants' rights (99-122).

million and two million laborers.<sup>26</sup> At the time, the transition to large-scale “factory farms” and mechanization was acknowledged to create a paucity of farm employment for much of the season. A Farm Security Administration (FSA) study recognized seasonal variation in labor needs, “[Farms] operate on a factory basis, employing only a few tractor drivers for most of the year, but depending on large numbers of day laborers for a few months in the cotton-chopping and picking seasons. This kind of farming leaves a big surplus population in other seasons, which either must depend on local relief or must migrate somewhere else in search of work.”<sup>27</sup> Though the USDA embraced AAA’s part in helping to speed mechanization and create more profitable farms, the USDA skirted acknowledgement of the legislation’s negative effects on small farm owners and landless laborers. For instance, Secretary Wallace defended the AAA to Eleanor Roosevelt in light of the Missouri demonstration: “Any tendency implicit in the AAA programs to increase technological efficiency – and that at best would only accelerate a normal economic tendency – certainly has been fully offset by the increased income brought to farm people by the AAA.”<sup>28</sup>

### **The “Paradox” – Context and Rhetoric**

Theatre historian Bruce McConachie writes, “performances tend to be ‘condensational events’ in which certain primary metaphors, condensed from cultural-historical interaction,

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<sup>26</sup> Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 175.

<sup>27</sup> Farm Security Administration, “Southeast Missouri: A Laboratory for the Cotton South,” 30 December 1940, p.4; Supplementary Reference Files 1193-1197 (SRF 1193-1197); reel 17; Lot 12024; US Office of War Information, Overseas Picture Division Washington Sections, FSA-OWI Written Records, 1935-1946 (FSA-OWI, 1935-1946); LOC.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, to Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady, 7 June 1939 (Wallace to Eleanor Roosevelt); Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1906-70 (General Correspondence, 1906-70); Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1839-1981, Record Group 16 (RG16) ; National Archives Building, College Park, MD (NACP).

emerge as significant.”<sup>29</sup> McConachie is building on George Lakoff’s and Mark Johnson’s theory of “embodied realism” in which physical interaction with the environment creates basic metaphors through which human beings perceive non-physical elements (emotions, affiliations, etc.); the physical environment structures the way we experience intangible elements of life.<sup>30</sup> McConachie’s notion of “condensational events” is relevant to the ways in which the conception of the “paradox” recurs in the performances I consider, as is Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphor for understanding the naming of visible/known food supply and visible/known hunger as a “paradox.”

The saying “paradox of want amid plenty” alluded to the seeming contradiction between the country’s ample food supply and the fact that many thousands of Americans were hungry.<sup>31</sup> Janet Poppendieck, in her history of federal food programs during the New Deal, explains that the situation of surplus agricultural products and the inability of many citizens to obtain food “was not, in fact, a paradox; it was the normal predictable working of the economy rendered extreme by the Depression;” she demonstrates that its widespread effects caused “many to question the wisdom of an economic system that could permit people to go hungry in the midst of such abundance.”<sup>32</sup> However, knowledge of and outrage with the problems of capitalism did not inhibit conceptualization of the problem as *paradoxical*. This demonstrates that the physical experiences of hunger and abundance corroborated capitalist principles of supply and demand,

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce McConachie, “Doing Things with Image Schemas: The Cognitive Turn in Theatre Studies and the Problem of Experience for Historians,” *Theatre Journal* 53.4 (2001): 569-94, Project Muse, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 2 February 2006 <[http://muse.jhu.edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/journals/theatre\\_journal](http://muse.jhu.edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/journals/theatre_journal)> 10.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Lakoff and George Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>31</sup> Poppendieck xii.

<sup>32</sup> Poppendieck xiii, xv.

while nevertheless disregarding the capitalist imperative of purchasing power. It also indicates a belief that a fundamental human right to food exists, which also implies that the right exists regardless of a person's ability to participate economically as a consumer. Each performance I consider professes belief in the human right to food.

The phrase “paradox of want amid plenty” also condenses the relationship between farmer and consumer. It draws on the myth of the rural idyll, a supposed bastion of morality, community support and fertile landscape, which idealizes consumer-producer connectedness. In seeking to retain this, the conception of the “paradox” shows a struggle with the realities of food's commodification. Anthropologist Carole Counihan writes,

Unlike non-capitalist societies where food exchanges reduce social distance and solidify relationships [...] in our capitalist society, food is a commodity, an object whose exchange creates distance and differentiation. Through capitalist exchange [...] individuals are separated from and placed in antagonistic positions towards each other. Some have control over access to food; others do not. Hence food becomes a vehicle of power.”<sup>33</sup>

Uneasiness with these power dynamics is apparent in condemnation of the Agricultural Adjustment Acts' food reduction and destruction programs. The program was economically sound; it predicted consequential stimulation of agricultural prices, a rebounded benefit for industry through increased farmers' purchasing power, and resultant increased employment for urban workers. Nevertheless, many citizens felt that destroying food (and even reducing output) when people suffered hunger, and potentially increasing prices when consumers were already

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<sup>33</sup> Carole Counihan, “Food Rules in the United States: Individualism, Control and Hierarchy,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 65.2 (1992): 55.

struggling was unconscionable. For a significant number of farmers the AAA contradicted their moral obligation to produce. John Simpson, prominent leader and head of the Farmers Union, testified before the US Senate that “The farmers are not producing too much. We need all this. What we have overproduction of is empty stomachs and bare backs.”<sup>34</sup> For consumers, economic argumentation fell flat in the face of human need and visible available food supplies. Clarence Darrow opposed “kill[ing] little pigs and throw[ing] them out on the prairies to decay while millions are hungry.”<sup>35</sup> Of course, such statements also show an almost visceral aversion to the measures the federal government deemed necessary to restore national livelihood security in order to ensure long-term food security.

Unlike the other case studies, in the Missouri Bootheel sharecroppers’ demonstration, the performers, officials, and media involved do not explicitly use the rhetoric of the “paradox,” despite the fact that the sharecroppers embodied “want.” This does not suggest a shift in context, but rather indicates the cultural, social, and economic marginalization of sharecroppers; the “paradox” had not been resolved by 1939. The AAA had not solved the issue of surplus crops or parity with production costs; cotton (the crop produced by Bootheel sharecroppers) earned only 66% of parity in August 1939.<sup>36</sup> In his 1937 inaugural speech, Roosevelt pronounced the persistence of want, “I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions. I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.”<sup>37</sup> However, the “paradox” linked “want” to

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<sup>34</sup> Qtd. in Choate 134.

<sup>35</sup> Qtd. in Lambert 248.

<sup>36</sup> Saloutos *The American Farmer and the New Deal* 66.

<sup>37</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “‘One Third of a Nation’: FDR’s Second Inaugural Address,” 20 January 1937, *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, 24 January 2007 <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5105/>>.

consumers not to farmers. Moreover, as Harvey Levenstein's study *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* demonstrates, federal and popular concern for those "wanting" was primarily directed toward citizens who were newly vulnerable to food insecurity as of 1929. He writes that despite exposés by writers and photographers such as John Steinbeck and Margaret Bourke-White: "The principal conflicts over food relief centered not on them [impoverished rural citizens, including sharecroppers, who suffered hunger before and after the economic crisis of the 1930s] but on urbanites who had lost their jobs – the 'Depression poor.'"<sup>38</sup> Thus, the consumer implicit in the "paradox" was a classed, regionalized, and racialized consumer.

*Performativity* offers a theoretical model for understanding the sharecroppers' exclusion from the "paradox" and the equation of sharecroppers and commodity surpluses. Shannon Jackson extends Judith Butler's concern with gendered subject formation through the "reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performers"<sup>39</sup> to racialized subjectivity in which "[racism] maintains itself by being unregistered, [...] its performers (both dominant and marginalized) are less aware of the ways its production depends upon their own repetitions."<sup>40</sup> This also holds true for class bias in the sharecroppers' case. The case studies demonstrate multiple performative acts which constitute and reiterate Americanness as white in gendered terms while disavowing non-whites as "other." For instance, the USDA World's Fair exhibits worked to reify hegemonic Americanness in gendered embodiments of white consumerism,

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<sup>38</sup> Harvey A. Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 61.

<sup>39</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 234.

<sup>40</sup> Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy for Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 183.

iterating appropriate appetites, food objects, and roles, while non-whites were excluded from representations of Americanness, non-white foreign subjects were included as fair entertainments in venues such as the foreign villages, and non-white Americans were largely excluded from the event itself. *Triple-A Plowed Under* also cites race and gender *conventions* and like World's Fair exhibits relies on their naturalization for effect. In the play's opening scene, farmers are entreated to increase crop production during World War I. The Second Speaker, a representation of national need, asks the farmers, "Do you want your daughters ravaged by Huns?"<sup>41</sup> As a rhetorical question, it is designed to produce the effect of normative masculine performance; the predetermined answer is "no" and entails agreement with the initiator's prescribed *conduct*. Simultaneously, the question reiterates women's vulnerability to/and the Other's predatory nature. *Triple-A Plowed Under* does not parody such performative acts, rather it represents them as a means of prompting audiences' empathetic identification with farmers. Proper American masculinity is, again, naturalized in Milk Pool farmers' response to the US government's failure to reciprocate farmers' war efforts. A strike poem reads: "We were glad to let him [the federal government] use [farmers' money]/if he'd return it like a man."<sup>42</sup> This poem indicts the government's failed masculinity; it does not question it as such. Sympathetic portrayals of African American and white sharecroppers in *Triple-A Plowed Under* make apparent that a class-based whiteness also underlies these latter examples.

Three years before the Bootheel demonstration, *Triple-A Plowed Under* figured the sharecroppers as a population suffering the effects of the AAA but they were not explicitly

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<sup>41</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.2; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>42</sup> Strike poem attached to Resolutions of National Farmers' Holiday Association, n.d. (Strike poem); 1934 January – June; Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool Records, 1925-1943 (WCMPR, 1925-1943); Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI (WHS-Madison).



interpellated in the “paradox.” The dramaturgy also attests to the “normalizing and unregistered operations of racisms [and classism’s] performativity.”<sup>43</sup> The New York production of *Triple-A Plowed Under* initially included a scene titled “Cotton Patch”; the published script also includes the scene under the same title.<sup>44</sup> However, by the third week of the play’s run the scene no longer appeared in this production. According to playbills, it was used in the Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, and Milwaukee productions.<sup>45</sup> A note written by the New York production’s director Joe Losey, which is included in the manuscript, states the reason for cutting it: “it was impossible to get actors to play it with the necessary simplicity. The scene is conceived to be played entirely without props, with vaudeville technique, but not to be played up or plugged.”<sup>46</sup> Losey’s description of his idea for the scene is potentially contradictory as vaudeville-style acting emphasizes theatrical playfulness. Vaudeville also relies heavily on the humor of puns. As scripted, the scene lends itself to “playing up” for comedy. The plot itself is not funny; it features an African American sharecropper, Sam, who becomes a “farmer” through federal loan programs. Sam is then left without a means to work his new land because the Sheriff takes his mule in lieu of a tax payment. The narrative, however, consists of Sam singing and talking to his mule, which he has named “Guv’ment” to honor his new benefactor. Sam’s dialect and his unwitting characterization of the federal government as part jackass reminisces late-nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy staging techniques.

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<sup>43</sup> Jackson 192.

<sup>44</sup> Federal Theatre Project, *Federal Theatre Plays: Triple-A Plowed Under by the staff of the Living Newspaper, Power: A Living Newspaper by Arthur Arent, Spirochete: A History by Arnold Sundgaard* (New York: Random House, 1938).

<sup>45</sup> See playbills: *Triple-A Plowed Under Playbills (TAPU Playbills)*; *The Tailor Becomes a Storekeeper to The Vinegar Tree (Tailor-Tree)*; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>46</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, MS., p.48; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

The scene's use in four productions and Losey's dissatisfaction with the playing of the scene demonstrate the presumption that no generic confusion exists in the script; that this veritable musical number "fits" in an otherwise staid documentary of the nation's current events. It suggests the perception of naturalness rather than comedy or derision.<sup>47</sup> The script's *citation* of minstrelsy to represent "authentic" blackness in a sympathetic manner, in particular its impossibility of imagining Sam as an American farmer, indicates that the *performativity* of Americanness implies whiteness.

A scene titled "Sharecroppers" follows "Cotton Patch" and concerns the dispute between sharecroppers and farm owners over AAA payments. The Voice of the Living Newspaper announces, "It is estimated, three hundred and seventy-five thousand sharecroppers lose their places in acreage reduction."<sup>48</sup> The scene demonstrates croppers' rights to payment under AAA legislation but how power dynamics between farm owners and laborers result in croppers' evictions:

FARMER. [...] You git you stuff together and git. The Guv'ment ain't wantin' me to plant the land you been workin'.

THIRD CROPPER. Wait a minute. The guv'ment's payin' you not to plant, and it says here . . . (waves a paper) . . . that you're supposed to pay us.

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<sup>47</sup> I did not find any pictures of this scene or notes indicating casting decisions. Therefore, I am unable to state definitively whether African American actors played the role of Sam or if blackface was used. Based on the cast listings in the playbills, the actors who played Sam were not cast in any other roles in *Triple-A*. This is unusual because most actors played at least two roles. This suggests that African American actors may have played Sam; Sam is the only character referred to in the play and playbills as "Negro," intimating that all other characters were white. The exception may be the Los Angeles production. In this production, Earl Smith played the waiter in both restaurant scenes and Sam. However, it is not clear whether Smith is an African American man or performed in blackface.

<sup>48</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, MS., p.52; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

FARMER. Every durn one of you owes me money, and I ain't sayin' nothin' if you git.<sup>49</sup>

This leads the croppers to determine to join a union that is “demandin’ Constitutional rights.”<sup>50</sup> As opposed to “Cotton Patch,” which ends with Sam disheartened as this is the second time he has lost a mule; this scene culminates in citizens resolving to take action. Significantly, dignity and agency was attendant on croppers’ whiteness. However, this scene and “Cotton Patch” demonstrate croppers’ difference from “workers,” “consumers,” or “farmers,” characters represented as part of the “paradox.” The sharecropper scenes show that though sharecroppers worked the land, their title indicates a distinct social status from property holding farmers.

But even more than not being “farmers” and not being “consumers,” sharecroppers were regarded as “surplus.” In federal attempts to explain the agricultural crisis, “surplus” connoted a threat to economic prosperity or plenty for all Americans. The idea of “surplus” was readily transferred to croppers because of their naturalized “otherness,” the historical condition of large cropper families and a declining need for laborers in a changing agriculture industry. The AAA’s contributions to increased mechanization, capital investment, and efficiency not only failed to curtail agricultural output, it also created an excess of farm laborers. Secretary Wallace’s letter to Eleanor Roosevelt couches the problems in the Bootheel in terms of this human surplus: “Few people are aware of or appreciate the importance of the basic population facts [...] there were in 1938 1,650,000 more people on the farms than there were in 1930, in spite of the technological advance under which the farm population of 1930 would have been entirely adequate to produce for the whole population of 1938. [...] There are few facts so

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<sup>49</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, MS., p.52; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>50</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, MS., p.52; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

fundamental to our whole economic problem of today.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in a letter containing a donation for the Bootheel sharecroppers’ relief, Anna M. Emerson of Sioux Falls, SD suggested that “the best help [the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU)] could give [the sharecroppers] would be to get Margaret Sanger [. . .] to teach them birth control.”<sup>52</sup> STFU Secretary J.R. Butler gratefully responded to Ms. Emerson’s letter stating that “Poor people as a rule are more prolific than the well to do for several reasons – lack of knowledge – no outside interests – failure to understand the results of carelessness both to themselves and their offspring.”<sup>53</sup> What is most telling about these two incidents are Butler’s and Wallace’s (both different sorts of agricultural experts) failure to cite economic imperatives as a primary factor in sharecroppers’ fertility. Sharecroppers needed to have large families to secure agreements with landlords and to increase their productivity for crop yield. Moreover, the excess of laborers was seasonal; cotton-picking season absorbed unemployed laborers each year. Blaming croppers’ livelihood insecurity on their fertility as an abject cultural practice rendered these individuals human surplus.

The exclusion of sharecroppers from explicit incorporation in the “paradox” complicates the notion of the right to eat as a universal entitlement, or even as an entitlement guaranteed as part of national citizenship. The galvanizing force of the conception of the “paradox” lay in its universalism, the deservedness of all humanity based on humanness. At the same time, as the case studies demonstrate, its use relied on normative embodiments of Americanness. Historian

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<sup>51</sup> Wallace to Eleanor Roosevelt; Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>52</sup> Anna M. Emerson to H.L. Mitchell, Secretary Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, 26 January 1939; reel 10; Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union Papers, 1934-1970 (STFU); (NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1971); film 17994; Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL (NU).

<sup>53</sup> H.L. Mitchell, Secretary Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union to Anna M. Emerson, 4 February 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

Alice O'Connor explicates that for 1930s social scientists “‘poverty’ and ‘lower-class’ were as much cultural as economic categories and the question was not whether but why and how the poor were culturally different from the middle and upper classes.”<sup>54</sup> Likewise, in his analysis of readers’ responses to and representations of impoverished rural whites in *Life* magazine, Charles Cunningham demonstrates how racist nationalism and eugenics distinguished impoverished whites as “trash” from “good” white Americans as the basis of “American exceptionalism.”<sup>55</sup> In both cases, science reinforced the naturalization of African Americans’ and poor whites’ inferiority or “otherness.” The “paradox’s” deployment by the USDA at the World’s Fair, by Wisconsin dairy farmers, and in *Triple-A Plowed Under* typifies the observations of political-economic anthropologists that “Access to food might be called the most basic human right, yet with the development of capitalism [...] access to food has become a key measure of power and powerlessness.”<sup>56</sup> Unlike the other case studies, in which economic dysfunction was self-evident as the cause for “want” because the constituencies’ Americanness was seemingly self-evident, in the case of the Bootheel, the onus to demonstrate social and economic exclusion was on the sharecroppers.

### **“Food Rights Performance”**

Spectators could not bracket these “food rights performances” from everyday life because food use was integral to the central conflict and foregrounded the material effects of each performance. I define *food rights performances* as events recognized as extra-ordinary, as

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<sup>54</sup> Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 72.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Cunningham, “*Life* Magazine and the Mythology of Rural Poverty in the Depression,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 29.3 (Fall 1999): 285.

<sup>56</sup> Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, Introduction, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997) 3.

“performances,” that assume a fundamental human right to food and attempt to fulfill that right within American political economy. They not only argue for the human right to eat but also assert rights to food in terms of production and regulation. This acknowledges food as an important commodity in addition to being a biological necessity. Though the performances I examine occurred nine to fifteen years before the Assembly of United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948, US citizens and the Roosevelt administration recognized hunger caused by economic dysfunction (as opposed to natural disaster) as a moral violation and they charged the federal government with correcting the situation through immediate relief and the institution of infrastructures that would provide livelihood security. The performances I consider grapple with the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act as an ethical decision made by the federal government. As stated by anthropologist Sidney Mintz: “The most profound ethical issues are raised by the assertion that every living human being has a sacred right to eat because decisions are being made all the time that – by their inevitable consequences – end up causing people to die of hunger.”<sup>57</sup> The hope was that the AAA would restore agricultural economic stability; the fear was that it would exacerbate hunger. My characterization of the case studies as “food rights” performances is based on their expression of citizens’ rights and government obligation.

My construal of protests and world’s fair exhibition as “performance” derives from the work of anthropologist Victor Turner and numerous performance scholars.<sup>58</sup> Non-theatrical

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<sup>57</sup> Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) 11.

<sup>58</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications 1988). My definition of non-theatrical performance draws on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s work on food events in “Playing to the Senses”; historian Joel Rhodes’ study of “performative violence” in protest, *The Voice of Violence: Performative Violence as Protest in the Vietnam Era* (Westport: Praeger, 2001); performance scholar Kirk W. Fuoss’s study of lynching, “Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19.1 (1999): 1-37; performance scholar

performance as a field of study articulates the structural, aesthetic, and affective convergences between events as varied as protest, feasts, and exhibitions with events that occur inside a theater. Like theatrical performances, non-theatrical performances require preparation, are temporally and spatially distinguished from quotidian activities, establish a participatory difference between performers and spectators, and are consciously constructed to elicit audience response. Performance studies scholar Kirk Fuoss points out that similarity with theatrical performance is only part of what makes “performance.” He insists that citizen recognition of an act as a “performance” is equally important.<sup>59</sup> Here, Fuoss follows Richard Schechner’s assertion that the primary condition necessary for performance to exist is that the performance is acknowledged as a “performance” by the culture.<sup>60</sup> Though citizens tacitly or explicitly acknowledged the events I consider as “performances,” these events could not be neatly contained as such; even the FTP drama, which occurred inside a theatre, crossed this boundary. Sociologist Wendy Griswold explicates the common separation of art and performance from “life,” in her terms, “Culture” from culture: “[art is invested] with the aura of the sacred and ineffable, thus removing it from everyday existence. [...] The entrance to Chicago’s main art museum, [...] for example, is guarded by bronze lions.”<sup>61</sup> This distinction contains the idea that performance does not have immediate material effects on everyday life and, therefore, is superfluous. The events I consider make apparent the capacity for performance to render

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Tracy C. Davis’s study of museum exhibition, “Performing and the Real Thing in the Postmodern Museum,” *The Drama Review* 39.3 (Fall 1995): 15-40; and analyses of protest by performance scholars Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999) and Silvija Jestrovic, “Theatricalizing Politics/Politicizing Theatre,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 103 (Summer 2000): 42-6.

<sup>59</sup> Fuoss 7.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 30.

<sup>61</sup> Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Pine Forge Press, 1994) 7.

material effects on quotidian matters.

Each performance I consider attempts to persuade citizens to share responsibility for food security, often in order to protect their own self-interest. In 1933 and 1934, US citizens purchased tickets to gain entrance to the World's Fair; as one of the many entertainments, USDA exhibits in the Federal Building, the Agricultural Building, and the Dairy Building used food objects to represent the AAA's betterment of Americans' lives. Wisconsinites cruised rural roads and waited near dairy processing and distribution plants in anticipation of milk dumping by dairymen, while media circulated stories regarding concern over the threat milk dumping posed to the dairy supply. *Triple-A Plowed Under* staged citizens' responses to and the effects of the Agricultural Adjustment Act as a reality with which audiences had to contend. Ascertaining whether Missouri sharecroppers *acted* their hunger during their demonstration became a central issue in determining the protest's legitimacy and, by extension, the obligation to fulfill sharecroppers' right to eat.

## Method

My approach to theorizing the ways in which these performances presented spectators with choices about their future and the future of the nation derives from Tracy C. Davis's assertion: "By restoring some of the historical signs, reception can be (hypothetically) reconstructed."<sup>62</sup> Like Davis, who uses Geertzian thick description, I historicize performance elements such as food objects' cultural/dietary importance, the performances' locations/venues, and performers' social statuses. I examine how performers used such elements to contend with the AAA. I create a composite of each performance and the conditions of spectatorship using

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<sup>62</sup> Tracy C. Davis, "A Feminist Boomerang: Eve Merriam's *The Club* (1976)," *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, eds. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998) 148.



myriad types of evidence: iconographic evidence includes production and newspaper photographs, renderings, maps, and charts; narrative evidence is comprised of newspaper articles, interviews, investigations, correspondence, and oral histories; and material evidence that consists of items such as scripts and scenic plots. I bring together archival sources from the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Archives of American Art, the Wisconsin Historical Society, George Mason University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, as well as collections from the University of California-Berkeley and Northwestern University. However, much of the evidence from which I draw is already a representation of or a response to the events. Therefore, I also historically situate and critique the sources of evidence.

Photographic exposés, production reviews, and articles appearing in local and national newspapers constitute a large portion of the available ephemera. I regard these documents, as well as other iconographic and narrative materials, in a manner similar to linguist Peter R. R. White who describes “the news report as ideological, as a value-laden story telling mode by which key social values and cultural motifs are reproduced and ultimately naturalized.”<sup>63</sup> To explicate the values permeating the evidence while getting at the “facts” – the dynamic, spatial, and temporal elements constituting the performances – I compare contrasting accounts, different media’s functions, and the varying interests and objectives of the social actors that documented the events.

I rely on historians’ work on different foods’ statuses in US culture in order to establish

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<sup>63</sup> Peter R.R. White, “Media Objectivity and the Rhetoric of News Story Structure,” *Discourse and Community: Doing Functional Linguistics*, ed. Eija Ventola (Tübingen: Narr, 2000) 379.

different food objects' meanings.<sup>64</sup> Based on political-economic anthropologists' contention that access to and use of food structures self-perception, I work from the perspective that the changes in everyday access to foods considered "nutritious" or "desirable" and, by extension, farmers' changing relationship to the foods they produced, deeply affected men's self-images as breadwinners, women's self-images as nurturers, and farmers' self-perceptions as producers contributing to national health and prosperity.<sup>65</sup> As noted by Joseph R. Gusfield, "Eating is not only a physiological process. It is also a form of self-production through communication. We ingest symbolic forms."<sup>66</sup> I assume that foods' use in performances during a period in which self-perceptions (and the possibilities of self-production) were in flux because of changing access to food diminished the ability to perceive that use as inconsequential.

I place these performances in socio-historical context using the work of agricultural, cultural, and social historians. I recognize the "problem with context," in Tracy C. Davis's

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Osborn Cummings, *The American and His Food: A History of Food Habits in the United States*, Rev. ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941); E. Melanie DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002); Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies & The Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1995); Richard J. Hooker, *Food and Drink in American: A History* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1981); Harvey A. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Elaine McIntosh, *American Food Habits in Historical Perspective* (Westport and London: Praeger Publishers, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Anthropologist Sidney Mintz insightfully describes the ways in which consumption structures identity in *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985). Mintz expands this argument to include imagined communities in *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past*. Susan Bordo in "Hunger as Ideology," explicates how culturally constructed gender roles influence appetite and consumption, in *Eating Culture*, eds. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 11-35. Janet M. Fitchen, in "Hunger, Malnutrition, and Poverty in the Contemporary United States," examines how cultural conditions structure sensed hunger in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997) 384-401. Additional sources include: Johan Pottier, *Anthropology of Food*; Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983); Joseph R. Gusfield, "Nature's Body and the Metaphors of Food," *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, ed. Michele Lamont, and Marcel Fournier (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 75-103.

<sup>66</sup> Gusfield 77.

terms, for performance scholars: “though it is provided for the sake of ‘completeness,’ one scholar’s criterion for gestalt may be another’s idea of irrelevance.”<sup>67</sup> I do not seek to offer a comprehensive account of the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool, the 1933-34 World’s Fair, the Federal Theatre Project, or Bootheel cotton culture. Rather, I privilege a salient aspect of the New Deal era in order to specify foods’ functions in food rights performances. I analyze these performances through the Great Depression colloquialism “the paradox of want amid plenty.” I examine the case studies within the context of the “paradox” because each explicitly addresses the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which was designed to help resolve the “paradox.” Except for the Bootheel roadside demonstration, each performance also overtly responds to the Agricultural Adjustment Act by using the concept of the “paradox.”

I use Tracy C. Davis’s study of postmodern museums and Susan Leigh Foster’s study of protest tactics as bases to explicate the ways in which conditions of performance and spectatorship can stimulate spectators to perform an ideology.<sup>68</sup> Davis shows how museums’ spatial arrangements can force a visitor to physically act out an exhibit’s argument. Similarly, Foster asserts that protesters’ bodies structure the movements of spectators and authorities, causing them to physically display support of or opposition to a protest’s claim. I draw on these theories directly, using Davis’s scholarship to illuminate the USDA co-operative Meat and Livestock Industry exhibit’s stimulation of consumer performance and Foster’s work to understand the Milk Pool’s interruption of Wisconsinites’ daily lives. I also build on their ideas by showing how *Triple-A Plowed Under’s* incorporation of the audience into the narrative

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<sup>67</sup> Tracy C. Davis, “The Context Problem,” *Theatre Survey* 45.2 (November 2004): 204.

<sup>68</sup> Davis, “Performing and the Real Thing,” and Foster, “Choreographies of Protest,” *Theatre Journal* 55.3 (2003): 395-412.

demanded that citizens take action and how Bootheel sharecroppers' living on open roads presented spectators with the freedom to help or not help.

*Theatricality* also elucidates spectatorship of the Bootheel demonstration and the Milk Pool protest. Tracy C. Davis defines *theatricality* as “[a] spectator’s *dédoublement* resulting from a sympathetic breach (active dissociation, alienation, self-reflexivity) effecting a critical stance toward an episode in the public sphere, including but not limited to theatre.”<sup>69</sup> This definition is premised on Baz Kershaw’s assertion that spectators’ choice to commit themselves to a performance determines a performance’s efficacy. Davis explains that in choosing to become engaged in a performance a spectator is aware of how her own watching and other’s watching makes this event exceptional. During the Milk Pool protest, spectators “enacted back” the protest’s “exceptionalness” when they gathered at sites where they anticipated milk dumping would occur.<sup>70</sup>

Committed spectators create *theatricality* when they choose to withhold sympathy; by not identifying with the performers, a spectator can recognize the conditions (e.g. social, economic, and political) that generated the display. In a letter to Secretary Wallace, Wisconsin citizen Warner Lehman writes of the Milk Pool strike, “When loyal, peaceful farmers are going on a strike, there must be something wrong.”<sup>71</sup> Lehman does not express empathy for the dairy farmers rather he describes their actions as symptomatic of systemic problems. Here, farmers’

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<sup>69</sup> Tracy C. Davis, “Theatricality and Civil Society,” *Theatricality*, eds. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) Table 5.2, 145.

<sup>70</sup> Davis, “Theatricality” 130.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Lehman to Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, 31 May 1933; Farm Relief (4) Milk and Dairy Products (March-Aug); General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

naturalization as true American patriots is integral to but does not hinder Lehman's critical thinking; he recognizes the historical conditions of the event.

Journalists also represented the Milk Pool and Bootheel protests to citizens who were at a distance from protest sites. Newspaper readers could consume the coverage as passive witnesses or active spectators. As committed spectators, readers could sympathize or express a critical response. For some readers, *theatricalizing* the protests may have even led to action on protesters' behalf. In the Bootheel, some citizens who learned of the demonstration from newspaper reportage traveled to Missouri, sent donations, or petitioned the federal government. Such acts of voluntary involvement, including spectatorship, demonstrate the efficacy of the performance for these spectators.

Davis "argu[es] for the enabling effects of active dissociation, or alienation, or self-reflexivity in standing aside from the suffering of the righteous to name and thus bring into being the self-possession of a critical stance."<sup>72</sup> Reporters, at times, *theatricalized* the events for readers. During the sharecroppers' demonstration, Cleveland's *Call and Post*, an African American press, reported that "these hundreds of homeless tenant farmers tragically dramatized a mass protest against the cruel attempt of planters [sic] eviction of their tenants, larger shares of the benefits paid by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration at Washington D.C."<sup>73</sup> As part of a photograph of croppers praying, the reportage expresses awareness of both spectatorship and display and engages with the demonstration as a dramatization of suffering due to ineffectual federal protections. Significantly, the photo's caption begins by asking the reader to "*visualize*

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<sup>72</sup> Davis, "Theatricality" 153.

<sup>73</sup> "Evicted Sharecroppers Roam Highways Homeless," *Cleveland Call and Post* 19 January 1939: 1.

... night, a cold drizzling rain pelting down unmercifully on homeless hundreds.”<sup>74</sup> It directs the reader to imagine watching, not to imagine the croppers’ suffering as their own. The reporter articulates an experience of *theatricality*, in which the demonstration is viewed as performance, and in doing so critiques the operations of the AAA.

In *Performance in America: Contemporary Culture and the Performing Arts*, David Román’s starting point for writing theatre and performance history is the socio-cultural issue or the “context.” From this perspective, he argues that community formations facilitated by the performing arts, however temporary they may be, are significant to the “shaping of American culture.”<sup>75</sup> One of his cultural starting points is the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As a participant-witness to the socio-cultural events and to the theatrical performances under consideration, Román analyzes case studies whose content shows varying engagement with the issue. He examines a performance art piece about 9/11 (*Rebel Without a Pause*); the coincidental premiere of a drama that examines European, American, and Russian involvement in Afghanistan (*Homebody/Kabul*); benefit performances for 9/11 victims (“Dancing for the Bravest and the Finest” at the Joyce Theatre); and commercial musical productions (*Urinetown* and *The Full Monty*) attended as a civic duty to infuse money into a faltering post-9/11 New York City tourist economy. Despite the performances’ vastly disparate content, Román equates the performances’ potential political and cultural interventions because of theatre’s creation of temporary community. He writes, “[t]he critical investment in futurity [...] disregards the work that the arts achieve in their contemporary moment. This model of

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<sup>74</sup> Emphasis added, “Evicted Sharecroppers Roam Highways Homeless,” *Cleveland Call and Post* 19 January 1939: 1.

<sup>75</sup> David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005) 1.

history is one of deferral, and it runs the risk of obscuring the archives [sic] most relevant to the historical record.”<sup>76</sup> My project similarly attempts to reclaim “dated” material or performances that may only “matter” in their historical moment. However, Román’s consideration of post-9/11 performances implies that productive exchange is innate to theatre’s ephemeral communities; he thus renders a performance’s dramaturgy secondary to the community of spectators and performers it draws together. This dissertation makes the alternative argument that performances’ various dramaturgies create different types of communities; thus, different types of “interventions” become possible.

I consider food and its marked absence the central “authenticating conventions” in food rights performances. Performance scholar Baz Kershaw contends that “authenticating conventions,” commonly-shared symbols included in a performance’s aesthetics, can create ideological connections and “are the key to audience’s successful decoding of the event’s significance to their lives.” The creation of such connections can cause an ideological crisis or affirmation for the spectator.<sup>77</sup> The deployment of foods and bodies marked by foods in food rights performances puts spectators’ self-interest at the performances’ centers. I argue that this implicates spectators in the “shaping of culture.” Moreover, each performance I examine offers spectators choices about their culture and its future and shows these choices as having substantial effects.

Theatrical use of food and its marked absence in food rights performances can stimulate in spectators a sense of physical investment in moral, economic, and political debates regarding

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<sup>76</sup> Román 259.

<sup>77</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992) 26.

the food system as a capitalistic enterprise. Case studies show performers' proclivity to deploy food security as a cultural right. In particular, resolution of the "paradox" resulting in plenty for all, either through or in opposition to the AAA, is the primary rhetoric through which these performances operate. Each performance induces spectators to consider apodictic biological needs and potential changes in the American moral order to meet those needs. The performances attempt to create this for spectators by affecting a corporeally-engaged spectator experience through manipulations of food and displayed food or hunger. Spectators' first-hand knowledge of the necessity of the foods used or absent in the performances is the mechanism transforming rhetoric into embodied experiences.

### **Case Studies**

In chapter 2, "Food (Mis)Use by the Nation's Providers: Milk Dumping in the May 1933 Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool Protest," I elaborate a theory of food destruction in performance as "(mis)use," or food used symbolically other than for consumption. I take up what is little more than an aside in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's explication of foods' evocative potential due to its concomitant sensory stimulation and its cultural meanings. In her description of food use in feminist performance art sculptures, she writes: "such uses of food verge on, if they do not cross the line of sacrilege, if only because such food is being 'wasted.'"<sup>78</sup> Here, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is primarily concerned with the manner in which "waste" resonates with the anorectic body. This chapter stays with the idea that there are ethical and moral implications (both positive and negative) to "wasting" food by virtue of its inclusion in performance. Milk Pool dairy farmers declared a right to control over food as property owners and food producers. The violent confrontation between these farmers and National Guardsmen over milk dumping

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<sup>78</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing to the Senses" 5.



demonstrated a hierarchy of rights to food in which both authorities and farmers paradoxically claimed to serve consumers' rights to eat. Food (mis)use prompted spectators of the May 1933 Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool strike to critically engage with the action of milk dumping as a *performance*. The protest confronted consumers with the question of whether their access to milk justifies the end of small farmers' way of life.

In chapter 3, "Performing the Promise of Plenty: Consumerism and the USDA's 1933-34 World's Fair Exhibits," museum theory elucidates the USDA's incorporation of food in its exhibits. I document the manner in which narratives and display techniques naturalized food as a consumable object; that is, the exhibits showed food as evidence of scientific achievements that improved Americans' pleasure and health in daily life. I work from Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's theory of the "interpretive processes" in museum display:

The exchange between an active agent and an object is more than a cognitive one. The encounter between an active agent and an object has two sides to it: the interpretive framework brought to bear by the individual subject, which is both personal and social, and the physical character of the artifact. The material properties and the physical presence of the artifact demand embodied responses, which may be intuitive and immediate. Responses to objects are culturally shaped, according to previous knowledge and experience, but the initial reaction to an object may be tacit and sensory rather than an articulated verbal level.<sup>79</sup>

I argue that the USDA's exhibits took advantage of the "tacit and sensory" responses food engenders, predominantly spectators' response to food as consumers, by emphasizing consumption on the "verbal level" ("textual knowledge – knowledge through the written, spoken

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<sup>79</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000) 112.

or heard text”),<sup>80</sup> and by excluding human performers as part of the exhibits. Three different display techniques – spectacle, *in situ*, and *in context*<sup>81</sup> – stimulated citizens to perform the role of consumer, and other World’s Fair entertainments offering consumption opportunities promoted the impression that the AAA would restore plenty to the nation, if citizens chose to endorse the legislation.

Chapter 4, “Re-presenting the Paradox: Performing Hunger, Gluttony, and Food Destruction in *Triple-A Plowed Under*,” addresses how theatrical representation of real events attempted to impact citizen understanding of the “paradox” and the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act’s effect on the situation. Here, I combine David Román’s theory of the “contemporary,” in which the creation of a temporary community allows hegemonic narratives to be tested and new social compositions tried out, with Temple Hauptfleisch’s concept of “eventification,” the framing of an event *as scripted*,<sup>82</sup> to understand the ways in which mimetic hunger and food destruction politicized current events and showed the politics of hunger, while nevertheless making real/experienced phenomena subject to doubt. The play’s mimetic choices argued for the right to food, and urged citizens to find solutions by showing the current inability to reconcile American capitalism to this right.

In chapter 5, “Staging the ‘Tactic’: Exhibition of Everyday Hunger in the 1939 Bootheel Sharecroppers’ Demonstration,” I investigate the 1939 demonstration by Missouri sharecropping families as a purportedly passive display designed to assert the right to food as a universal right

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<sup>80</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 116.

<sup>81</sup> *In-context* and *in-situ* display are Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s categories of museum display in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 2.

<sup>82</sup> Temple Hauptfleisch, “Eventification: Utilizing the Theatrical System to Frame the Event,” *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames*, eds. Vicky Ann Cremona, Peter Eversmann, Hans van Maanen, Willmar Sauter, John Tulloch (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004) 279-302.

of all humanity. Evicted from farms due to the operations of the AAA, these laborers, who had no legal claim to the land, displayed themselves on two major Missouri highways. I consider the protest as a version of Michel de Certeau's "tactic:" "the resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have."<sup>83</sup> I examine how these families' *roadside living* capitalized on the humiliation and objectification of human exhibition, the site and fact of their homelessness, and the discourse of "shiftlessness" in which they were imbedded to communicate the authenticity of their hunger. The demonstration of slow starvation through labor exploitation and the croppers' docility demanded that spectators acknowledge the sharecroppers' suffering, but gave them a choice of whether they would share a responsibility to the croppers.

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<sup>83</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 18.

## **Chapter 2: Food (Mis)use by the Nation's Providers:**

### **Milk Dumping in the May 1933 Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool Protest**

In the papers of the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool a poem championing strike action is attached to the back of a proclamation by the National Farmers' Holiday Association condemning Secretary of Agriculture Wallace's "wholesale destruction of the necessities of life, as being criminal and sacriligious" (sic).<sup>1</sup> It is unclear whether Wisconsin State Historical Society archivists fastened the documents to one another, but the pairing seems chronologically erroneous. The Holiday Association's proclamation must have been written following Wallace's summer 1933 announcement of the AAA's emergency livestock and crop destruction program. Yet as evidenced by the poem's references to the February 1933 Milk Pool strike, the new Roosevelt administration's failure to act on behalf of farmers, and the climactic rallying cry for farmers to join a new strike, the poem antedates the Holiday Association's edict. These references temporally situate the poem's creation sometime between the winter and early spring of 1933, perhaps as an attempt to drum up support for the May 1933 strike.

It is ironic that the Holiday Association should have condemned the government's livestock and crop destruction program because this radical agrarian group used the tactic of food destruction in its protests. In declaring the government's program immoral, while participating in food destruction, the Holiday Association discloses the belief that such an act's justness is conditioned by the destroyer's relationship to food. Farmers' food destruction claims the right to determine their own production conditions (i.e. their ownership of their product). Nonetheless, the very commodity farmers produce makes absolute ownership questionable. The public

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<sup>1</sup> Resolutions of National Farmers' Holiday Association, n.d.; 1934 January – June; WCMPR, 1925-1943; WHS-Madison.

response to food destruction (by both the federal government and farmers) reveals a tacit belief that consumers also have rights to food. The May 1933 Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool's milk dumping<sup>2</sup> and the actions deployed by the state to prevent it suggested that a hierarchy of consumers' rights above producers' may have existed.

The strike poem is rudimentary artistically, but the clarity of meaning and the repetitive punch of the second and fourth line rhyme scheme enable unequivocal, assertive communication of Milk Pool members' claims. The pro-strike poem lays out farmers' contributions to the nation, the failure of the federal government to reciprocate, corporate greed, and the effects suffered by farmers:

We've all been patiently waiting  
 for the government to act  
 But they didn't reconize [sic] us  
 that you all know is a fact  
 [.....]  
 The farmer and his children  
 stayed home upon their land  
 They worked from sunrise to sunset  
 with blisters on their hands  
 All the money that we earned  
 we gave to Uncle Sam

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to this action as "milk dumping" because this was the phrase used by protesters, authorities, and journalists to describe the action. I found no use of the verb "spill." Furthermore, to employ the term "spill" and thus invoke the adage "don't cry over spilled milk" (which implies the pointlessness of regret) would mischaracterize the attitudes of protesters and authorities toward the action.

We were glad to let him use it  
     if he'd return it like a man  
 [. . . . .]  
 Now this farmer has a mortgage  
     which he cannot meet  
 And some millionaire is waiting  
     to put him on the street  
 After all these years of labor  
     the farmer lost all hopes  
 Because this man Borden [Milk Products LP]  
     had him tied with two inch ropes.<sup>3</sup>

The Milk Pool poem distills with great acuity the personal implications of the historic transition from family-owned to corporate agriculture for the farm family. It draws on the history of farmers' contributions to the union and suggests that the lack of remuneration has patriotic, ethical, and masculine implications for the federal government. It is a cry for reciprocity, obliging the government to repay the nation's debt to farmers by protecting farmers' way of life. The poem makes moral claims, suggesting that the federal government is duty-bound to sustain farmers' identities.

The visceral knowledge that vital foodstuffs lack adequate substitutes has made food destruction a commonly used tactic in farmers' attempts to raise agricultural commodities' prices. Though surely conditioned by production and spoilage rates, when farmers withhold or destroy food they (symbolically) threaten deprivation by pronouncing their fundamental control

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<sup>3</sup> Strike poem; 1934 January – June; WCMR, 1925-1943; WHS-Madison.

over the food system. They attempt to coerce acknowledgement of the indispensability, and by extension, the high value of their products. Shay's Rebellion, which occurred in the 1780s, is a well-known US case of farmer radicalism. The Kentucky Night Riders and the National Farmers Union both participated in food destruction in the early 1900s, as did the National Farmers Organization (NFO) during the 1960s. Confédération paysanne (France) and Farmers for Action (Britain) have recently employed the tactic of food destruction in protests.<sup>4</sup> The Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool's May 1933 milk dumping represents one of many acts of food destruction that occurred during the Great Depression. Oscar Ameringer, an Oklahoma activist, testified before Congress in 1932 about farmers' desperate efforts to raise prices through produce and crop destruction.<sup>5</sup> In summer 1933, Stanley Piseck led 10,000 New York milk producers in a strike involving milk dumping.<sup>6</sup> The Pool's wrenching of milk cans from trucks mimicked tactics used in 1932 in Sioux City, Iowa by the nation's most radical agrarian organization, the National Farmers' Holiday Association. The Holiday Association, headquartered in Iowa with state branches nationwide, also orchestrated various forms of protest (sometimes violent) such as national withholding actions, speeches, pickets, and penny-auctions.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Milk Pool staged three strikes in 1933 – February, May, and October – and each included milk dumping. These strikes might be categorized generally as protests against

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<sup>4</sup> Luther Tweeten, *Terrorism, Radicalism, and Populism in Agriculture* (Ames: Iowa State Press, 2003); Michael Woods, "Politics and Protest in the Contemporary Countryside," *Geographies of Rural Cultures and Societies*, eds. Lewis Holloway and Moya Kneafsey (Burlington, VT and Wiltshire, England: Ashgate, 2004) 103-125; F.W. Groves, "Twentieth Century Farm Strikes: A Comment," *Agricultural History* 39.4 (October 1965): 217-19.

<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in Poppendieck xii.

<sup>6</sup> Abrahams 95.

<sup>7</sup> Farmers and community members would attend auctions of foreclosed farms and inhibit large bids on the land (often through physical intimidation) or offer bids of mere cents for hundreds of acres and machinery. The new owner of the farm would then transfer ownership back to the original owner.

insufficient market prices and inadequate federal responses to farmers' needs. However, the February strike occurred under the Hoover administration, and the October strike was part of a national farmers' protest, led by the National Farmers' Holiday Association, against the AAA's failure to adequately improve farmers' income. The May 1933 strike is significant as a New Deal food rights performance because it protested the fact that the Roosevelt administration's Agricultural Adjustment Act did not make parity with production costs a *legal* right. It was a response to a perceived imbalance of federal protections and citizens' entitlements.

Sociologist James Jasper asserts that protesters choose tactics based on "what works, by what protesters know how to do and by their moral vision."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he argues that "tactics are selected not simply for their efficacy, but also for their symbolic and emotional implications."<sup>9</sup> Though I am not interested in establishing farmers' intentions or mapping the patterns amongst Depression-era protesters, the shared tactic of food destruction by protesting farmers may suggest a shared repertoire of performance tactics, and the assumed efficacy or at least the assumed emotional and symbolic impact of such actions. These basic commonalities allow use of the May 1933 Milk Pool action as a representative example for theorization of the aesthetic implications of food's use in protests concerning producers' rights.

Sociologists Patrick Mooney and Scott Hunt demonstrate the persistence of agrarianism, "[independent] agricultural production [as] the source and preserve of equality, freedom, democracy and strong family," as the underlying *moral vision* of US farmers' movements since

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<sup>8</sup>James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997) 80.

<sup>9</sup> Jasper 234.



the colonial period.<sup>10</sup> Embedded in the idea of America as the land of plenty, agrarian fundamentalism purports that the nation's (moral and economic) prosperity depends on agricultural (economic and production) prosperity. This contains entitlements for both consumers and producers. American farmers' vocation obligates them to both produce and ensure pure, healthful products. The primary means of reciprocation is payment of a fair price. But simple economic exchange – a good price for a safe product – is complicated by the moral implications attached to the food producer's role. Concomitantly, production of these most vital commodities sanctifies farmers as the nation's providers. However, tension between consumers' entitlements and producers' rights were revealed in Depression-era farmers' protests. Farmers raised questions about producer-consumer responsibility and the government's role in protecting both by destroying food in protest of their products' detrimental undervaluing.

In this chapter, I analyze the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool's May 1933 protest and the action of milk dumping to consider the implications of food use in protest. Using (any) food for anything besides consumption risks the act being condemned as wasteful.<sup>11</sup> Janet Poppendieck, in reference to the 1932 Iowa protest involving milk dumping, summarized the moral potency of milk's use in "wasteful" performance: "because milk is virtually synonymous with good nutrition and health, a symbol of motherhood and a test of the ability to provide for one's family, its destruction was particularly offensive."<sup>12</sup> The insult to which she refers is based on milk's status and the economic circumstance that made plentiful milk inaccessible to many

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<sup>10</sup> Patrick Mooney and Scott Hunt, "A Repertoire of Interpretations: Master Frames and Ideological Continuity in U.S. Agrarian Mobilization," *The Sociological Quarterly* 37.1 (1996): 183.

<sup>11</sup> In "Playing to the Senses," Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett cites performances such as Jana Sterbak's and states that this performer's meat dress and food furniture "verge on, if they do not cross the line of, sacrilege, if only because such food is being 'wasted'" (5).

<sup>12</sup> Poppendieck 78.

consumers. I wholly concur with Poppendieck, but it is necessary to explore her claim in order to grasp the performance implications of milk dumping. I complicate Poppendieck's assertion by showing the ways in which the level of insult (or the potential inability to condemn the act outright) depends on the food object itself, the type of misuse, the user, the context, and the performative genre in which the act occurs. I elaborate how food "(mis)use," or food used symbolically other than for consumption, and its inherent failure to be entirely symbolic gives cause for spectators to perceive the performance as significant to their lives.<sup>13</sup> The sheer novelty of food (mis)use distinguishes an event from ordinary life; like theatre it creates a temporary situation that allows for new considerations of socio-cultural arrangements. However, food's very realness (its cultural construction as destined for consumption) refuses anti-theatrical dismissal of its (mis)use as mere play. Thus, food (mis)use is morally significant.

Protests, the performative genre with which I am concerned, often exhibit the criteria of non-theatrical performance. Indeed, performance studies scholars examine protest using the same analytical tools with which they study theatrical performances. Though milk dumping was only one aspect of the rallies, meetings, rhetoric, and patrols that constituted the six day protest (13 – 19 May 1933), dumping and the violence it stimulated was the action that primarily drew spectators. In this way, milk dumping adheres to Kirk Fuoss's conception of "embedded performance" within a "performance complex." The performance complex consists of "preliminary," "embedded," and "subsequent performances." Preliminary performance concerns all events anticipating an embedded performance; it is a type of publicity for the embedded performance. Embedded performance is the event given primary focus – the cause for anticipation and for the events that follow (i.e. subsequent performances). Fuoss uses the

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<sup>13</sup> Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance* 28-9.

extralegal activity of lynching to explicate the performance complex, in which case he includes as preliminary performances the accusation of a crime, the identification of a criminal, and word of mouth announcements about the time and place for the lynching. The embedded performance is the lynching itself, and subsequent performances include newspaper reportage, spectators collecting souvenirs, postcard circulation, etc. Regarding the embedded performance of lynching, Fuoss states that “the public torture and execution of lynch mobs' victims were designed not merely to put to death their victims but to display the putting to death of the victims. Display mattered.”<sup>14</sup> Fuoss’s concern is with how a performance complex teaches social actors to behave, thus causing “performance chaining”: “[a] performance function[s] as a rehearsal for a subsequent performance which in turn functions as a rehearsal for yet another.”<sup>15</sup> The Milk Pool’s protest could be similarly analyzed, and in fact chapter sections are organized in relation to what I consider the embedded performances of milk dumping. Citizens’ behavior during the Milk Pool strike demonstrated implicit recognition of milk dumping as performance. Citizens sought out milk dumping; it was a display that mattered to them. They gathered at potential hot spots and waited. Wisconsinites’ actions show their “aware[ness] of their spectatorial status” because milk dumping “became a communal act of viewing.”<sup>16</sup> I explore what the display of milk dumping accomplished that could not be achieved by the displays and rhetoric which circulated before and after the dumping itself.

The Milk Pool’s choice to wrench milk from trucks and pour it onto roads contained clear theatrical, symbolic, and moral dimensions that designated this act as a performance within a

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<sup>14</sup> Fuoss 17.

<sup>15</sup> Fuoss 26.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, “Theatricality” 129-30.

protest. Milk dumping in the Milk Pool's protest signaled "performance" while preserving a sense of the action's material effects. By integrating sociological and performance-based theories of protest with anthropological conceptions of food symbolics, I explicate the ways in which the incorporation of food into this protest marks "performance" and its effects. I also question the ways in which the type of food object used and the form of its use matter. Through an examination of the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool's protest action as anticipated and enacted, and the conditions of protest spectatorship, I theorize that milk dumping made the protest into a morally significant performance.

### **Irrational, but Justified Action**

The Milk Pool, incorporated in 1932 and representing eight percent of Wisconsin farmers, was comprised of the "poorest dairy farmers of eastern Wisconsin" organized around the mission to receive "cost of production plus" profit.<sup>17</sup> In February 1933, this small group of dairymen, led by Walter Singler, protested the declining prices that were impoverishing farmers. This week-long strike, in which the farmers barricaded roads and dumped milk, ended on 22 February with Governor Albert G. Schmedeman's pledge to advocate on farmers' behalf to the incoming Roosevelt administration; a new administration offered the hope of federal protections for farmers. The Milk Pool's agreement to a strike truce came with a caveat. The Pool, under the guidance of the National Farmers' Holiday Association, declared a halt to its strike activity only until 1 May 1933. The Pool announced that after that date they would participate in a national agricultural withholding action led by the Holiday Association: "[I]n the event that the incoming National Administration fails to fulfill its pledges to agriculture, we [...] solemnly pledge to withhold all farm commodities from the markets until society gives to agriculture that

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<sup>17</sup> Hoglund 26-7.

which it grants to all other industries, the cost of production.”<sup>18</sup> These farmers’ request for at least cost of production (profit is not mentioned) emphasizes the sense of entitlement to governmental protection of their livelihood.

Schmedeman fulfilled his oath in a speech given less than two weeks later at the President’s Conference of Governors in Washington D.C. On 6 March, Schmedeman declared before President Roosevelt and the governors of the United States that: “A permanent solution of the problem will require well considered action by the Federal Government to relieve the farmer from the terrible burden of falling prices, increasing debt and high taxation.”<sup>19</sup> He asked for consideration of the Frazier Bill, which refinanced farm loans at a reduced interest rate. The Milk Pool supported the Frazier Bill, as did many in the agricultural constituency. Still, Milk Pool farmers ultimately wanted guaranteed cost of production as a right. On 22 April 1933, attorney and strike mediator for Wisconsin Harry Bragarnick, sent a letter to President Roosevelt “[urging] that the federal administration give full consideration to dairy products in its farm relief program and that this program be speeded. Serious trouble was averted in the strike on milk in Wisconsin in February by a truce founded on the pledge of legislative aid.”<sup>20</sup> Yet by late April or early May it became clear that no cost of production provisions would be included in the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Milk Pool and Holiday Association members perceived this as a failure to protect the livelihood of small farmers and as tacit legislative support of the corporate

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<sup>18</sup> Resolutions by the Various Co-Operative Organizations of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, 22 February 1933, Vol. 1; WCMR, 1925-1943; WHS-Madison.

<sup>19</sup> Albert G. Schmedeman, Address of Governor Albert G. Schmedeman of Wisconsin, before the President’s Conference of Governors, Washington D.C., 6 March 1933 (Schmedeman Address), p. 22; Ralph M. Immell Papers, 1908-1960 (Immell Papers, 1908-1960); WHS-Madison.

<sup>20</sup> Harry Bragarnick to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 22 April 1933; Harry Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960 (Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960); WHS-Milwaukee.

processors and distributors who were purchasing dairy products at well below production costs. Consequently, the Holiday Association called a national “holiday” on farm commodities to begin at 12:01 a.m. on Saturday, 13 May 1933.

The many farm foreclosures stemming from heavy tax burdens, sizable debt, continual decline in domestic prices, and virtual closure of foreign markets following World War I made the plight of farmers incontestable. Despite widespread knowledge of and sympathy for Wisconsin farmers’ dire economic situation, few in the Wisconsin press or in power characterized the impending national strike as a reasoned action. General consensus held that farmers deserved a fair price for their products and that their anger was justified. Nevertheless, most in Wisconsin thought strike action would not only fail to advance Wisconsin farmers’ agenda but it would have detrimental effects on Wisconsin’s agriculture-based economy. In a radio address delivered three nights prior to the set strike date, Harry Bragarnick enumerated the reasons that strike action was unwise. He asked farmers to consider whether they could “afford to withhold [their] products” and “lose [their] best leading markets [throughout Wisconsin and in Chicago].”<sup>21</sup> Bragarnick recalled the experience of the February strike. He reminded listeners of the violence, the waste of labor and income due to milk dumping, and the “broken faith of friends and neighbors.”<sup>22</sup> He also laid the failings of the past next to the promise of the present:

The previous administration has done little toward bettering your condition. But we are living in a new era. Our president has proven to you [...] in the last few months of his administration that he is a man of action and a man of his word. [...] Already in the past

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<sup>21</sup> Harry Bragarnick, Radio Address Delivered by Dr. S.K. Pollak, In Behalf of Mr. Harry Bragarnick, WTMJ, 9 May 1933 (Radio Address), p.2; Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960; WHS-Milwaukee.

<sup>22</sup> Radio Address, p. 2-3; Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960; WHS-Milwaukee.

sixty days prices of cheese and other dairy products have gone up. President Roosevelt's Farm Relief Bill has already been passed and will be in effect shortly. This Bill provides a committee be appointed to fix prices, and thus protect you. We also have assurance of the President that legislation will, [sic] continue to be enacted until satisfactory relief of the farmer is established.<sup>23</sup>

Bragarnick clearly spoke in support of the federal government. Moreover, his derogatory comments regarding Milk Pool president Walter Singler as single-mindedly driven to strike showed his bias against this group. Yet his speech represents an assemblage of the reasons against the strike that had been presented in local and state presses, as well as in agricultural publications. A 29 April editorial in the *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer*, which pointed to the same injurious potentials of protesting as Bragarnick's radio address, keenly summarized the problems of striking itself: "The threat of a strike may help to draw attention to the just demands of the dairymen. As an actual weapon, the strike is extremely dangerous to those who make use of it."<sup>24</sup> Public reiterations of the new administration's promises and evidence of improvement in agricultural markets suggested that calling a strike was counterproductive, if not nonsensical. The Roosevelt administration's work to alleviate farm problems evidenced the federal government's *awareness* of farmers' plight, and therefore that there was no need for public demonstration.

Striking appeared even more irrational when it was transformed, virtually overnight, from a national withholding of agricultural products to a withholding by a minority of producers from one state of one type of agricultural product. Much to the surprise and consternation of the Milk

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<sup>23</sup> Radio Address, p. 4; Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960; WHS-Milwaukee.

<sup>24</sup> Radio Address, p. 4; Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960; WHS-Milwaukee.

Pool, the evening before the scheduled strike, 12 May 1933, Farmers' Holiday Association President Milo Reno postponed the national strike in order to allow time to gauge the AAA's efficacy, to "give the Roosevelt administration an 'opportunity to fulfill pre-election pledges to the farmer.'"<sup>25</sup> This diminished the strike action's potency.<sup>26</sup> As "a refusal to provide the actions necessary for a social arrangement to continue," a nationwide strike had the capacity to restructure the US food system.<sup>27</sup> The withdrawal of the Holiday Association replaced the coercive possibilities of nationwide deprivation with localized inaccessibility of dairy products. The inability to obtain dairy products proved meaningful to Wisconsin residents during the Milk Pool's strike, but the change in strike status from a national to state action flattened its potential efficacy. The Holiday Association's withdrawal severely limited the protesting producers' major advantage in the economic realm. But more significantly, while the Holiday Association continued to advocate aggressively for farmers – just days before withdrawing support for the strike, Holiday Association members stormed an Iowa courthouse in an attempt to actually lynch a judge who ruled in favor of a farm foreclosure – the organization's show of faith in the Roosevelt administration robbed the Milk Pool of the authority of collectivity.<sup>28</sup> The Holiday Association's support of the Roosevelt administration's plans made the Milk Pool's determination to carry on with a withholding appear even more reckless to fellow farmers, authorities, and citizens.

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<sup>25</sup> "Nation-wide Holiday is Off," *Marshfield News-Herald* 13 May 1933: 1.

<sup>26</sup> In Kaukauna on 14 May 1933, several hundred Milk Pool protesters strung a straw effigy of Milo Reno to a pole and then set it on fire. This symbolic lynching suggests Pool members felt deeply betrayed by Reno's withdrawal. "Burn Effigy of Milo Reno," *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune* 15 May 1933: 1.

<sup>27</sup> John Lofland, *Protest: Studies in Collective Behavior and Social Movements* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1985) 264.

<sup>28</sup> "Hold Iowa Farm Sale Under Militia Protection," photo caption, *Sheboygan Press* 1 May 1933.



Press reports of the Pool's decision to go ahead with the strike despite losing the support of the major militant farm organization focused on statements by Pool officials concerning the righteousness of their cause and the repercussions of postponement. A *Wisconsin State Journal* article reported Singler as stating, "we'll have everything or nothing," and "it's too late to stop now." The journalist suggested that Singler meant: "The strike is to be a final staking of the pool's entire power behind its demand."<sup>29</sup> Green buttons worn by Pool officials reading "cost of production plus a reasonable profit" represented that demand.<sup>30</sup> Such statements characterize postponement as total loss and equated anything less than legalized parity with production costs with intolerable injustice. The strike would demonstrate that the nation's providers would no longer be robbed of the value of their labor. The Pool hoped that they would receive the support of other farm organizations, and by this regain control over production. Yet the Holiday Association's withdrawal, the economic inefficacy of a minority of producers withholding products, and the Pool's statements regarding cause rather than tangible outcomes transformed the strike from a significant disruption of the food system into, perhaps unwittingly, a symbolic act.<sup>31</sup> However, the strike offered a peculiar form of symbolism. Protest actions, such as parades, rallies, marches, and picketing, which sociologist John Lofland categorizes as *symbolic*, are "those orderly and nondisruptive but more or less ostentatious ways in which

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<sup>29</sup> William H. McIlrath, "Singler Off for Trout as Strike Opens," *Wisconsin State Journal* 12 May 1933: 1, 4.

<sup>30</sup> William H. McIlrath, "Singler Off for Trout as Strike Opens," *Wisconsin State Journal* 12 May 1933: 4.

<sup>31</sup> Pool officials hoped for material gains. They expressed a desire for their action to result in a powerful farmers' cooperative. In a speech given during the strike, Frederick Bergelin, vice president of the Milk Pool, stated "you are not going to make these octopuses [large corporate food companies] surrender with 960 different cooperatives, the way Wisconsin is now divided among themselves. [sic] [...] If you are going into an organization I do not care what you are calling it, but let us get together and see if with a large organization we cannot meet these octopuses," in Report of Meeting of Farmers relative to Wisconsin Milk Pool, Marshfield, Wisconsin, 17 May 1933, p.2-3; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

people collectively draw attention to their grievances.”<sup>32</sup> Though clearly an ostentatious display expressing the Pool’s discontent, withholding dairy products, blocking roads, and preventing milk’s delivery to dairies actually disturbed infrastructures. And even as it contained symbolic implications, milk dumping materially destroyed a culturally-valued food source. Thus, while enabling expression of the Milk Pool’s grievances, the protest also compelled action beyond sympathetic response or disdain from spectators.

Two facets related to the dumping sustained the both/and quality of the protest, allowing the symbolic to persist despite real destruction inherent in the act of milk dumping. Foremost, the Milk Pool cooperated with the state to allow milk distribution to vulnerable populations during the strike. *The Daily Northwestern* quoted a Pool official: “We have no war with the city people [...] We’ll give our milk away free.”<sup>33</sup> Both actions demonstrated farmers’ dedication to their role as producer. The Pool also offered milk for purchase on farms. With regard to this, Singler announced: “There is no excuse for any Milwaukee consumer to buy milk from any dairy company during the farm holiday.”<sup>34</sup> Here, Singler calls attention to ethical consumerism. Availability of milk on farms attempted to restructure the dairy processing and distribution system by reestablishing the traditional agrarian relationship between producer and consumer. Through this action, the Pool called on the rural value of neighborliness: mutual support during crisis. Legislative change might have been the ideal outcome for the strike. Nevertheless, the action of dumping milk while making it available on farms and to vulnerable populations also

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<sup>32</sup> Lofland 263.

<sup>33</sup> “County Crisis in Strike May Come Tonight,” *Daily Northwestern* 14 May 1933: 2. Prior to the strike Walter Singler announced that the Pool would give away milk to the poor, in “Milk Supply for Needy to be Permitted,” *Sheboygan Press* 6 May 1933: 1.

<sup>34</sup> “Madison Area Milk Embargo Will End Within Few Hours,” *Wisconsin State Journal* 12 May 1933: 4.

had the potential to cause a moral conflict for consumers. Thus, while no threat of total milk deprivation existed, milk dumping demonstrated the depth of farmers' belief in their right to control the food they produced.

It mattered that the protesters were farmers. Farmers' importance to the nation made their relief of great interest. In Theodore Saloutos's words, "For years [farmers] had been told that they were the backbone of the nation, that their calling was the most important, the most deserving, the most fundamental of all, the collapse of which would bring down the pillars of civilization itself."<sup>35</sup> Public iterations of farmers' importance were ubiquitous. The 1933-34 Century of Progress installations offer an example of this sentiment. Iconic farm figures saturated public buildings in the work of the federal Section of Fine Arts (established in 1934) and in WPA murals (established in 1935), "celebrating the land as a source of American democracy" and making the "farm family an icon of an idealized social and moral landscape."<sup>36</sup>

In Wisconsin, dairymen were consumers' actual and ideological neighbors. The dairy industry contributed significantly to the state's economy. More than 25% of Wisconsin residents were employed in agriculture or agricultural-related industries.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the 1930s, various dairy products and agricultural implements ranked as the fifth, sixth, and seventh most valuable manufactured products for the state, and Wisconsin ranked first in the nation in dairy production.<sup>38</sup> Dairy farms dominated the landscape: "about 200,000 farms [occupied] three-

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<sup>35</sup> Saloutos and Hicks 560.

<sup>36</sup> Melosh 53.

<sup>37</sup> *State of Wisconsin Blue Book 2003-2004*, 30 July 2006 <[www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/bb/03bb](http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/bb/03bb)>.

<sup>38</sup> Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, *The WPA Guide to Wisconsin* (Wisconsin Library Association and New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), Introduction by Norman K. Risjord (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006) 75, 73.

fifths of all the land in the State, [. . .] crowned by the richest dairy development in the world.”<sup>39</sup> There were seventy milk cows for every one hundred people.<sup>40</sup>

Dairy farming constituted Wisconsin’s cultural identity. In 1930, 47% of the population lived in rural areas,<sup>41</sup> and when the state slogan first appeared on Wisconsin automobile license plates in 1940 it read, “America’s Dairyland”; the slogan remains the same today.<sup>42</sup> Governor Schmedeman, in his address to the president and various governors, summed up the importance of dairymen to Wisconsin:

The milk that flows to the great centers of population from the dairy farms of Wisconsin is the very life blood of rural Wisconsin and the mother lode of our agricultural prosperity. The complete collapse of the market for the products of the dairy industry has brought about the most distressing financial situation among our people.

Not only does Agriculture represent the greatest single source for income for the people of Wisconsin, but it is upon the solvency of the farmer that industry and the urban population must depend, both for profit and the fundamental necessities of life itself. The destruction of the purchasing power of the farmer during the last decade is primarily responsible, in my judgment, for the idle factory and the idle man.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, *The WPA Guide to Wisconsin* 91.

<sup>40</sup> Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, *The WPA Guide to Wisconsin* 96.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Census of Population and Housing 1930, *Historical Census Browser Geospatial and Statistical Data Center*, University of Virginia Library, 26 July 2006 <<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php/state.php>>.

<sup>42</sup> *The License Plate Shack*, 30 July 2006 <<http://www.plateshack.com/wisconsin>>.

<sup>43</sup> Schmedeman Address; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

Even anti-strike statements acknowledged farmers' status: "No one can deny that the farmers [sic] cause is just. They produce the food for the nation. Theirs is a noble calling and they produce a basic commodity."<sup>44</sup> Responding to Milwaukee Mayor Hoan's request that he arbitrate the strike, Harry Bragarnick wrote: "The farmers are the people on whom we in the cities really depend upon for our living. [...] While factories have been closed [sic] and men lost the right to earn a living the farmers continued to produce food for us so that we might have a plentiful supply at all time."<sup>45</sup> Strike instructions given to sheriffs by commander of the Wisconsin National Guard Adjutant General Ralph Immell included a reminder that strikers and deputies were neighbors: "You are dealing with people in your community who will be with you during your lifetime."<sup>46</sup> The protesters represented central figures in the economic and cultural life of Wisconsin.

Related to this point, Jasper argues: "Much if not most protest is reactive, spurred by a sense of threat to one's daily life, including one's physical surroundings."<sup>47</sup> Unwanted or forced change is the chief impetus to protest. Widespread failures of small farms surely affected farmers' self-perceptions as the nation's providers. Moreover, the AAA's failure to provide relief for dairy farmers suggested federal neglect. Agricultural economist Luther Tweeten's appraisal of the contemporary conflict between identity and economics is comparable to the tensions of the 1930s:

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<sup>44</sup> "Preparing for Holiday," *Marshfield News-Herald* 12 May 1933: 4.

<sup>45</sup> Harry Bragarnick to Daniel W. Hoan, Mayor of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, n.d.; Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960; WHS-Milwaukee.

<sup>46</sup> "State's Plans are Complete," *Marshfield News-Herald* 12 May 1933: 2.

<sup>47</sup> Jasper 12.

Farm fundamentalists do not reject the market, but believe that relieving farm hardship and preserving the family farm is more important than maintaining an open market.

Democratic capitalists on the other hand believe that farmers and the rest of society will be better off economically in the long run by facing the impersonal rigors of the market.

If family farmers are unable to compete, then society is best served in the long term by letting inefficient or unlucky farmers go the way of the blacksmith, buggy maker, and the mom-and-pop grocery store.<sup>48</sup>

Apart from the incendiary dichotomization in his designations “farm fundamentalist” and “democratic capitalist” that suggest an anti-Americanness in farmers’ attempts to maintain their identities and his assumption that rationality is the privilege of the “economically” rather than “ideologically” invested, Tweeten repeats Depression-era divides. Theodore Saloutos’s comments on the cultural situation entered into by the 1933 Roosevelt administration emphasizes the persistence of such concerns within the US: “The outlook for assistance to the low-income farmers [. . .] was bleak from the outset [the start of Roosevelt’s term], [. . .] because of a growing conviction on the part of many influential citizens, politicians, and scholars that there were too many farmers on the land. They further believed that the best interests of society would be served if those far down the economic ladder were persuaded or forced to abandon the land and migrate to the cities.”<sup>49</sup> Farmers’ loss of status accompanied their loss of self-determination. The administration’s effort to salvage the agricultural industry through the AAA was characterized by *Hoard’s Dairy Farmer* as the end of autonomy: “The bill, in reality, makes the Secretary of Agriculture a dictator in the field of farming. [...] We may well ask, can any group

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<sup>48</sup> Tweeten 123.

<sup>49</sup> Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* xv.

of men formulate a plan that will meet the approval of millions of farmers who, in many instances, are farmers because they have been permitted to carry on their industry in their own way and to express their own individuality?”<sup>50</sup> What’s more, though the rural landscape appeared the same, farm foreclosures and the resultant transformation of farms from family-owned to corporate enterprises imperiled farmers’ way of life. Harry Jack’s speech at a Milk Pool meeting held during the strike indicates farmers’ fear for their future: “What are we going to do about our boys and girls? Many of them would like to follow their fathers and mothers on the farm and have a home of their own. They have not a chance in this world, and you know it.”<sup>51</sup> Milk Pool farmers (mis)used milk not merely for economic gain, but also to maintain their identity across generations. The potential dissolution of a way of life for a population on which Wisconsin was economically reliant, and in which the state was ideologically invested, suggests that citizens had a personal interest in the fate of the family-owned farm.

Generally, when theatre actors (mis)use food the waste does not impact their identity. Though the waste is real, its placement within a fiction/(mis)use by “characters” causes the audience to examine what the (mis)use says about the character, the world, etc. (i.e. food manipulation is a metaphor for or symbolic of something else). The fact that actors are paid to (mis)use food in order to entertain theatergoers is not highlighted. Conversely, the obligations and freedoms tied to farmers’ cultural identity influenced perception of their milk (mis)use and of farmers’ socio-economic predicament. Philosopher Elizabeth Telfer writes, “[t]hose who have contractual duties to others in the sphere of food are the professional providers of food: farmers, fishermen, market-gardeners, food retailers, restaurateurs, caterers, professional cooks,

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<sup>50</sup> “What Does it Mean,” editorial, *Hoard’s Dairyman* 10 April 1933: 144.

<sup>51</sup> Harry Jack, Outagamie County, Wisconsin, 17 May 1933; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

and so on. While these providers have legal contracts with their customers, most people would hold that they also have moral obligations, arising out of these contracts, to sell them food of good quality.”<sup>52</sup> Consumers’ bodily vulnerability bonds producers into an ethical trust. Yet unlike other food producers or handlers in the United States, the role of farmer is uniquely ideologically invested. American farmers are exemplars of the thrift, hard work, self-sufficiency, and neighborliness that constitute “Americanness,” thus giving their interactions with food distinct moral significance. Not only are farmers the archetypical model of American values, but they are also stewards of the land of plenty. As such, farmers’ destruction of food indicates severe malfunction in the food system. With reference to the Milk Pool strike, Warner Lehman, an engineer from South Milwaukee, wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Wallace proposing solutions to problems in the dairy industry. Lehman justified his perceived need for change by stating: “When loyal, peaceful farmers are going on a strike, there must be something wrong.”<sup>53</sup>

John Lofland explains that citizens expect to see protesters behave unusually: “collective behavior requires suspension of the attitude of everyday life by relatively large numbers of people [...] suspension of the attitude of everyday life is accompanied by increased levels of emotional arousal in participants [...]. [T]he emerging definition [of the situation as protest] and affective arousal is accompanied by action defined by participants and observers as outside the ordinary.”<sup>54</sup> This implies that protesters may behave in ways antithetical to their identity. And significantly, spectators may recognize the behavior as specific to a complaint, not as generalizable. Protest is comparable to theatre in this regard. Román states that theatre’s

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<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 62.

<sup>53</sup> Lehman to Wallace; Farm Relief (4) Milk and Dairy Products (March-Aug); General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>54</sup> Lofland 37-8.



cultural designation as “theatre” allows such license: “the provisional gathering that characterizes performance opens up a space in the public sphere that might challenge or refute local or national sentiments.”<sup>55</sup> On the one hand, because farmers made milk available, milk dumping could be viewed symbolically, thus enabling critical engagement with the issue of producer-consumer rights. Both protest and theatre can teeter between symbolic and real action. However, the designation “protest” inhibits perception of the action as provisional, particularly when it involves actual food or property. Then the action carries considerable moral weight because of its immediate material effects. Food (mis)use is not only a symbolic act, but also enacts destruction of sustenance. Because protest expresses dissatisfaction with the status quo, food’s (mis)use is bound to the grievance itself. Jasper makes this clear in his assessment that actions within a protest express the “moral vision” of a group.<sup>56</sup> Food (mis)use may become metonymic of a group because of its inclusion in a protest. The realness of the milk dumping suggested the protesters’ willingness to violate their role as providers in the interest of remaining farmers. The Milk Pool’s milk dumping is almost Gestic in its contradictions, “relying on alienation from character [...] to bring about political critique as an affect of viewing.”<sup>57</sup> Yet as Davis notes, the spectator must choose to theatricalize the events in order to realize the critique staged by the performance. Lehman theatricalizes milk dumping by “distinguishing between actor, role, and situation; self and other; and between self and self-as-actor.”<sup>58</sup> He comments on the difference between the dairy farmers and the farmers as protesters dumping milk. He does

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<sup>55</sup> Román 2.

<sup>56</sup> Jasper 234.

<sup>57</sup> Davis, “Theatricality” 153.

<sup>58</sup> Davis, “Theatricality” 141.

not imaginatively place himself in the farmers' situation and he recognizes his spectatorial position; his attention to these elements constitutes his critical assessment of milk dumping.

### **Rules and Expectations**

In the week before their withdrawal from the strike, the Holiday Association held a convention in Des Moines and announced on 5 May that a national strike would begin at midnight on 13 May 1933.<sup>59</sup> The declaration of a set date and time enabled both Wisconsin authorities and protesters to make public their preparations. In their pre-strike statements, the Wisconsin branch of the Holiday Association asserted that milk would be available for purchase on the farms, that Holiday and Pool members were withholding products from milk plants (not consumers), and that city residents could obtain dairy products from dealers deemed "friendly to the holiday movement."<sup>60</sup> A conference between Arnold Gilberts, vice president of the Wisconsin Holiday Association, Leo Crowley, advisor to the Governor, and Milwaukee Health Commissioner Dr. John Koehler resulted in assurances that milk would be delivered safely to hospitals and children. Similar agreements were generated in towns and cities throughout Wisconsin. Not only did the Holiday Association and the Pool agree to let relief trucks pass through picket lines, but they also refused payment for the milk they supplied to these vulnerable populations.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Associated Press reports stated that Walter Singler declared that the protest would entail peaceful picketing.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Milk Strike Review from Day to Day," *Marshfield News-Herald* 15 May 1933: 1.

<sup>60</sup> "Strike not to Sever Supply," *Marshfield News-Herald* 9 May 1933: 1.

<sup>61</sup> "Koehler Named to Route Milk for Ill, Needy," *Milwaukee Leader* 9 May 1933; Bragarnick Clippings, Milk Strike, Jan. 29-May 26, 1933; Bragarnick Papers, 1930-1960; WHS-Milwaukee.

<sup>62</sup> "State Prepared for Start of Farm Strike Saturday: Not to Allow Any Violence," *Marshfield News-Herald* 11 May 1933: 1.

Despite these pronouncements, the Governor issued a proclamation that anticipated violence:

In view of the public announcement that the Farm Holiday association has declared a strike or holiday on farm produce effective May 13, 1933, and it appearing that a very considerable number of farmers in various sections of the state have demonstrated that they will not withhold their produce from the markets; and it further appearing that already methods of intimidation have been resorted to in order to compel unsympathetic farmers to join the strike; and it further appearing that threats of boycott against certain businessmen in various cities and villages have been resorted to in order to gain support for the proposed strike; and it further appearing that if it be contemplated to conduct the strike along such lines, as evidenced by the conduct of the milk strike in February last, the public health, good order, and public welfare of the people and our institutions will unquestionably be affected, I am compelled to take measures to insure their preservation.<sup>63</sup>

This preface to the multiple orders the Governor issued regarding the state's conduct in the strike suggested that the Holiday Association and the Milk Pool could not be relied upon to engage in peaceful action. Even more, Schmedeman's accusations of coercion threw doubt upon the strike's validity as an action agreed upon by Wisconsin's farmers.

Governor Schmedeman's actual strategy entailed six measures. First, he ordered closure of all cheese factories, condenseries, milk distribution plants, and creameries. This constituted a preemptive removal of non-striking farmers' milk trucks from the roads, apparently to avert milk dumping and physical conflict. However, the governor's sixth order stated that farmers could,

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<sup>63</sup> "Strike Proclamation," *Marshfield News-Herald* 11 May 1933: 2.

“by petition or any other convenient means” that demonstrated their majority, call for the reopening of the plants of which they were patrons and receive police protection during delivery. The governor seemingly allowed farmers’ self-determination.<sup>64</sup> He would act as they wished, ostensibly supporting the farmers by keeping plants closed if farmers agreed with the Holiday Association. Conversely, if they desired to sell their products to distributors and processors, he would use his power to protect their right to do so. Thus, he created the opportunity for farmers’ performance of non-support of the strikers.

The second through the fifth orders all pertained to safe milk delivery to vulnerable populations. The Governor’s plan permitted trucks displaying a red sign with a white cross labeled “public welfare,” to distribute milk designated for families with children under eight years of age, to hospitals, and to elderly and disabled persons. All such persons were to pre-register with the state Board of Health. “For the purpose of pasteurization, distribution and delivery of milk [to this population...] all milk plants” were to be opened. Despite the Holiday Association’s professed cooperation in this regard, the governor “charge[d] sheriffs and district attorneys of the various counties to facilitate without molestation or interference, the transportation of milk for such purposes.”<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the partially reprinted state’s “plan for meeting the emergency” generated by Adjutant General Immell estimated that in some counties “a minimum of 200 deputies are necessary to start this plan and that these patrols would have to be augmented in proportion to the activities of belligerents” (sic).<sup>66</sup> Prior to any actual protest

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<sup>64</sup> “Madison Farmers Prepare Petition to Halt Strike,” *Milwaukee State Journal* 11 May 1933: 1. In a *Wisconsin State Journal* article regarding the governor’s proclamation, the explanation of orders given regarding farmers were subtitled: “Decision Left to Farmers” and “Majority to Rule,” “Madison Farmers Prepare Petition to Halt Strike,” 11 May 1933: 1.

<sup>65</sup> “Strike Proclamation,” *Marshfield News-Herald* 11 May 1933: 2.

<sup>66</sup> “State Controls Farm Strike in Wisconsin,” *Daily Northwestern* 12 May 1933: 1, 2.

activity, the governor's creation of a veritable police state suggested and, in part, determined how the strike would progress. Tracy C. Davis describes the proposals for ousting Castro made by the Joint Chiefs during Kennedy's presidency as "staging." Davis chooses the word "staging" because it is "not only a verb indicating the calculated orchestration of events, but also stands for a process that deliberately blurs the demarcations between simulations and their legitimization."<sup>67</sup> In the case of the Milk Pool protest, the governor's pre-strike declarations contributed to the strike's staging. Despite the lesser degree of engineering on the Wisconsin government's part relative to the Pentagon's proposed fabrication and execution of events to instigate Castro's removal, the Governor's preemptive actions both caused a need for and legitimized use of police and military forces during the strike. At the same time, this allowed the state to frame its display of power as protecting citizens. Even more, the state's actions both created scenarios and involved Wisconsin citizens, protesters, and authorities in acting them out. Similar to the Pentagon's *scripting*, Schmedeman's declaration *plotted* imagined/anticipated events and "the embodied enactments that they prescribe."<sup>68</sup> The preemptive closure of plants could cause an immediate dairy shortage for consumers; it did result in consumers' stockpiling of products. The designation of "public welfare" milk could stimulate consumers to register themselves or their children; it manifested performatively state protections, which would be reinforced by the armed guards riding in "public welfare" trucks. The reopening of plants by petition could cause divisiveness amongst dairy farmers; it did result in milk dumping and

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<sup>67</sup> Tracy C. Davis, "Operation Northwoods: The Pentagon's Scripts for Overthrowing Castro," *The Drama Review* 50.1 (Spring 2006): 145.

<sup>68</sup> Davis, "Operation Northwoods" 145.

physical conflict to protect non-protesting farmers' property rights and consumers' rights to the milk supply.

Reports of pre-strike hoarding quickly followed the governor's proclamation. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* featured a picture of grocer Gust Blatz "dispensing several days' supply of farm products to Miss Dorothy Hendricks." Next to this a photograph depicted farmers' rushed attempts to deliver milk to the Luick Dairy plant before the suspension of deliveries began at midnight on 13 May.<sup>69</sup> The *Marshfield News-Herald* reported "Housewives are Hoarding Milk Butter and Eggs." In the article, store supplies of fresh and condensed milk in Milwaukee were said to be quickly exhausted the day before the strike. One grocer stated that a year's supply had been bought up in one day.<sup>70</sup> In the same edition of the *Marshfield News-Herald*, anecdotes of the first "Echoes of the Strike" reiterated consumers' rush on groceries and featured the tale of a local woman who unthinkingly "placed a bottle of buttermilk in the lunch box of her milk-loving husband, upon whom the full significance of the agrarian revolt did not dawn until he placed the bottle to his lips at lunch-time."<sup>71</sup> Though elsewhere it was reported that Health Commissioner Koehler was working with federal health officials to develop a milkless diet, it seems that the threat of an immediate shortage was sufficient to compel consumers to stock up.<sup>72</sup>

The day before the strike, articles about pre-strike petition signing by non-cooperating farmers littered the presses. Associated Press reports appeared in the *Sheboygan Press* and *Marshfield News-Herald*, stating that farmers in Kenosha, Burlington, Appleton, LaCrosse, and

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<sup>69</sup> "City Stocks Up for 'Siege' Rush Bottles to Meet Milk Demand," photo caption, *Milwaukee Sentinel* 13 May 1933: 2.

<sup>70</sup> "Housewives are Hoarding Milk Butter and Eggs" *Marshfield News-Herald* 13 May 1933: 3.

<sup>71</sup> "Echoes of the Strike," *Marshfield News-Herald* 13 May 1933: 1.

<sup>72</sup> "Milk Supply For Needy to be Permitted," *Sheboygan Press* 6 May 1933: 1.

Sheboygan were circulating petitions seeking the reopening of plants in their areas.<sup>73</sup>

Likewise, the *Wisconsin State Journal* reported that the Madison Milk Producers' Association signed petitions to reopen plants. By the time the evening edition of the *Daily Northwestern* was issued on the first full day of strike activity, the governor had reopened all but nineteen of Wisconsin's seventy-one counties for milk deliveries, and General Immell predicted that ten more counties would be reopened by Monday, 15 May.<sup>74</sup> (The counties that initially remained closed were Milk Pool strongholds.) Pool members responded to these first reopenings by questioning the authenticity of the petitions. The Governor's office refused Milk Pool officials' request to review the documents.<sup>75</sup> No evidence exists to confirm or invalidate the government's claims of authenticity. With the overnight withdrawal of the Holiday Association from the strike, officials may have felt that the counties in the northern and western portions of the state, where much less support for the Pool existed, would be less likely to support the strike. On the other hand, authorities' smooth coordination between midnight and the afternoon of 13 May of state-wide closure of all plants, farmers' collection of a majority of farmers' signatures, and then authorities' receipt of these petitions in over fifty counties gives cause for suspicion. Furthermore, numerous dairy plants were reported to have altogether ignored the governor's decree, remaining open despite mandated state-wide closure.<sup>76</sup> Within hours of the strike's start, trucks were (again) hauling milk.

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<sup>73</sup> "Appleton Unit is Opposed to Farm Strike," and "Do Not Believe Strike Will Affect Sheboygan," *Sheboygan Press* 12 May 1933: 1; "Many Groups Oppose Strike," *Marshfield News-Herald* 12 May 1933: 1.

<sup>74</sup> "Schmedeman Orders Milk Outlets Shut," *Daily Northwestern* 13 May 1933: 1.

<sup>75</sup> "Petitions not Public Record," *Marshfield News-Herald* 13 May 1933: 1; "State Checks on Milk 'Leaks,'" *Milwaukee Sentinel* 13 May 1933: 1.

<sup>76</sup> The governor's office had received reports stating that the Dairy Distributors, Inc. of Milwaukee refused to stop distributing milk to its regular customers, "Diary Defies Order," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 13 May 1933: 2. On 14 May,

On 12 May 1933, the day before the strike, Wisconsin Attorney General J.E. Finnegan legally defined “Peaceable Picketing” for the public: “Peaceable picketing is the mere act of inviting attention to the existence of a strike as by signs or banners and the seizure or destruction of property or the use of force or the use of threats and the calling of vile names is not peaceable picketing.”<sup>77</sup> The attorney general elaborated that “the blocking of roads so as to prohibit the transportation of persons and merchandise” constituted a “violation of peaceable picketing.”<sup>78</sup> That night, Walter Singler issued a statement ordering strikers to follow the rule of law:

All farmers in every territory are to withhold all farm produce peaceably on the farm.

Any picketing that may be done must be done in conformance with constitutional rights, in peaceful form. While farmers may assemble and ask trucks to stop, they can not use any obstruction. The highways must be kept clear.”<sup>79</sup>

Yet by the evening of the strike’s first day, after several milk dumpings had already occurred, Singler reportedly changed his mind. He cited the governor’s dubious reopening of dairy plants as the reason for intensified picketing. Singler stated: ““Our men in the closed counties are not going to sit still [...] The closed county men will picket the open counties and they’ll picket them thoroughly. Men can travel fast and far during a strike. Milk will not go through.””<sup>80</sup>

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the Winnebago county sheriff telephoned Immell regarding the Carver Creamery’s refusal to close. It was still open on the evening of 15 May. From Port Washington on 16 May, the district attorney reported, “Farmers are getting sore, saying that dairy companies were violating the Governor’s orders,” Report of Activities of the Adjutant General’s Office 13 - 18 May 1933 (Adjutant General’s report), p.7, 18, 29; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>77</sup> “‘Peaceable Picketing’ Defined by Finnegan,” *The Daily Northwestern* 15 May 1933: 2; “Picketing to be Permitted,” *Marshfield-News Herald* 12 May 1933: 1.

<sup>78</sup> “‘Peaceable Picketing’ Defined by Finnegan,” *The Daily Northwestern* 15 May 1933: 2

<sup>79</sup> “Singler Calls for Picketing,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* 13 May 1933: 2.

<sup>80</sup> “Trouble Ahead Singler States,” *Daily Northwestern* 13 May 1933: 1.



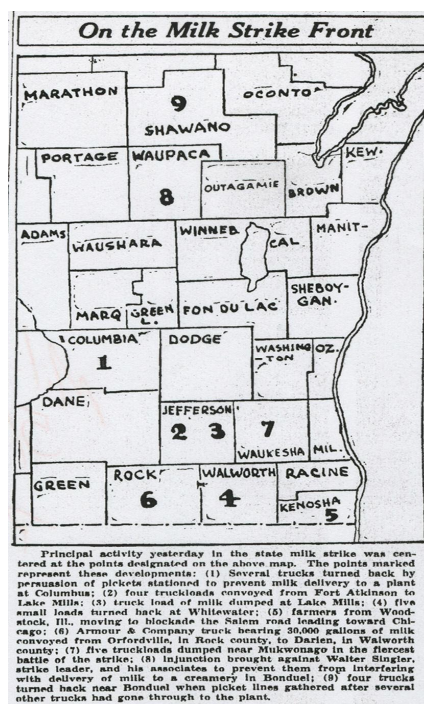


Figure 2.1. Counties involved in milk strike.

Source: "On the Milk Strike Front," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 15 May 1933: 2.

Once Governor Schmedeman reopened counties, the action of the Milk Pool transformed from strictly a strike into what Lofland refers to as *intervention* in the form of *blockade* and *occupation*.<sup>81</sup> Protesters combined withholding of their own products from processors with gathering on and barricading roads so that they could regulate the passage of dairy trucks. According to the Wisconsin attorney general, these methods were illegal and would justify deputies' and National Guardsmen's use of force against farmers. Milk Pool dairy farmers had to display withdrawn labor, while maintaining their ethical obligations to consumers. By dumping the commodity en route to processing plants, rather than stopping production on their own farms, Milk Pool protesters disrupted the operations of the food system that were impoverishing farmers. At the same time, by allowing "public welfare" milk to safely pass

<sup>81</sup> Lofland 265.

through picket lines or road blocks and by offering milk on their farms, protesters sought to retain their moral status as providers.

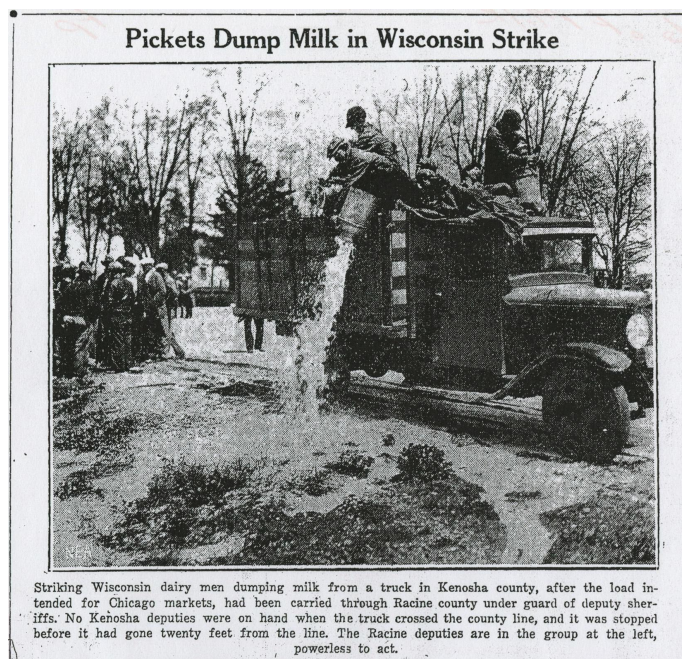
### **Spectacles and Spectators**

The protest occurred mainly in the eastern counties of the state along Lake Michigan, from the Illinois border north to Menominee County and as far west as Wood County. Roughly thirty counties included this area experienced some events associated with the protest: meetings, milk dumping, rallies, picketing, road blocks, farmer and deputy patrols, or fighting [see fig. 2.1]. Though newspapers attended to the various activities related to the strike, the recurrent action of milk dumping, which served as the impetus for violence, dominated media coverage. Performance studies scholar Baz Kershaw stresses that “[t]he media tends to pick out the performative precisely because the performative stages the dramas that the media considers to be the ‘news.’”<sup>82</sup> Kershaw’s assertion has merit, but he fails to consider the importance of specific tactics to the public, and he does not address the power of the media to make the banal dramatic through inclusion. Milk dumping’s tacit status as the protest’s most newsworthy aspect indicated not only a drive to report on the dramatic, but also the assumed significance of the action to the audience. Newspaper reports about the waning supply in relation to milk’s destruction by protesters may have bolstered consumers’ anxiety. Reports of hoarding suggest that citizens may have been concerned about obtaining milk. Additionally, despite the media’s ability to frame an event as a “spectacle” through coverage of the event as “news,” farmers actually made a spectacle of milk dumping. The Milk Pool did not engage in clandestine action to which spectators bore witness to only the effects. Destruction of milk occurred in open spaces at all

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<sup>82</sup> Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance* 98.

times of the day as farmers stopped trucks on local roadways and outside dairy plants.<sup>83</sup> Cans were yanked from trucks and milk was poured onto the roads. It was a public, highly visible act [see fig. 2.2].



**Figure 2.2. Milk Dumping.**

Source: "Pickets Dump Milk in Wisconsin Strike," *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune* 15 May 1933: 1.

In their efforts to trash milk, farmers encountered armed guards and deputies wielding nightsticks, bayonets, guns, and gas bombs [see fig. 2.3]. Former reporter Herbert Jacobs recalled what he witnessed during the protest:

<sup>83</sup> There were two incidents of milk destruction by contamination. Protesters poured kerosene into vats at H. Christman Dairy in Johnson Creek and nearby in Farmington at Christians Creamery. These acts occurred in the presence of plant workers and deputies. Thus, they demonstrate the purposeful visibility of food destruction. There is no evidence to support that protesters wished to harm consumers. "Parade at Lake Mills," *Sheboygan Press* 16 May 1933: 1; "Lake Mills Guard Doubled as Officials Hear Threats to Poison Milk, Bomb Plant," *Wisconsin State Journal* 16 May 1933: 1. Authorities arrested eight men in Shawano County because they threatened to dump kerosene into milk vats, Charles E. Lafferty, Captain 57<sup>th</sup> F.A. Brigade, Report of Activities of battery during the recent emergency, Whitefish Bay, WI, 27 May 1933; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison. Additionally, the commander of the Racine Co. deputies heard rumors that protesters were going to poison milk, Report of Company K to General Immell, n.d., p.1; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

The pickets took to cars instead of camping at crossroads. They swooped down on trucks [en route to processing plants] when no guardsmen were present, dumped the loads, and vanished. Near Mukwonago I saw a new wrinkle, when pickets tossed an old harrow in front of a line of trucks to stop them by puncturing the tires. But the authorities were even more forehanded. The lead truck had a snowplow, which brushed the harrow off the road. The deputies wore gas masks when they exploded their triple-action bombs. And the pickets wore leather gloves to toss the bombs right back before they exploded.<sup>84</sup>

News photographers captured varied incarnations of Jacobs' remembrance. A caption in the *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune* explained the powerlessness of authorities to act when three protestors tipped cans of milk over the side of a truck. In this instance, Racine County deputies were forced to watch milk puddle on the road because farmers dumped the milk just beyond the limits of deputies' authority, over the county line in Kenosha County [see fig. 2.2].<sup>85</sup> The *Milwaukee Sentinel* featured a picture of roughly thirty men standing in milk. The paper emphasized protestors' determination: "Disregarding gas, clubs, and fists, several hundred pickets succeeded in dumping 20,000 pounds of milk [more than 2,300 gallons] at the Walworth-Waukesha county line."<sup>86</sup> To the left of this photo, a member of Waukesha County's bomb squad was shown, accoutered in a gas mask and protective clothing, hurling a bomb onto a highway between East Troy and Mukwonago. Below this, another picture shows pickets' successful road barricade of railroad ties, harrows, and ice picks.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Jacobs 34.

<sup>85</sup> *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune* 15 May 1933:1.

<sup>86</sup> "Bomb Squad in Action Road Blocked Milk Goes into Ditch," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 15 May 1933.

<sup>87</sup> "Bomb Squad in Action Road Blocked Milk Goes into Ditch," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 15 May 1933.



**Figure 2.3. Tear gas used against pickets.**

Source: "Farmers Dump Milk as Tear Gas Flows," *The Daily Northwestern* 17 May 1933: 4.

Photo exposés like these offered mediated accounts of the protest to citizens. From the end of April to the beginning of June, protest stories saturated Wisconsin newspapers, putting the protest at the center of community life and making it unavoidable. Hundreds of newspaper articles, however, were the least invasive form of compelled observation. Reading a newspaper forced only acknowledgement not interest; readers could choose whether the events were significant to their lives.<sup>88</sup> The protest also impacted the daily life of citizens who did not directly encounter it on the streets. The governor's initial regulation of milk required extraordinary measures by citizens to ensure their supply. Citizens either had to stock up or register with the state Board of Health. Once the strike began, the availability of milk on farms, and the

<sup>88</sup> Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance* 28-9.

reopening of plants against the Pool's wishes, demanded that consumers confront the terms of their consumption. In her analysis of bodies in protest, performance scholar Susan Leigh Foster alludes to the way in which protesters stimulate spectators to perform an ideology by the choices they make in response to protesters' actions. She writes: "Monitoring the movements of all bodies in the space, protestors [exert] a subtle control over everyone's actions."<sup>89</sup> Foster cites Civil Rights lunch counter sit-ins as an example wherein African Americans performed the action of integration and equality by sitting beside white customers in a space designated for whites only. This resulted in ideological performances by spectators, including both customers and lunch counter employees, as they had to choose whether to leave, sit beside protesters, serve or refuse protesters service. The sprawling nature of Milk Pool protest activity suggests that spectator-protester proximity varied. Yet the Milk Pool still exercised control over consumers' actions. The protest transformed protesters' farms, roadside stands, dairy plants, and groceries into ethically contested sites. Unless refraining from usage, consumers had to choose from whom they would obtain dairy products, and in doing so physically perform their ideology. They had to decide if their own immediate biological security merited violation of the trust between producers and consumers. Was milk worth the cultural cost of farmers' loss of self-determination?

Two forms of live spectatorship also occurred: voluntary and unwilling. The protest's violation of everyday space created unwilling spectators. Due to the hundreds of patrols and mobile pickets, some Wisconsinites encountered protest participants during daily activities. Occupation of the northeastern portion of Wisconsin by these groups actually defined citizens' movement. For instance in Menasha, against warnings of pickets, Mrs. Strohmeier walked

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<sup>89</sup> Foster 4.

through barricades to attend church.<sup>90</sup> Literal fighting in the streets over milk impacted daily life, and some citizens were caught in the fray. One school cancelled classes because gas used during a fight between strikers and authorities at Durham Hill seeped into the building.<sup>91</sup> The *Wisconsin State Journal* reported that several women and children who had driven through the same protest site complained to county officials about suffering the effects of tear gas.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* wrote “Residents of the community were wrought up over the fight. They were especially irate because the children were not given an opportunity to clear out of the danger zone before the gas was hurled.”<sup>93</sup> The community’s outrage suggests that unwilling spectatorship was an unacceptable incursion because of the danger it posed to citizens going about their daily activities. Interestingly, the language used in newspapers places much of the blame for the risk on authorities not protesting farmers.

Alternately, voluntary spectatorship demonstrated some citizens’ desire to watch milk dumping. Newspaper reports note the draw to sites where action was anticipated and document post-action visits to locations where milk was spilled. The *Sheboygan Press* featured a photograph of “Strikers and Spectators Near Adell Today” [see fig. 2.4]. The caption stated that spectators had gathered at the Borden powdered milk plant on 16 May.<sup>94</sup> No other activity was described. As plants were often a site for dumping it seems probable that citizens congregated at one of the state’s most powerful dairy companies hoping to see some action. Newspapers’

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<sup>90</sup> “Woman Defies Barricade,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* 15 May 1933: 3.

<sup>91</sup> “Residents are Irate,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* 19 May 1933: 2.

<sup>92</sup> “Gas Bombs, Bayonets Flash in Milk Battles,” *Wisconsin State Journal* 18 May 1933: 4.

<sup>93</sup> “Gas Bombs” *Milwaukee Sentinel* 18 May 1933: 4.

<sup>94</sup> “Strikes and Spectators Near Adell Today,” *Sheboygan Press* 16 May 1933: 1.

coverage of other encounters between strikers and authorities mention spectators incidentally indicating that citizens felt milk dumping was worth watching. The 15 May *Milwaukee Sentinel* included a short article titled “Crowds Clutter Up Roads Seeking Strike Excitement.” The report illustrates citizens’ desire to see milk dumping first-hand and visit the sites of activity:

[T]housands of motorists cruised on the highways of Milwaukee and neighboring counties all yesterday afternoon.

Every rumor that milk was being dumped at some point brought a rush of cars, and all roads on which the farm strikers were picketing were jammed.

Highways in Waukesha county, Sheriff Arthur Moran said last night, carried the heaviest traffic yesterday they have had since 1929. Highway 14 had a steady stream headed south; Highway 36 was nearly as bad, and many thousands more were cruising about on Highways 55, 41, 19 and Capitol drive. [...]

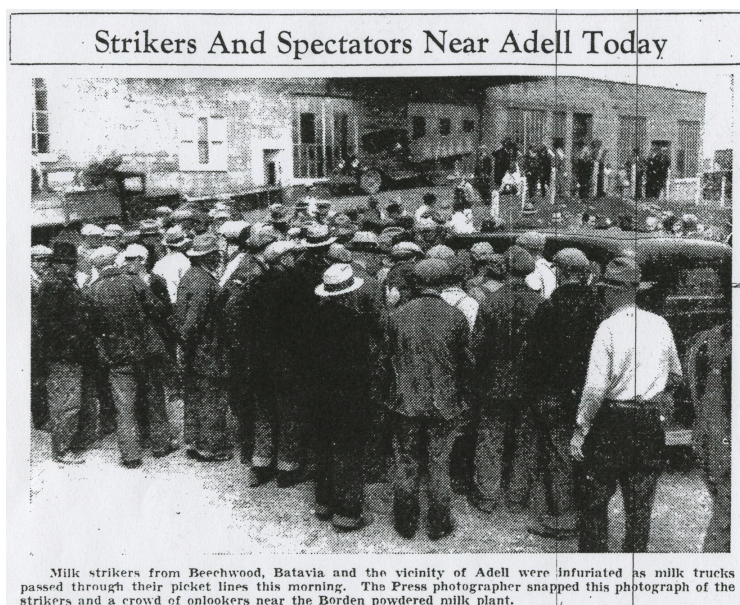
Although there were not many on hand at 9 a.m. when strikers and deputies engaged in their pitched battle near Mukwonago on Highway 14, thousands of motorists sought the spot in the afternoon. Evidence of the clash, in which tear bombs and ‘K.O.’ bombs were used by the officers was clearly visible. The pavement was white with milk for a considerable distance, and pools of water at the side of the road and even over the fence in the fields in some places were white.<sup>95</sup>

The paper does not indicate whether spectators were anti- or pro-Milk Pool, but it seems the act of milk dumping attracted spectators.

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<sup>95</sup> “Crowds Clutter Up Roads Seeking Strike Excitement,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* 15 May 1933: 3.





**Figure 2.4. Spectators.**

**Source:** “Strikers and Spectators Near Adell Today,” *Sheboygan Press* 16 May 1933: 1.

Milk dumping’s contestation of Kershaw’s assertion that the “*unexpected and the surprising* [acts that constitute protest] are especially potent weapons for [. . .] challenging authority” illuminates citizens’ desire to watch the Milk Pool protest.<sup>96</sup> In the Milk Pool strike, Wisconsinites’ knowledge, generated from a combination of pre-strike declarations and the strike’s antecedents, allowed them to decide in advance about whether to watch. Citizens expected milk dumping, and by cruising highways and appearing at plants they demonstrated that watching the display mattered. Perhaps the way in which each act would progress (whether violence would occur, if the farmers would actually get to dump the milk, etc.) could not be known beforehand. Still, only the exact times and places of the milk dumpings were unknown, and even then news coverage anticipated where milk dumping would occur. Citizens in cars racing to protest sites, and those crowding around plant entrances sought pleasure and

<sup>96</sup> Emphasis added, *The Radical in Performance* 97-9. Kershaw is concerned with creating a method for analysis of protest as performance; he is not attempting to discern motivations for spectatorship.

community affirmation. In his discussion of cultural performances, anthropologist Victor Turner states: “people become conscious, through witnessing [...], of the nature, texture, style, and given meanings of their own lives as members of a sociocultural community.”<sup>97</sup> Satisfaction stemmed from being in the right place at the right moment to witness something integral to the everyday lives of Wisconsin citizens.

Spectators entered harm’s way to watch milk dumping. Whereas danger was problematic for unwilling spectatorship, for some voluntary spectators risk may have been linked to pleasure. Warnings against attending the protest, such as the one issued on 18 May by the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, did not deter citizens from seeking out pickets. In fact, the language used by the newspaper indicates that persuading people not to attend was an issue. The notice reads: “WARNING! The Sentinel [sic] suggests that citizens stay away from picketed areas of the milk strike. There is grave danger of serious injury to sightseers and innocent bystanders.”<sup>98</sup> After an affray between authorities and protesters at Woodlawn Cemetery in Shawano County on 17 May, the *Sheboygan Press* reported that police released several spectators from custody after they “established their innocence as ‘bystanders.’”<sup>99</sup> On 18 May, gas bombs, which deputies had thrown into protesters’ trucks, affected the “hundreds of spectators” at a “battle” between 350 deputies and 1,000 strikers in Appleton.<sup>100</sup> On the evening of 16 May, a Racine deputy fired two shots at a car, injuring teenaged spectator Russell Holding. In one report, the car in which Holding was riding roused deputies’ suspicion because of its slow, repeated passes around an

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<sup>97</sup> Turner 22.

<sup>98</sup> “WARNING!,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* 18 May 1933: 1.

<sup>99</sup> “Deputies remain on duty in Shawano Trouble Zone,” *Sheboygan Press* 19 May 1933: 4.

<sup>100</sup> “Thousand Pickets Routed After Furious Fight,” *Wisconsin State Journal* 18 May 1933: 1.

area where strikers had gathered. The commanding officer told the driver to stop, but when he failed to do so the officer ordered a deputy to “get that car.”<sup>101</sup> Commenting on the incident, the district attorney emphasized the danger of spectatorship: “I believe it necessary to warn all persons to remain away from these so-called battle fronts. [...] No one knows just what will happen. Stay away, because peace officers can not [sic] distinguish between rioters and spectators when a riot breaks out.”<sup>102</sup> The district attorney’s need to be explicit about the inability of guards to differentiate between protesters and watchers attests to spectators’ belief in the ultimate safety of spectatorship.

Such reports demonstrate a middling ground of spectator-participant. Authorities’ misunderstanding about which persons were protesters afforded some spectators a brief embodied experience as participants. Based on the theatrical convention that watching does not “directly involve” the audience, it follows that spectators can vicariously experience but cannot suffer the consequences of participation. Writing about the space of performance, spectatorship, and participation, Yi-Fu Tuan asserts that separation is necessary to take pleasure in Tragedy: “A person can ‘enjoy’ a tragedy by sitting somewhere apart and watching.”<sup>103</sup> The audience’s reliance on not being the entertainment is vital to being entertained. Tuan points to both an audience’s sense of safety and their power; not quite *Schadenfreude*, but sympathy for the Other’s misfortune combined with pleasure in one’s own good fortune. In Davis’s terms, this is

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<sup>101</sup> “Farm Youth Shot During Gifford Riot,” *Sheboygan Press* 17 May 1933:15.

<sup>102</sup> “Strike’s First Bullet Victim is Near Death,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* 18 May 1933: 3.

<sup>103</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Space and Context,” *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, eds. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 242.

the “absorbed,” but not “engaged” spectator.<sup>104</sup> In the case of the Milk Pool, spectators could sympathize, but they could not guarantee their safety/separation – they could at any moment become the entertainment. Yet acting as spectator-participants enabled the thrill of momentary participation; they could physically experience the farmers’ plight, while being “spectators” not “protesters” provided them with the safety of social distance. Authorities’ confusion enabled spectators to try out the role of protester without demanding that they assume responsibility or consequence for their actions.

As Davis notes in her description of the experience of theatre-going, “[t]he communal act of viewing normally helps to forge a public realm, connecting private experience to the public; we reckon with our reactions privately but we do so literally in public.”<sup>105</sup> Crowds gathered at protest sites also had opportunities not only to see the action but to immediately respond to it amongst fellow community members or watch their fellow community members watching. Those who watched others watching (or participating) may have theatricalized the event, engaged critically with how others “caught up in [the event ...] have no awareness of what opinion history will bestow,” and aware of “the dialectics of the events’ transpiring.”<sup>106</sup>

Milk dumping converged with theatrical performance in another manner. Milk was a central symbol and an important material object for farmers and citizens of Wisconsin. Its inclusion indicates the assumed emotional and symbolic efficacy of its (mis)use. Andrew Sofer writes, “the prop itself is defined as a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor, its meaning – those denotations and connotations for which it stands –

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<sup>104</sup> Davis, “Theatricality” 154.

<sup>105</sup> Davis, “Theatricality” 137.

<sup>106</sup> Davis, “Theatricality” 132-3.

is a *temporal contract* established between the actor and spectator for the duration of performance.”<sup>107</sup> Rather than farmers’ manipulation constituting milk’s meaning during the protest, the cultural meaning of milk – its vital importance to daily life – conditioned the meaning of the action. As milk retained its ontological meaning; milk dumping evoked issues of identity.

Anthropologist Sidney Mintz uses the term “ritualized” to refer to the ways in which a food object is invested with meaning. In short, “the spread of internal meanings [significance for everyday life] can be stimulated and manipulated; the simultaneous control of both the foods themselves and the meanings they are made to connote can be a means to pacific domination.”<sup>108</sup> Milk, of course, has a long and complex symbolic history, but it also had a specific place in 1930s US culture and therefore meanings immediate to the socio-cultural situation would be invoked by its (mis)use. In the 1930s, milk consumption structured consumers’ daily lives and was a “ritualized” symbol. Unlike some symbols which foreground that they are “stand-ins,” milk embodied the thing itself. It did not just represent good parenting, or sound nutrition. Ensuring that your children had milk *was* good parenting, as milk *was* an essential food. Food industries’ product promotions, philanthropic organizations’ campaigns, scientific developments in nutrition, and institutionalization of milk’s significance through government programs all contributed to this food’s paramount importance to US citizens. The USDA Extension Service produced films like *Milk for You and Me*, which emphasized the nutritional value of daily milk

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<sup>107</sup> Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) 14.

<sup>108</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* 122, 20-2.

consumption.<sup>109</sup> During the Progressive Era, the Children’s Bureau could not keep up with demand for its pamphlet, “Child Care and Milk: The Indispensable Food for Children.”<sup>110</sup> Suffragists used the distribution of tainted milk by crooked dealers as reason to extend women’s civic role.<sup>111</sup> “By the 1930s [...] [advertisements] were encouraging mothers to make comparisons between the perfect ‘test children’ in [milk] advertisements and their own.”<sup>112</sup> Harvey Levenstein’s social history of food shows that by the 1930s milk’s role expanded. It became indispensable to adults, whereas it was earlier only imperative to children and infants. Recommended consumption levels rose alongside a more inclusive target population; the recommendation for adults was one pint daily, and for children it was one quart each day. With the onset of the Depression, studies of low-income groups identified the inability to obtain milk as the number one problem regarding increasingly inadequate access to food.<sup>113</sup> Food’s inextricability from biological imperatives and citizens’ belief in milk’s necessity, rather than the perception of milk as a symbol of well-being – perhaps only a difference of degree – morally invested its (mis)use.

Symbols ultimately lack authenticity, consequently limiting the moral implications of their use. They are not the thing itself, and therefore their use cannot immediately impact everyday life. (Mis)use of food violates the boundary between representative act and actuality.

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<sup>109</sup> *Milk for You and Me*; Motion Picture Films, ca. 1915-ca.1959; Records of the Extension Services, 1888-1996, Record Group 33 (RG 33); NACP.

<sup>110</sup> Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 55-6.

<sup>111</sup> Leslie Goddard, “‘Something to Vote for’: Theatricalism in the U.S. Women’s Suffrage Movement,” diss., Northwestern University, 2001, 94.

<sup>112</sup> DuPuis 105.

<sup>113</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty* 59.

The immorality associated with a wasteful act is based in foods' most intimate, corporeal cultural meanings. A food instilled with the status "healthful" or "necessary" is of greater moral significance than one regarded as pleasurable but non-essential. It follows that (mis)using a food constructed as a treat has comparably less severe implications than (mis)using foods deemed imperative to well-being. Real waste of a very important food makes the material effects of symbolic acts concrete.

The degree of moral significance also depends upon the way in which the users re-purpose the food. Regardless of the new purpose to which the food is put, its association with "waste" is inescapable. However, the way in which food is acted upon increases or lessens the offensiveness of waste. For example, the Corn Palace as a (mis)use of food is not profoundly offensive. This is due to the fact that a new function (homage to settlers and South Dakota) has been substituted for the old function (feeding the body). Additionally, though the Corn Palace prohibits consumption of some corn, it does not thwart the operations of the food system. In contrast, when food is wasted, but not re-purposed the (mis)use of the food is decidedly more morally charged. The most extreme instance of this occurs when disabling consumption is the goal of the food's use. The Milk Pool's milk dumping falls into this category. Though protesters poured out other farmers' milk to prevent its sale on the market (but not to inhibit consumers' access to milk), impeding the functions of a food system is directly related to the prevention of consumption. Still, the manner of the (mis)use cannot be separated from the user. Thus, while the Pool demonstrated concern for consumers, inaccessibility of milk was foregrounded as a primary (potential) consequence of milk dumping.

In Lofland's terms, the farmers' milk dumping is not "protest." It is "violent struggle": "the strategy of physically damaging or destroying property or other humans."<sup>114</sup> The dissociation of protest from violence suggests that the legitimacy of the action as *protest*, an extralegal means of demonstrating complaints and requesting change, is reliant upon maintenance of private property entitlements and the human right to life. Though the Milk Pool did engage in fighting with authorities, there is no evidence that the protesters instigated physical combat. Fights with authorities often followed the gassing of farmers: protesting farmers responded to authorities' physical attacks. More importantly, the issue of private property was fundamental to the protest, and the Pool's destruction of milk made apparent the imbalance in enforcement of property rights. The state gave priority to physical violation of property rights over economic violation. National Guardsmen and deputies were licensed to physically harm protesters in order to protect private property, specifically milk.

The Milk Pool's demand for cost of production was a property rights claim – one that was particularly urgent because unlike other agricultural products, which could be stored for months, milk is produced and must go to market daily. This meant that farmers had to endure immediate losses by accepting low prices or by watching their product spoil. Farmers compared receipt of prices below cost of production with theft, a clear violation of property rights. As Wisconsin resident Ingvald Quam rhetorically asked in a *Wisconsin State Journal* interview, "Is a storekeeper considered a traitor to his country because he decides to let an article stay on his shelf rather than sell it to you below cost?"<sup>115</sup> The allusion to American fidelity was not only Quam's attempt at persuasive speech, but it was actually appropriate, as farmers' call for

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<sup>114</sup> Lofland 261.

<sup>115</sup> "Reporter Learns View of Farmers on Strike," *Wisconsin State Journal* 13 May 1933: 4.



legislation ensuring the value of their products evoked the constitutional entitlement of legal protection of property. Article V of the Constitutional Amendments states, “nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.”<sup>116</sup> Of course, the US government and corporations had not taken farmers’ products for public use.



**Figure 2.5. The hungry.**

Source: *Chicago Daily Tribune* n.d., clipping from microfilm; WCMR, 1925-1943; WHS-Madison.

Nevertheless, private ownership of food is tenuous. An anti-strike illustration, which appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, demonstrates this point [see fig. 2.5]. Beneath a drawing “sketched from [a] photograph” of farmers pouring milk onto a road is a drawing of a gaunt woman holding an infant and a bottle. In front of her, her thin son looks up at the farmers. Clinging to the back of her skirt, a daughter cries: “I’m hungry.”<sup>117</sup> This drawing shows the perceptions that (1) hunger and want produces the right to food and (2) that farmers are obligated to consumers. These claims, however, deny farmers’ economic rights. The drawing obscures

<sup>116</sup> US Const. Amendments Art. 5.

<sup>117</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* n.d., clipping from microfilm; WCMR, 1925-1943; WHS-Madison.

the fact that farm foreclosures occurred as a direct outcome of farmers earning less than cost of production. Recurrent undervaluing of dairy products resulted in the legal, though unjust, revocation of farm ownership and, ultimately, the cessation of a way of life.

Farmers' moral obligation as food producers overrode the reality that they could not continue to produce without meeting their costs of production. If the nation had enjoyed food security, regardless of whether the security stemmed from ample supply or livelihood security/purchasing power, the likelihood of serious engagement with milk dumping seems minimal. Because food insecurity (in the form of unstable access, but not lack of supply) existed, its perceived cause and pervasiveness shaped perception of milk's (mis)use. Localized food insecurity enables two conflicting responses: "The walls that grant us our privacy and the basis for no small amount of complacency allow us also to imagine the starving as less repulsive and more pathetically deserving of our attention than their immediate presence would tend to make them, but the same immured privacy lets us simply tune them out by turning off the evening news."<sup>118</sup> It seems likely then that the widespread food insecurity experienced during the Great Depression would lessen the probability of apathy due to an increase in visibility and personal vulnerability. Additionally, the economic crisis of the Depression generated widespread food insecurity caused by livelihood insecurity. Unemployment and poverty decreased stable access to food because of rural and urban citizens' lack of purchasing power. Moreover, visible hunger was matched by visible supply, i.e. the "paradox." The Hoover administration was found culpable for this situation. The Roosevelt administration, on the other hand, had the responsibility of solving the problem. It strove to combat the crisis through a combination of food distribution programs, relief, and legislative measures for livelihood

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<sup>118</sup> William Ian Miller, "Gluttony," *Representations* 60 (Fall 1997): 100.

security. The Milk Pool's (mis)use of milk in the midst of prevalent food insecurity while the government was working to alleviate the problem demonstrated disdain for federal measures. Specifically, it displayed the Pool's perception of inequitable application of federal protections. On the other hand, if the government guaranteed parity with production costs (plus profit), dairy farmers could have milk ready for consumers almost immediately. Due to the unique nature of milk production, relative to the lengthy growing seasons of other agricultural commodities, consumers would not suffer irrevocable effects from the strike. According to the Pool, Wisconsin consumers and citizens would only suffer if dairy farmers no longer existed.

Transportation of milk to processing plants during the strike blatantly undercut the efforts of farmers to obtain a fair price for their product, a price necessary to ensure their survival. Moreover, non-protesting farmers were afforded police protection, a tangible measure of protecting property. The assurance to protesting farmers that the state government would respect the withholding action (and by doing so assist in the protection of farmers' property) was violated through the questionable reopening of plants. Though non-protesting farmers were the strikebreakers, the government's allowance of milk distribution without economic provisions for cost of production perpetuated the exploitation of farmers on both sides. Both those accepting prices below the cost of production and those facing National Guardsmen in an effort to gain a fair price suffered.

Milk (mis)use in the protest framed the event as an "embedded performance," while preserving its "reality." Spectators, authorities, and journalists distinguished milk dumping from and emphasized it above the other elements of protest. Deborah Geis discusses dramatists' "[awareness] of the spectacle inherent in the theatrical presentation of food and excess, as well as the pleasure of juxtaposing the corporeal/tangible [...] realm of real food with the

fictionalized/vicarious/untouchable realm of staged food.”<sup>119</sup> I contend that food (mis)use demonstrates a similar allure based on the *novelty of use* within the real, rather than the “novelty of its [food’s] ‘realness’ within the fictitious.”<sup>120</sup> Public disruption of food’s presumed purpose distinguishes the action from everyday behavior; doing something with food other than consuming it is an act out of the ordinary. However, the morality attached to food refuses dismissal of the act as inconsequential; it is therefore something too important and desirable to witness. Food (mis)use has a draw because it is unusual, but it also thwarts anti-theatrical degradation as trivial play. A morally significant performance is created because of food’s biological necessity. Regardless of actual availability of food, spectators become personally invested in the wasteful act through the conflation of their needs with the notion of threatened access. The importance of the act becomes more acute if spectators feel their personal access will be impacted and if the food is culturally significant.

Farmers pouring milk onto roads was indeed out of the ordinary; the actors (food producers) engaged in the act of food (mis)use making it even more so. Also, because milk was both the “thing itself” and stood for the cultural life of Wisconsin, its destruction demanded notice. Cultural belief in milk’s importance to well-being created an immediate, physical connection, which in turn created a sense of personal investment in the dumping; its destruction within an act of protest stimulated engagement with the meaning of farmers’ food (mis)use. Milk connoted Wisconsin’s livelihood, culture, and landscape and embodied wellness/life.

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<sup>119</sup> Deborah Geis, “Feeding the Audience: Food, Feminism, and Performance Art,” *Eating Culture*, eds. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 218.

<sup>120</sup> Geis 218.

Farmers' (mis)use of milk called into question how the cultural, economic, and actual lives of Wisconsin citizens would be sustained without dairy farmers.

### **For Consumers' Welfare**

The National Guard had been on duty beginning on Monday, 15 May when the Governor ordered their service in the following capacity: "The members of all units will be in civilian dress and will be prepared to serve as civil deputies to assist the sheriffs in the affected counties in maintaining law and order."<sup>121</sup> Governor Schmedeman repeatedly insisted that use of Guard did not establish martial law.<sup>122</sup> No evidence details the reason the state initially deployed guardsmen without uniforms as "civilian deputies" [see fig. 2.6]. However, several observations by guardsmen and statements by General Immell and the Governor suggest that officials tried to minimize the Guard's visibility because using the nation's reserve military force against farmers made citizens and state officials uncomfortable. Despite Guard's appearance, during the Milk Pool protest, milk dumping and military force were inseparable. Fighting between protesters and authorities shaped the morality of property destruction. Two of the biggest fights – in Shawano and Waukesha counties – occurred in order to prevent dumping. Guards and deputies used gas, bayonets, and clubs against protesters to disperse strikers from roads: that is, to protect milk.

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<sup>121</sup> Adjutant General's report, p.15; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>122</sup> "Immell Tells Guardsmen to Open Plants," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 16 May 1933: 2.



**Figure 2.6. Civil deputies.**

Source: “Militia On Duty In Wisconsin Milk Strike,” *Sheboygan Press* 18 May 1933: 6.

During the May strike, Shawano County was a hotbed of strike activity and Sheriff Otto Druckery’s failure to support use of the Guard against pickets led to his dismissal. On 15 May, Colonel Holden of the 128<sup>th</sup> National Guard Infantry forced Sheriff Druckery to resign his post. In the Colonel’s report to General Immell, Druckery’s sympathy with the strikers gave the Colonel cause to classify the sheriff as “physically and mentally weak.”<sup>123</sup> The sheriff’s non-cooperation with the state and National Guard during the first two days of the strike entailed his refusal to deputize additional men, his unwillingness to disperse with gas a group of 1,500 strikers gathered at the Badger Cooperative Dairy, and his disinclination to call in the National Guard as reinforcements. The sheriff’s actions reflected those of February when he refused measures urged by the Colonel until he “ascertain[ed] what the majority of the people

<sup>123</sup> William A. Holdem, Colonel 128<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Suspension of Otto Druckery, Sheriff of Shawano County, report to the Adjutant General, Wisconsin National Guard 128<sup>th</sup> Infantry Headquarters, Wisconsin Veterans Home, Wisconsin, 31 May 1933 (Holdem report), p.2; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

wanted.”<sup>124</sup> Druckery’s (in)action enabled the Milk Pool to re-close this county after the Governor had reopened it.

On the night of 15 May 1933, 250 National Guard troops deployed to Shawano County because of fighting that had occurred earlier in the afternoon in which 1,000 strikers overtook deputies and dumped 2,000 pounds (approximately 233 gallons) of milk.<sup>125</sup> On the morning of 16 May, authorities took twenty-nine prisoners and closed Shawano county plants following another struggle in which strikers used clubs and stones against deputies.<sup>126</sup> At this time, based on reports that the Milk Pool would concentrate its forces in Shawano the next day, Colonel Schantz requested three additional National Guard units and General Immell telephoned sheriffs of surrounding counties requesting that they prevent strikers from entering Shawano.<sup>127</sup> The General then telephoned the Secretary of War to ask for an Army plane to send additional supplies of 500 fast burning CN (chloroacetophenone) tear gas candles and 200 CN-DM (diphenylaminochloroarsine or “adamsite”) tear gas candles. General Drum of the War Department agreed to send the requested supply of CN candles, but offered a smaller number of CN-DM candles because of their capacity for bodily harm. According to the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, “DM was first produced during World War I. Adamsite was not toxic enough for the battlefield, but it proved to be too drastic for use against civilian mobs; it was banned for use against civilian populations in the 1930s in the Western

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<sup>124</sup> Holdem report, p.2; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>125</sup> “1,000 Pickets Stone, Club Deputies in Wild Battle; Six Farmers Arrested,” *Wisconsin State Journal* 15 May 1933: 1.

<sup>126</sup> Nicholas M. Schantz, Lt. Co., A.G.D., Wisconsin Nation Guard, Assistant Adjutant General, Report on Milk Strike 23 May 1933; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>127</sup> Adjutant General’s report, p.26; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

nations.”<sup>128</sup> General Immell insisted on the need of CN-DM tear gas because of the severity of the threat in Shawano.<sup>129</sup> While deploying soldiers and prepared to use military force, civilian dress may have been an attempt by the Governor and state officials to visually trick the public and disguise the militaristic purpose of the Guard.



**Figure 2.7. Civil deputies in Gas Masks.**

Source: “Ready for Showdown at Shawano,” *The Milwaukee Journal* 17 May 1933: 1.

The Guards’ everyday attire and designation as “civil deputies” failed to diminish the perception that the state was being governed by force because journalists employed combat metaphors, the Guard and/or sheriff’s deputies (civilian clothing makes it difficult to tell which men serve in which capacities) posed for press photos in gas masks and bearing arms, and these

<sup>128</sup> CN causes eye irritation, tearing, burning pain, and respiratory discomfort. DM causes vomiting. “Detailed Facts about Vomiting Agent Adamsite (DM),” 218-17-1096, *U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine*, 26 February 2006 <<http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/dts/docs/detdm.pdf>>. I am grateful to Lt. Colonel James Storey, USMC Ret. for directing me to this information.

<sup>129</sup> Adjutant General’s report, p.27; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.



deputies showed off their equipment and sometimes misbehaved in the counties where they were posted [see fig. 2.7]. On 16 May, Senator Hunt offered support to Governor Schmedeman but questioned his use of force. During a debate in which Sen. Polakowski's resolution to sanction the Pool's distribution of free milk to Milwaukee's needy was voted down, Senator Hunt stated: "When you put your army in the field and the truck drivers of the big milk companies, armed with guns, go on the highways to shoot down our farmers it is about time we wake up."<sup>130</sup> The Milwaukee Federated Trades Council denounced the governor's actions, stating in a resolution that he "assumed dictatorial powers to protect large trust owners," and "called out the national guard merely disguised as special deputies."<sup>131</sup>

Guardsmen also reported citizen displeasure at their presence. At Tess Corners, Fred J. Mattingly, troop commander in Waukesha County, ordered Captain Baumgarde to remove his men from the streets to Gridly Dairy and "not make a display of the men and weapons."<sup>132</sup> Following this he found that businessmen and community members "were very much pleased and [they] seemed to have a different feeling towards the whole situation after the men were made less conspicuous."<sup>133</sup> The unease caused by the Guard's presence suggests that citizens did not feel reassured by the patrols. Rather, citizens may have perceived deployment of the Guard as an extreme and suppressive measure. In another instance, "Col. Williams called the sheriff of Juneau Co. in regard to the resentment of people at Mayville that deputies were quartered in Turner Hall. Sheriff said the fact of the matter is that they are in sympathy with the strike and

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<sup>130</sup> "Senate Avoids Interference in Wisconsin Milk Strike," *Sheboygan Press* 16 May 1933: 1.

<sup>131</sup> "Angry Crowd of 150 Storms into the Courthouse," *Daily Northwestern* 18 May 1933: 5.

<sup>132</sup> Fred J. Mattingly, Comdg. Troops in Waukesha County, 16-19 May 1933, Report to Adjutant General (Mattingly report), p.2; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>133</sup> Mattingly report, p.2; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

are trying to squeeze the deputies out of the city.” At Shiocton, where Singler resided, “a few individuals [...] spoke very bitterly over the fact that the National Guard had been called out for service in the strike area.”<sup>134</sup>

Reports about troops’ poor behavior suggest that it was not only Pool supporters who may have wanted deputies off of their streets. On 17 May, Col. Williams telephoned Captain Mattingly to report “troops were not very courteous on the streets.”<sup>135</sup> The Captain assured the Colonel that he would “see that [troops] acted in a more dignified manner.”<sup>136</sup> Following the strike, the *Appleton Post-Crescent* published a letter to the editor from an Ontagamie County resident that described special deputies’ crass behavior: “When it is our misfortune to have to use means by which to gain our ends, those who are deputized to keep peace and order at least can refrain from vile and profane remarks. [...] Surely, it is a citizen’s right to be able to walk through the streets of your city without being subject to remarks common among such men.”<sup>137</sup> Despite this citizen’s anti-strike attitude, the letter expresses great offense at the violation of moral standards by the special deputies, whom the citizen calls “jail birds” and “detriments to human welfare.” By differentiating the special deputies as not only criminal but damaging to well-being, this citizen questions these men’s authority and the state’s judgment in deputizing them. The letter also suggests that the deputies were not seen as members of the community. Rather, their presence represented an unpleasant invasion of the state’s power on this resident’s life. The lack of citizen support for these special deputies may suggest that some citizens

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<sup>134</sup> Edward F. Schmidt, Shawano, Shiocton and Milwaukee, 17-19 May 1933, Report to Adjutant General, p.2; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>135</sup> Adjutant General’s report, p.41; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>136</sup> Adjutant General’s report, p.41; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>137</sup> Letter to *Appleton Post-Crescent* editor, reprinted in *Wisconsin Dairyman’s News* 1.8 (June 1933): 7.

doubted the governor's claim, as stated in his proclamation, that the Guard was deployed to defend the welfare of citizens by ensuring safe transport of dairy products.

Daily newspapers contributed to the legibility of state-sanctioned military action through the use of martial metaphors such as, “war,” “battle,” and “showdown” and special attention to weaponry. A report in the *Sheboygan Press* about a 16 May incident in Shawano stated: “Shawano resembled an armed camp although none of the deputies is in uniform. The sight of guns on the hips of guardsmen, however, seems to have taken effect.”<sup>138</sup> The *Wisconsin State Journal* reported on the movement of troops and additional tear gas into the area under a headline threatening a massive battle: “Call for More Deputies at Shawano: State's Army of 600 Fears New Threat of 10,000 Invaders.”<sup>139</sup> A 17 May *Milwaukee Sentinel* photo of seventeen strikers gathering rocks set the scene of the predicted battle in the county. Calling the strikers a “motley but determined crew,” the sight was compared with the “barbed wire entanglements of France” and said to have the “aura of war.”<sup>140</sup> An adjacent story emphasized the mass of 2,000 National Guardsmen and deputies called out to Shawano. The mixture of guardsmen, sheriff's deputies, and non-striking farmers and Native Americans from the Menominee reservation, who were sworn in as special deputies, were also referred to as a “motley crew.”<sup>141</sup>

On 18 May 1933, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* described the movements of the Shawano county battle in great detail. Converging on Cemetery Hill, a twenty-mile area located between two cemeteries, strikers joined by Native Americans from the Oneida reservation lined the

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<sup>138</sup> “Striker Hurt in Fight at Shawano,” *Sheboygan Press* 17 May 1933: 1.

<sup>139</sup> Willard R. Smith, “Call for More Deputies at Shawano: State's Army of 600 Fears New Threat of 10,000 Invaders,” *Wisconsin State Journal* 16 May 1933: 1.

<sup>140</sup> “Determined Strikers Face Deputies at Shawano,” photograph, *Milwaukee Sentinel* 17 May 1933: 1.

<sup>141</sup> “Guardsmen Rushed to Shawano As Threat of Trouble Grows,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* 17 May 1933: 3.

highway. When guardsmen and deputies arrived in gas masks, strikers reportedly fled in an attempt to avert the gas bombs' effects. However, barbed wire trapped many pickets, and authorities clubbed strikers prior to their arrests.<sup>142</sup> In all, the Guard captured just under 200 men.<sup>143</sup>

On the same day, a violent confrontation took place at Durham Hill in southern Waukesha County. According to details reported by Second Lieutenant Wood, the Guard arrived at Durham Hill via truck at 9:00 a.m. Strikers "marched thru [the Guard's] rank with U.S. colors flying."<sup>144</sup> Pool leaders then made speeches. During an attempt to arrest one of the leaders, fighting ensued. The pickets armed themselves with rocks. By 3:15 p.m., the guards received support from three additional units. They dispersed the group of approximately 300 strikers with gas, bayonets, and side arms. Following this, the Guard escorted seven milk trucks to the county line.<sup>145</sup> One day's warning enabled authorities to generate a spectacular show of force at Cemetery Hill and allowed the *Milwaukee Sentinel* to capture the battles at Cemetery Hill and Durham Hill in a photo exposé. It was titled "Milk Strike War Told in Pictures."<sup>146</sup>

At the same time, Schmedeman and Immell used allegations of communist agitators and other "outsiders" to help justify military force and obscure use of such force against farmers. On 17 May, the *Wisconsin State Journal* reported Immell's statement that of thirty strikers arrested

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<sup>142</sup> "Jail 250 in Shawano Fight," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 18 May 1933: 3.

<sup>143</sup> "Jail 250 in Shawano Fight," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 18 May 1933: 3; "Milk Strikers Routed by Gas In Battle," photo caption, *Marshfield News-Herald* 19 May 1933: 1.

<sup>144</sup> Wilbert E. Ryan, Comdg. 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Co., Wisconsin National Guard, Janseville, WI, Report of Activities 332<sup>nd</sup> Tank Co. and attached troops of 121<sup>st</sup> F.A. Band, Janseville, Wis., Waukesha County, 16 May 1933 (Ryan report), p.2; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>145</sup> Ryan report, p.2; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>146</sup> "Milk Strike War Told in Pictures," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 18 May 1933.

in Milwaukee, twenty-five were communists and that “cars from Indiana and Illinois filled with *strangers*” were infiltrating strike areas.<sup>147</sup> Immell stated that these uninvited guests warranted a new policy: “There will be no dickering with the strikers from now on, officials revealed, the strike will be broken and counties open for delivery of milk will remain open.”<sup>148</sup> Authorities had been attempting to negatively distinguish Pool members from Wisconsin citizens since the beginning of the strike. On the first day of the strike, Arthur M. Evans was ordered to keep Singler, referred to in documents as “Mr. X,” “under surveillance and report any of his private or public utterances which might be construed as inciting to riot, as un-American, etc.”<sup>149</sup> Evans failed in this task. In his efforts to keep Singler under watch, Evans traveled through Madison, Milwaukee, Shiocton, Kaukauna, Marathon, and Marshfield, and found that Singler and other Pool officials continually warned strikers against violence.<sup>150</sup> From an interview with two brothers in Shiocton, Evans could only offer unsubstantiated speculation about Singler’s immorality: “they became evasive and naturally this would cause one to wonder if this indicates weakness on the part of Mr. X along this line.”<sup>151</sup>

Throughout the strike, there were a few rumblings that *foreign* elements – communists and thugs – instigated violence. After allegations that communists were attempting to participate

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<sup>147</sup> Emphasis added, “State Moves to Bring Strike to Crisis; Fears Reds Seeking Control of Farmers,” *Wisconsin State Journal* 17 May 1933: 1.

<sup>148</sup> “State Moves to Bring Strike to Crisis; Fears Reds Seeking Control of Farmers,” *Wisconsin State Journal* 17 May 1933: 6.

<sup>149</sup> Arthur M. Evans, Report to Adjutant General, Madison, WI, 13 May 1933; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>150</sup> Arthur M. Evans, Report to Adjutant General, Shiocton, WI, 14 May 1933; Arthur M. Evans, Report to Adjutant General, Shiocton, Kaukauna, Marathon, Marshfield, 17 May 1933; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>151</sup> Arthur M. Evans, Report to Adjutant General, Shiocton, WI, 15 May 1933; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

in the strike in Oshkosh, Singler stated that the Pool would not allow “red agitators” into their ranks.<sup>152</sup> Singler’s performative utterance, like the flags held by Pool members at Durham Hill, reiterated Milk Pool farmers’ Americanness. In communications with Immell, commanding guards and sheriffs reported three separate accounts of outsiders, including “city hoodlums” and communists, damaging property and participating in affrays.<sup>153</sup> Herbert Jacobs also recollected that some “jobless city sympathizers” joined the Pool’s efforts.<sup>154</sup> Allegations that fighting was caused by outsiders enabled authorities to disavow their use of force against farmers and supportive urban neighbors. These “outsiders” also enabled Pool members to disavow their part in creating violence.

On 18 May, the governor ordered all guards into uniform, but General Immell asserted that troops were still acting in a civilian capacity:

National guardsmen in uniform and carrying rifles with bayonets fixed patrolled Wisconsin milk strike trouble zones today to prevent violence as the governor opened the entire state for movement of dairy products.

Although fully equipped for military duty, most of the guardsmen still served as deputies under orders of sheriffs they were assisting. [...] Adjutant General Ralph M.

Immell stated emphatically that martial law does not exist anywhere in the state.<sup>155</sup>

The concomitant reopening of the entire state with visibly militarized authorities contradicted the denial of martial law. It sent a message that the government considered use of military tactics

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<sup>152</sup> “1,000 Pickets Stone Deputies in Battle,” *Wisconsin State Journal* 15 May 1933: 4.

<sup>153</sup> Adjutant General’s report, p.22, 33-5; Immell Papers, 1908-1960; WHS-Madison.

<sup>154</sup> Jacobs 34.

<sup>155</sup> “Farmer is Run Down By Truck,” *Marshfield News-Herald* 18 May 1933: 2.

and arms a legitimate means of ensuring economic functions. Most specifically, it demonstrated that the Governor felt that ensuring milk's safety warranted use of artillery and force. The Pool called the state's use of the Guard "Prussianized and un-American" and refused to call off the strike until the state discharged these special deputies.<sup>156</sup>

When the strike ended on 19 May 1933 attendees at the Governor's public address booed General Immell, "who was criticized for his action in deputizing national guardsmen to control the strike."<sup>157</sup> Actions of sheriff's deputies also met with criticism. Farmers' affidavits claiming that deputies attacked pickets without provocation led to two opposing opinions regarding deputies' authority.<sup>158</sup> Still, perhaps the most damaging censure came from state representatives. On the day the strike ended, the Wisconsin State Senate rejected a resolution acknowledging the Senate's "alarm at the unwarranted use of military power to suppress the milk strike and to subdue the farmers into unconditional surrender."<sup>159</sup> However, the proposal was rejected only after three hours of debate during which the Senate decided to reject all proposals commending or condemning the governor's use of the Guard.<sup>160</sup>

The Pool and Governor Schmedeman issued a joint statement which blamed violence on "outsiders" and affirmed the fine character of Pool members:

The undersigned members [...] asserting the right of the farmer to withhold his products in order to gain his just demands in an orderly and peaceful way, deplores the fact that, in

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<sup>156</sup> "State Acts to Prevent Red Control of Strike," *Wisconsin State Journal* 17 May 1933: 6.

<sup>157</sup> "Thousands Journey Here for Celebration," *Wisconsin State Journal* 19 May 1933: 1.

<sup>158</sup> "Officials War Over Use of Cops in Strike," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 19 May 1933: 3.

<sup>159</sup> "State Senate Stays Neutral in Milk Strike," *Wisconsin State Journal* 19 May 1933: 14.

<sup>160</sup> "State Senate Stays Neutral in Milk Strike," *Wisconsin State Journal* 19 May 1933: 14.

his making said demands, outside and undesirable elements have entered upon unlawful activities of intimidation and violence, and the said Milk Pool emphatically repudiates such elements as undesirable and uninvited allies.

As good citizens of the state of Wisconsin the Milk Pool members join with the governor in condemnation of such unlawful activities.<sup>161</sup>

The statement absolves Pool members of violence, tacitly acknowledging farmers' Americanness and their importance to the state.

In a speech given in front of 5,000 farmers, as well as the Governor and other officials, Milk Pool attorney William Rubin also blamed violence on outsiders. However, while he defended the governor's efforts to secure peace, he also held Immell culpable for the strike's bloodshed: "Some one was anxious to put on the adjutant general's uniform [...] It hadn't been worn for a long time."<sup>162</sup> Though violence was mutually constituted by authorities and protesters, farmers' status merited respect and served to diminish their culpability. Schmedeman demonstrated his desire to mend the relationship between the state and its farmers when he expressed admiration for and desired unity with them. From the steps of the capital building, he told the thousands gathered, "Boys, I'm glad to see all of you. I wish I had the chance to shake hands with you."<sup>163</sup> Though in the weeks that followed the Governor would defend the Guard's deployment, General Immell and the actions of the Guard were not afforded the appreciation shown to the Milk Pool.

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<sup>161</sup> "Terms of Pool Accepting Truce in Farm War," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 19 May 1933: 1.

<sup>162</sup> "5,000 of Milk Pool Drive to State Capital," *The Daily Northwestern* 19 May 1933: 1; "Farmers Gather at Capital Today," *Marshfield News-Herald* 19 May 1933: 1.

<sup>163</sup> "Boys, I'm Glad to See All of You," photo caption, *Wisconsin State Journal* 19 May 1933: 1.



Almost one month after the strike's end, on 13 June 1933, Governor Schmedeman issued a special statement to the Wisconsin legislature addressing official criticism of the National Guard's use. Under the title "Governor Defends Use of Troops in Milk Strike," *The Capital Times* published Schmedeman's address in full. The governor's message closed by rebuking a motion introduced in the State Senate "asking the adjutant general to report who called the National guard into service during the recent milk strike":

There is no mystery about this. Under the constitution the governor alone can call out the National Guard. [...] I would commend the officers and men of our guard in the performance of their duties. Likewise I have no apologies to offer for the use made of the militia during the milk strike or of the conduct of the guardsmen. I am satisfied that but for this precautionary measure, serious bloodshed, property damage and a breakdown of local government would have resulted.<sup>164</sup>

The various condemnations of the governor's action, as well as the governor's justification, indicate that the Guard's deployment did not receive unanimous support. Use of the military against farmers deeply troubled others because farmers were not "criminals," "Reds" or "hoodlums": though their behavior was radical and extra-ordinary, they were important community members.

In the years following the 1933 protest, use of the Guard factored into citizens' judgment of General Immell. This suggests intense feelings regarding the Guard's deployment against farmers. In the personal papers of William T. Evjue, editor of *The Capital Times*, an anonymous postcard and a letter from a businessman indicate the impact of the events of 1933. In 1938 when General Immell came under fire for misallocation of WPA funds, the Madison postcard

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<sup>164</sup> "Governor Defends use of Troops in Milk Strike," *The Capital Times* 13 June 1933: 6.

writer enumerated the general's misdeeds. "Clubbing farmers in milk strike" topped the writer's list.<sup>165</sup> Thirteen years after the protest, real estate and insurance agent M.J. Donovan asked that Evjue publish his letter regarding Immell's role as commander of the Guard. Donovan expressed concern over the sincerity of Immell's gubernatorial campaign remarks, in which he stated that he supported farmers, because when Immell served as General of the Guard "farmers were clubbed and otherwise mistreated."<sup>166</sup>

National Guardsmen and special deputies met farmers' attempts to halt the sale of milk with clubs, bayonets, and gas bombs. They held strike prisoners under threat by machine guns. The state legitimated use of martial force by claiming to protect citizens' welfare while attempting to mask the degree of force used and which citizens it was used against. The Guard's role was to provide secure transport of "public welfare" milk and non-striking farmers' milk so that consumers' needs would be met and farmers' way of life maintained. Yet the dairy industry operated to the detriment of Wisconsin's farmers, endangering all farmers' livelihood and the cultural life of Wisconsin. Milk Pool farmers were integral citizens in Wisconsin, and this fact exacerbated perception of the state's use of brutality on unarmed or inadequately armed men. The violence exacted upon protesters physically played out the economic killing of the small dairy farmer by the AAA's exclusion of cost of production guarantees from corporate processors. The Pool's action raised questions regarding the government's obligation to producers as well as their obligation to protect consumers' rights to food. Farmers' willingness to face martial force in order to maintain their rights stimulated spectators as consumers to consider their part in the

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<sup>165</sup> Postcard to William T. Evjue, editor of *The Capital Times*, 14 February 1938, William Theodore Evjue Papers, 1880-1969 (Evjue Papers, 1880-1969); WHS-Madison.

<sup>166</sup> M.J. Donovan to William T. Evjue, editor of *The Capital Times*, 6 August 1946, Tomah, Wisconsin; Evjue Papers, 1880-1969; WHS-Madison.

violence. The impact on unwilling spectators questioned if the collateral damage, particularly the children who suffered the effects of tear gas, was worth safe milk delivery. In the effort to ensure vulnerable populations' nutritional welfare, authorities ironically risked those same citizens' safety. Alternately, could voluntary spectators who witnessed and perhaps participated in the violence go to the grocery or a corporate dairy plant without contemplating what their purchase meant to the farmers, their community, and Wisconsin?

### **“Wasteful” Performance**

Agricultural historian William Høglund credits the 1933 Milk Pool protests as part of a larger farmers' movement that “dramatized farmers' plight” and stimulated the “growth of federal activity” in agriculture.<sup>167</sup> Yet before the May 1933 protest, the Wisconsin and federal governments had certainly acknowledged the need to provide relief to farmers, and following the strike the federal government did not change its agricultural policy to guarantee farmers' receipt of cost of production plus profit. However, at the conclusion of the May strike Governor Schmedeman did form a committee to study the dairy industry, which advocated cooperative marketing programs and federal legislation. It may be difficult to discern tangible outcomes of the May 1933 protest, however dairy farmers' expression of their grievances through milk dumping demonstrated farmers' *potential impact* on the everyday lives of citizens.

In his poetics of protest, Jasper states: “*Tactics are rarely, if ever, neutral means about which protestors do not care. [...] Just as their ideologies do, their activities express protestors' political identities and moral visions.*”<sup>168</sup> On the one hand, milk dumping was an act tied to the grievance itself. It literally inhibited corporate theft (perceived by the Pool as being sanctioned

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<sup>167</sup> Høglund 34.

<sup>168</sup> Italics in original, Jasper 237.

by the government) of agricultural products. Milk dumping as a *political act* demonstrated radicalism. Farmers not only refused to participate in the current dairy food system, but also attempted to alter it in Wisconsin. As a *violent act*, spilling milk demonstrated disregard for others farmers' property in a paradoxical attempt to protect farmers' property rights and showed protesters' willingness to place themselves in physical jeopardy in order to do so. Property destruction's connotations as a protest tactic might be generalizable. However, the *literal act* of destroying a product "meant" for consumption ultimately differentiates this act from other acts of property destruction.

The Milk Pool's milk dumping offered spectators a compelling reason for the protest to be significant to their lives. The Milk Pool's violation of the bounded spaces of the everyday and the extra-ordinary may have engendered uneasy coexistence, but the act of milk dumping also generated an audience. In the first case, coerced inclusion necessitated reconciliation of the performance with the spectators' beliefs. Citizens had to choose how to protect their families' immediate well-being, and therefore had to enact their beliefs about farmers' rights. In the second case, voluntary spectators could critically engage with the act of milk dumping. Clear-cut determination of milk dumping as morally reprehensible was difficult. Consideration of the meaning of the act stemmed from: the visibility of the display, the ability to witness collectively, the cultural construction of milk, the status of the actors (farmers), and the bodily harm endured and exacted because of the dumping. Milk dumping was antithetical to the Milk Pool farmers' role as producers, especially when consumers suffered hunger or anticipated want. Still, Pool members dumped milk to preserve their identity as farmers, attempting to restructure producer-consumer relations. Farmers risked physical harm in order to dump milk. This provoked the question of whether milk's preservation warranted the use of military force. The violence that

ensued raised the question of whether biological necessity should trump food producers' rights to determine conditions of production. Finally, the act of wrenching milk from trucks asked spectators if the government should ensure a hierarchy of consumers' over producers' rights regardless of the cost to a minority population and the potential dissolution of a way of life.

### Chapter 3: Performing the Promise of Plenty:

#### Consumerism and the USDA's 1933-34 World's Fair Exhibits

A cartoon featured on the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* front-page on the opening day of the 1933 Century of Progress International Exposition typified the hope the World's Fair offered to US citizens. Titled "A Perfect Setting for a Great National Jubilee," the drawing showed towers of light illuminating buildings lining Lake Michigan's shore. Hearing fairgoers' jublations, Uncle Sam afloat a makeshift raft waves his iconic top hat and exclaims, "They must be expectin' me!" The words "America's Comeback After Three Years of Depression," printed on the base of the raft reiterate the fair's celebration of national resilience and the new era of prosperity that the Century of Progress foretold.<sup>1</sup>

The Century of Progress, a great boon to the Chicago economy and to the spirit of the nation, opened in the midst of the First Hundred Days fury, wherein unprecedented federal action on the part of Congress and the Roosevelt Administration promised a New Deal for the American people. In his inaugural address on 4 March 1933, Franklin Roosevelt candidly characterized the nation's problems: "Yet our distress comes from no failure of substance. We are stricken by no plague of locusts. Compared with the perils which our forefathers conquered because they believed and were not afraid, we have still much to be thankful for. Nature still offers her bounty and human efforts have multiplied it. Plenty is at our doorstep, but a generous use of it languishes in the very sight of the supply."<sup>2</sup> During the summer of 1933, the Chicago

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<sup>1</sup> "A Perfect Setting for a Great National Jubilee," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 27 May 1933: 1.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Inaugural Speech of Franklin Delano Roosevelt," 4 March 1933, *History and Politics Out Loud*, 15 September 2004 <<http://www.hpol.org/fdr/inaug/>>.

World's Fair and its theme of civilization's progress let Americans feel Roosevelt's promise of plenty.

The Roosevelt administration seemed highly effective in spring 1933. The legislative bustle in Washington produced quick results. Though still receiving prices below the cost of production, "nearly all twenty-seven commodities included in the [farm price] index" rose from 15 March to 15 April 1933 to levels that hadn't been received for five months, and prices continued to improve into the summer.<sup>3</sup> The National Recovery Administration was credited with increasing wages for urban workers, and AAA legislation slowed farm foreclosures.<sup>4</sup> Though a minority of small farm-owners expressed immediate dissatisfaction with the Agricultural Adjustment Act, numerous farm groups showed confidence in the Roosevelt administration's agricultural plan. Early in the first season of the Century of Progress, federal funds' flow into states and cities afforded interpretation of the AAA as contributing to a positive resolution of the "paradox."

The Century of Progress International Exposition ran for two seasons; the first season lasted from 27 May to 12 November 1933. Due to its success in 1933, the fair opened for a second season on 26 May 1934 and ran until 31 October 1934. World's Fairs historian Robert W. Rydell observes: "Far from being ephemeral to the New Deal, the fairs [of the 1930s] served as a primary vehicle for giving the appearance of coherency to New Deal programs, for popularizing those programs."<sup>5</sup> Rydell's estimation suggests the 1933 Century of Progress's

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<sup>3</sup> *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer* 29 April 1933: 3; E.W. Heller, "Farm News and Farm Views," *Marshfield News-Herald* 8 May 1933: 4.

<sup>4</sup> Saloutos and Hicks 479-80.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 147.

significance as a venue for the USDA to set forth a favorable depiction of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. It also indicates that the 1934 Century of Progress offered the USDA an opportunity to re-frame the AAA, which had become morally problematic by the end of the 1933 World's Fair season.

In this chapter, I consider how USDA exhibits within a World's Fair environment facilitated the impression that the AAA, which was designed to reduce agricultural production, actually produced "plenty." The fair's overarching narrative of progress, achievements for humanity's (read: Americans') betterment from 1833 to 1933, instilled exhibits of the ideal present and future with authority. History substantiated futurity. Fairgoers incorporated exhibits demonstrating American advancement into their bodies through food consumption. Fair buildings manifested grandeur, festivity, and modernity. Exhibits utilized innovative technologies to show the past and displayed contemporary innovations making daily life more enjoyable. The USDA's main and co-operative exhibits,<sup>6</sup> the opportunities available at the fair, its architecture, the overall thematic concentration on "the services of science to humanity,"<sup>7</sup> and the intermingling of educational/scientific exhibits with food tourism and popular entertainments provided an ideal venue for promoting New Deal agricultural legislation as a service to the American people. As a whole, it blurred boundaries between future possibilities and the future as a reality; it functioned to "make belief" in "make-believe."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Dairy Industry and Meat and Livestock Industry exhibits were two of four non-governmental exhibits to which the USDA contributed. The USDA also supplied an installation in the Home Economics section of the Hall of Social Sciences and a Biology exhibit in the Hall of Sciences.

<sup>7</sup> Rufus C. Dawes, *Report of the President of a Century of Progress to the Board of Trustees* (Chicago: Century of Progress, 1936) 28.

<sup>8</sup> Schechner 35.



The USDA's departmental exhibit and its cooperative exhibits with the Meat and Livestock Industry and Dairy Industry directed spectators to act as consumers. The Dairy Industry's use of spectacle stimulated visitors to perceive themselves as a consumerist collective, part of the exceptional American race. The aggrandizement of Dairy products, both in terms of dairy foods' potentials – the capacity to build superior human beings – and the techniques of display – technical innovation, size, and a bombardment of images – culminated in consumption. Within this display, perfect embodiment resulted from the choice of the proper food objects, which were available in the Dairy Industry restaurant.

The USDA's cooperative exhibit with the Meat and Livestock Industry routed visitors through an enclosed exhibit, and its absence of designated actors prompted visitors to insert themselves in the display. Tracy C. Davis has argued that museums which represent arguments spatiality can induce museum-goers to physically perform the ideology of the museum. For instance, in the Billy Graham Museum, visitors perform as Christians by walking along the path to heavenly salvation.<sup>9</sup> The Meat and Livestock Industry's use of *in-situ* exhibition technique, “immersive and environmental” displays, initially incorporated spectators into the exhibit as visitors/tourists.<sup>10</sup> Yet in this exhibit, the teleological endpoint of Progress both physically and narratively was consumption. In turn, a consumerist performance facilitated by attractive food displays supplanted the tourist perspective.

The USDA's primary exhibit employed *in-context* display technique, “objects [...] set in context by means of long labels, charts, diagrams, [...] docents conducting tours, [and]

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<sup>9</sup> Davis, “Performing and the Real Thing” 29-32.

<sup>10</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 3.

booklets,”<sup>11</sup> to develop a *mise-en-scène* of plenty; an overall impression that New Deal agricultural programs would restore both stable access to desirable foods and economic prosperity. It capitalized on the “interpretive process”<sup>12</sup> in museum exhibition by emphasizing the foods displayed as consumable objects through the narrative; it affirmed the potential visceral response exhibit-goers may have had to the foods through explanatory labels and arrangements that assured the USDA’s service to consumers. The orderly aesthetic of conventional museum exhibition, the technique’s connotation as educational, and the use of a scientific framework in deployment of a consumer-oriented agrarian fundamentalist rhetoric depicted the Agricultural Adjustment Act as producing both food security and economic stability.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that “in-context displays [. . .] depend on the drama of the artifact. Objects are the actors and knowledge animates them.”<sup>13</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses the term “actor” metaphorically to indicate the evocative potential of displayed objects, their ability to serve as a metonym of the culture displayed. I argue that the display of mundane foods diminishes spectators’ touristic or ethnographic gaze and stimulates visitors to perform as consumers, to engage in a “performance of everyday life.” Richard Schechner draws a distinction between “performances of everyday life [which] ‘make belief’ – create the very social realities they enact,” and “‘make-believe’ performances, [where] the distinction between what’s real and what’s pretended is kept clear.”<sup>14</sup> By placing food in vitrines and using scientific/educational display conventions, the USDA attempted to generate *belief* in *make-*

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<sup>11</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 21.

<sup>12</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 112.

<sup>13</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 3.

<sup>14</sup> Schechner 35.

*believe*; food, and its stimulation of an American consumer perspective, naturalized the immanent futurity of plenty for American citizens presented in the exhibit.

### **Atmosphere of Promise**

Association of national greatness with the triumphs of the fair, including attendance, size, technical innovations in exhibits and the content of exhibits themselves, characterized World's Fairs generally. Fairs offered opportunity to display the best of the host country's culture, technology, and products to an international audience.<sup>15</sup> Such display bred nationalist sentiment. The early 1930s economic crisis resulted in fewer exhibits by foreign nations at the Century of Progress and negligible international attendance, making it an overtly American affair.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, President of the Century of Progress Rufus Dawes described the ironic advantage of opening a fair in the midst of economic depression: "there was a freedom from extravagant expectations on the part of the public [due to the Depression...] A result of this was that the Exposition, when opened, so far exceeded the expectations of the public, even in Chicago, that we derived a great advertising benefit from the element of surprise in its finished effect."<sup>17</sup>

The Century of Progress's physical structure and vast experiential opportunity contained the potential to engender a patriotic attitude in visitors. Three miles of massive, multi-colored

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<sup>15</sup> Burton Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915* (London and Berkeley: Lowie Museum of Anthropology in association with Scolar Press, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> There was still an international presence at the Century of Progress, particularly in the foreign villages. Belgium, England, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Switzerland and Spain contributed villages and the fair also had an "Oriental village." However, there were only a handful of international exhibits, these included exhibits by China, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Japan and Mexico. Dawes expressed disappointment in the board's failure to draw more international exhibitors, "Although it is true [...] that we experienced some benefits as a direct result of the depression, it must be admitted that our invitations for the participation of foreign governments were not presented at a time favorable for their reception" (68). Only 4% of registered visitors were foreign and of that number roughly 37% were from Canada, see *Commerce* (April 1934): 16; 16-129; Century of Progress Collection (CPC); Richard J. Daley Library, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois-Chicago, Chicago, IL (UIC).

<sup>17</sup> Dawes 51.

structures surrounded US citizens, physically engulfing them in festivity.<sup>18</sup> Architectural historian John Findling surmised, “The raw modernism of the buildings and the bright colors used to paint them seemed to combine with the carnival spirit present in all expositions to recreate a mood that had disappeared with the stock market crash [of 1929].”<sup>19</sup> *Newsweek* described the architecture as the “Triumph of the Modernists,” whose “sweep of naked lines, of daring planes” contributed to “a new rhythm [...] deriving from the rhythm of the machine.”<sup>20</sup> The ideals of progress bombarded visitors through fair buildings’ sleek and colorful modernist aesthetic and exhibits’ manifestations of technical advancement. Performance studies scholar Margaret Drewal asserts that “spectacle derives power from its potential to move its audience *en masse* [...]. The aggrandizing ethos of spectacle strives to unite spectators into a collective and, furthermore, to unite the audience with the performance through collective, but passive, spectatorship.”<sup>21</sup> The Century of Progress created a patriotic collective through its overall celebratory ethos, its sheer size, the scale of exhibits, and focus on innumerable innovations improving Americans’ lives.

Added to the scale of the spectacular aesthetic, US citizens who attended the fair may have been demographically homogeneous – predominantly white and middle-class – thus possibly bolstering visitors’ sense of collectivity. The \$.50 adult admission, about three times

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<sup>18</sup> Rydell, *World of Fairs* 38.

<sup>19</sup> John E. Findling, *Chicago's Great World's Fairs*, ed. Paul Greenhalgh, *Studies in Design and Material Culture* (Manchester and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994) 79.

<sup>20</sup> “Chicago’s Fair: Heavenly Gestures to Open Century of Progress on Beam from Arcturus,” *Newsweek* 27 May 1933: 10.

<sup>21</sup> Here, Drewal weds Victor Turner’s concept of “ideological *communitas*” to John MacAloon’s elaboration of spectacle, in “From Rocky’s Rockettes to Liberace: The Politics of Representation in the Heart of Corporate America,” *Journal of American Culture* 10.2 (Summer 1987): 71.

the price of a movie ticket, would have priced-out most impoverished citizens. Admissions for both seasons of the fair totaled 48,441,927, of this only 20% (approximately 9.7 million people) were given free admissions.<sup>22</sup> “[M]en and women frequently observe[d] exhibits together and also attend[ed] expositions and fairs in approximately equal numbers.”<sup>23</sup> The Century of Progress Commission estimated that roughly 80% of the 1933 attendees came from outside of Chicago and that Chicagoans repeatedly visited the fair, constituting 5,000,000 paid admissions during the fair’s first season. The report does not mention whether visitors from outside Chicago were from rural or urban areas, however use of rail, automobile, and bus transportation indicates that these individuals had some disposable income.<sup>24</sup> The 1.4 million attendees who registered in 1933 show nation-wide attendance, and though the bulk of citizens came from Midwestern, near-Eastern, and Western states, Californians (9%) attended in greater numbers than Midwesterners such as Iowans, Kentuckians, and Michiganders.<sup>25</sup> Finally, as shown by Rydell, African Americans were largely excluded from the fair, both as visitors and as employees.<sup>26</sup> This information suggests that exhibits’ correctly assumed a white, middle-class American audience.

The fair offered these visitors a visual and embodied experience of a world of plenty.

Parents could leave their children with “trained attendants” on the “Enchanted Island” playing in

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<sup>22</sup> On Children’s Day each week, admission for children under 12 cost \$.05. The attendance figures do not distinguish adult from children’s attendance, Attendance Tables for 1933 and 1934 Exposition; 15-229; CPC; UIC.

<sup>23</sup> D.S. Burch, “The Effectiveness of Various Types of Agricultural Exhibits,” October 1933 (Burch report), p. 8; Exhibits Effectiveness Study – The Effectiveness of Selective Exhibits, [Office of Information] Records Relating to Exhibitions and Expositions, 1889-1949 (OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949); RG 16; NACP.

<sup>24</sup> Press release, A Century of Progress Publicity Office, 15 January 1934; 14-148; CPC; UIC.

<sup>25</sup> *Commerce* (April 1934): 16; 16-129; CPC; UIC.

<sup>26</sup> Rydell, *World of Fairs* 166-7.

the Magic Maze, enjoying pony rides, slides, or the miniature railroad, while they enjoyed adult entertainment on the Midway, visited various exhibits, or took an aerial tour 210 feet above the exposition on the Sky Ride.<sup>27</sup> Rydell, Pelle, and Findling describe the fair as “a vision of a planned future where technology and science, wedded to corporate capitalism, made social and economic problems seemingly disappear.”<sup>28</sup>

Typical of fair conventions, food was absolutely everywhere. Approximately eighty food and beverage booths as well as restaurants and food samples associated with exhibits pervaded the exposition.<sup>29</sup> Visitors exercised the American imperialist prerogative as they smelled, tasted, heard, and felt the “other” in the foreign villages and on the Midway. Rydell alludes to the significance of fairgoers’ bodily engagement in his examination of consumerism at the fair and in the exploitative displays of non-whites: “the expositions, and especially the midways, gave millions of Americans first-hand experience with treating nonwhites from around the world as commodities.”<sup>30</sup> Food enabled visitors to taste the exotic; foreign villages offered native cuisines in which the “gastronomic adventurer [found] himself in his glory.”<sup>31</sup> Myriad opportunity and freedom of choice enabled a physical experience of plenty.

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<sup>27</sup> *The New World’s Fair of 1934* (Chicago: A Century of Progress International Exposition, 1934); 16-172; CPC; UIC.

<sup>28</sup> Robert W. Rydell, Kimberley Pelle, and John Findling, *Fair America: World’s Fairs in the United States* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000) 136. In a similar appraisal of the fair’s atmosphere, Folke T. Kihlstedt concludes, “Visitors saw a vision of a future in which democracy, capitalism, and consumerism were affirmed by science and technology,” in “Utopia Realized: The World’s Fairs of the 1930s,” *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology and the American Future*, ed. Joseph J. Corn (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1986) 97.

<sup>29</sup> JMR, “Food,” press release, A Century of Progress Publicity Office, 25 May 1934 (“Food”); 14-169; CPC; UIC.

<sup>30</sup> Rydell, *World of Fairs* 21-2.

<sup>31</sup> “Food,” 14-169; CPC; UIC.

The US Government building, its Hall of States, the Food and Agricultural Building, and Dairy Industry Building occupied Northerly Island. US states' exhibits used food to show their unique contributions to the country. Inclusion of agricultural commodities was a standard of state exhibits. Florida transplanted lemon, orange, grapefruit, and other tropical fruit trees outside the agricultural group buildings.<sup>32</sup> Georgia's exhibit included various agricultural products; the National Pecan Growers Exchange of Albany, GA showcase featured a succulent ham topped with pineapple and pecans.<sup>33</sup> Washington state depicted its wildlife, landscape, housing, and rail and ocean transportation on a six-foot, seven hundred pound cake.<sup>34</sup> Among the many exhibits in the Food and Agricultural Building, a 1933 season-long "egg-laying derby" featured prize hens from twenty-eight US states, Canada, and four other foreign nations.<sup>35</sup> The National Biscuit Company showed the making of shreaded wheat;<sup>36</sup> W.F. Straub Laboratories demonstrated how use of Lake Shore Brand honey turns ordinary cereal into desserts.<sup>37</sup> From their on-site bottling plant, Coca Cola sold 6 million drinks in 1933.<sup>38</sup> The smells, sights, and availability of food literalized America as the land of plenty.

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<sup>32</sup> *Official Guidebook of the Fair 1933* (Chicago: A Century of Progress International Exposition, 1933) 73; CPC; UIC. The Agricultural buildings were just north of the Federal Building on Northerly Island.

<sup>33</sup> Photograph No. 29485-C, COP 1933; 52; Photographic Prints of USDA Exhibits and Other Exhibits, 1900-1953; RG 16 (RG 16-EX-52); NACP.

<sup>34</sup> Photograph of a woman and a girl standing next to a cake; Events-Exhibits-Illinois-Chicago-Century of Progress; CPC; UIC.

<sup>35</sup> *Official Guidebook of the Fair 1933* 77; CPC; UIC.

<sup>36</sup> "Food at the New Fair" *Commerce* (May 1934): 40; 16-129; CPC; UIC.

<sup>37</sup> HTB, "Foods and Agriculture Building," Press Release, A Century of Progress Publicity Office, 20 June 1934; 14-156; CPC; UIC.

<sup>38</sup> "Food at the New Fair" *Commerce* (May 1934): 17; 16-129; CPC; UIC.

Significantly, food exhibits designed to promote the benefits of mass production and technological progress reinforced American race and gender hierarchies. For instance, Kraft demonstrated its efficiency in mayonnaise making as liberating women from home cooking, and Heinz exhibited how their canning methods eased kitchen labor.<sup>39</sup> Mrs. Lois Johnson Hurley, editor of the “Home and Household” section of the *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer*, commented that the Foods Building was “the high spot of woman’s interest at the Fair [...] What [is] more interesting to a woman than food, its production and preparation?”<sup>40</sup> Hurley’s comment demonstrates the constraining and producing power of gender performativity; she interpellates female fair-goers into domesticity through the citation of this gender norm.

Food companies often included performers in these exhibits. The Quaker Oats exhibit featured “Aunt Jemima” making pancakes while singing traditional plantation songs.<sup>41</sup> For the 1934 season, Wilson & Co. had a restaurant that served its meat products and an exhibit featuring mechanical bacon slicers:

Stunning blondes and brunettes, to the number 42 – equally divided – all busily engaged in wrapping and packing bacon for the consumer [. . .] Federal inspectors supervise the work of the girls, which consists of preparing 5,000 pounds of certified sliced bacon daily, the task being directed by a superintendent and four skilled male aides. [. . .]

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<sup>39</sup> “The Pedigree of Food,” *Official World’s Fair Weekly*, for the week ending 27 May 1933 (“Pedigree”): 8-9; 16-134; CPC; UIC.

<sup>40</sup> Mrs. Lois Johnson Hurley, “The Human Side of the World’s Fair,” *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer* 9 July 1933: 8.

<sup>41</sup> “Pedigree” 9; 16-134; CPC; UIC.



Striking uniforms adorn the girls in this department. They are resplendent in white linen frocks with French red plaid lapels and cuffs and berets are white, tipped with red.<sup>42</sup>

In 1934, Libby, McNeill & Libby also added “smartly uniformed girls packing Spanish Olives artistically in glass jars.”<sup>43</sup> Various exhibits in the Food and Agriculture Building demonstrated “accomplishments in commercial cookery that have changed woman’s old sunrise-to-sun-up lot to a far happier and richer one.”<sup>44</sup> Eve Jochnowitz, in her examination of similar exhibits at the 1939-40 New York World’s Fair, concludes that employment of women in corporate exhibits stressed mass food production as safe and sanitary while easing women’s daily duties.<sup>45</sup> This is apparent in the description of the Wilson “bacon pit,” as is the presumed draw of lovely girls to the male fairgoers. These exhibits highlight the conservative gender and race representations used at the Century of Progress. Images of a stable US socio-economic order displaced the realities of economic upheaval, which rendered many men incapable of fulfilling the breadwinner role, and caused some married white women to work outside the home.<sup>46</sup> Absolute quantity together with representations that affirmed a status quo social order, by and large

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<sup>42</sup> HDJ, “Wilson,” press release, A Century of Progress Publicity Office, 30 May 1934; 14-156; CPC; UIC.

<sup>43</sup> “America’s Food Supply,” *Commerce* (May 1934): 40; 16-129; CPC; UIC.

<sup>44</sup> “Pedigree” 8; 16-134; CPC; UIC.

<sup>45</sup> Eve Jochnowitz, “Feasting on the Future: Foods of the World of Tomorrow at the New York World’s Fair of 1939-40,” *On Cooking*, spec. issue of *Performance Research* 4.1 (1999): 110-20.

<sup>46</sup> For studies regarding women’s employment as an “issue” see: Ruth Milkman, “Women’s Work and the Economic Crisis: Some Lessons from the Great Depression,” in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*, eds. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) 507-41; Eileen Boris, “Regulating Industrial Homework: The Triumph of ‘Sacred Motherhood,’” *Journal of American History* 71.4 (1985): 745-63; Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism and the Great Depression* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980); Landon Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers’ League, Women’s Activism and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

through the citation of racial and gender norms, provided the experience of an idea of America for “ideal” Americans.

### **Building Superior People**

Unlike the other agricultural industries’ exhibits, which were housed together in the Foods and Agriculture Building, the Dairy Industry had its own 15,000 square-foot building. In 1933, 15,000 – 20,000 visitors attended daily and roughly 50,000 people attended the exhibit on Fourth of July and Labor Day Sundays.<sup>47</sup> The USDA blended into this exhibit’s “story of how ‘Dairy Products Build Superior People.’” Small print signs at the corners of installations identified the USDA’s contributions. Through exhibits showing “vital importance, to the consumer, of an adequate consumption of milk, butter, cheese and ice cream,”<sup>48</sup> the USDA added to the sense of dairy’s critical ubiquity as felt in the bones, teeth, and budgets of American people. The USDA placed installations such as “Physical Perfection” alongside these exhibits. On one side, this display featured three abstract panels of women exemplifying how “The Liberal Use of Dairy Products Contribute to Personal Charm and Beauty: A Slim, Lithe Body; Smooth Skin; Strong White Teeth; Beautiful Hair; Keeness of Spirit.” On the other side, men’s “Physical Perfection” was depicted via the athletic figures of “Co-ordination,” “Rhythm,” and “Strength.”<sup>49</sup> The exhibit’s comparison of average citizens’ consumption to US Olympians’ consumption drove home the benefits of dairy products by drawing on the authority of performative gender identities. Another exhibit offered a comparison similar to a display used in the USDA primary exhibit; this time, small and large rats appeared off to the side, and

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<sup>47</sup> “Dairy Products Build Superior People,” N. pag.; 16-261; CPC; UIC.

<sup>48</sup> H.E. Van Norman, President Century Dairy Exhibit, Inc., foreword to “Dairy Products Build Superior People,” 15 September 1933; 16-261; CPC; UIC.

<sup>49</sup> Photograph in “Dairy Products Build Superior People”; 16-261; CPC; UIC.

centralized photographs of two different-sized puppies, two pigs, and two chickens served to demonstrate “Milk – The Best Growth Food.” Installations also showed that dairy products “preserve the characteristics of youth,” “build sound teeth,” contribute to “safe weight control,” and “build delicious satisfying meals.”<sup>50</sup>

The main attraction of the building was a color organ performance (Lumia); a series of images along with recorded narration and music showed the importance of milk from the “Dawn of Civilization” to the present.<sup>51</sup> Heifer, the story’s protagonist, plays a central role in this American historical narrative. Her “heavenly Milk” inspires Man to name the stars the “Milky Way.” Brought to Plymouth Colony in 1624, her “life sustaining foods [...] bring HEALTH and Thanksgiving.” She faithfully follows the covered wagon in its westward journey; “a source of Life,” she assists as “CIVILIZATION conquers the wild west.”<sup>52</sup> By 1933, “she is the foundation of a Great Industry.”<sup>53</sup> The picture show rises to its climax with magisterial musical flourishes:

GONG - - - - A CENTURY OF PROGRESS! (Fanfare)

GONG - - - - PROGRESS IN HEALTH! (Fanfare)

GONG - - - - PROGRESS TOWARD THE GOAL OF PHYSICAL PERFECTION

(Music)<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> “Dairy Products Build Superior People”; 16-261; CPC; UIC.

<sup>51</sup> A.W. Bitting suggested that the color organ brought visitors to the Dairy building: “Thousands visited the exhibit for this feature alone but once their interest was gained they followed through,” in Report on the Food and Agriculture Exhibits, 10 November 1933 (Bitting report), p.12; Charges Criticism – Chicago World’s Fair 1933 (CC-Chicago WF 1933); General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>52</sup> “Dairy Products Build Superior People”; 16-261; CPC; UIC.

<sup>53</sup> “Dairy Products Build Superior People”; 16-261; CPC; UIC.

<sup>54</sup> “Dairy Products Build Superior People”; 16-261; CPC; UIC.

The final image is a classical tableau. Husband and Wife, muscular and lithe, respectively, stand at the center. Clad in loincloths, the husband places his hand on the shoulder of his son; the son peers up at his mother, dressed in a flowing Grecian gown. She holds a baby who reaches down to receive a leafy branch from a young nude girl covered only by this vegetation. Underneath these ideal Americans, white but neither urban nor rural, the machinery of the dairy industry shines light upward onto the message: “Dairy Products Build Superior People.” The narrative’s homage to the cow collapses civilization into America, whiteness, and physical and economic superiority.

The spectacle itself encouraged jingoism. A cyclorama, ninety-feet wide and forty-feet high, served as the projection screen for Thomas Wilfred’s lumia scenes. This new style, patented by Wilfred in 1930, used light to manipulate color and shapes.<sup>55</sup> Lumia are slow-changing (not still) images. The operatic music of Gounod, Ansell’s *Plymouth Ho*, Charles Skilton’s indianist *Deer Dance*, and Bizet’s cantata *Le Retour* augmented these massive, innovative, moving images of American myth and the teleological narrative. The program epitomized the formal elements of spectacle: “(1) the primacy of visual sensory and symbolic codes, (2) monumentality and an aggrandizing ethos, (3) [...] presentational action set in opposition to passive spectating, and (4) dynamism in the presentation that engenders excitement in the audience.”<sup>56</sup> The environment in which this performance was imbedded functioned in concert with its capacity to inspire collectivity and collective awe. It was the main attraction within a building filled with “evidence” of the myriad contributions dairy products make to US

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<sup>55</sup> *Light Art Lumia: A Site about the Pioneering Work of Thomas Wilfred with Images and Information from the Eugene and Carol Epstein Collection*, 15 November 2006 <<http://www.lumia-wilfred.org/>>.

<sup>56</sup> This is Margaret Drewal’s précis of MacAloon’s definition (71).

citizens' lives, which was part of a massive event dedicated to American progress; the various spaces and experiences available within each mutually constituted, or seamlessly confirmed, the greatness of the United States.

The USDA supplied five exhibits contributing to the display of dairy's centrality to the everyday *extraordinary* American life. The installations employ conventional museum techniques; they lack actual food specimens, but utilize graphics and embodiment framed as informational to immediately impress upon spectators dairy's significance. Four exhibits aggrandize consumption and production; one focuses on dairy use in daily life.

A huge US map showed milk production and usage by state. Hundreds of tiny illuminated holes – each one symbolizing the annual production of 1.5 million gallons – dotted every state on the map. Midwest states were the most heavily dotted, but the map showed significant production levels from North Dakota to Texas, throughout New England, and from the mid-Atlantic states to Tennessee. The map manifested national economic reliance on the dairy industry. Lantern slides at the side of the map showing states' milk-usage figures verified milk's enormous importance to consumers nation-wide.<sup>57</sup>

USDA cooperative exhibits recurrently reiterated production efficiency and product quality, as well as the economic benefits of dairying. Atop an installation showing annual consumption of dairy foods, an iconic farm mural signified the 4.6 million farms that provided 104.6 billion pounds of milk products annually. Below this, large dials/white disks showed the difference in total consumption of Ice Cream, Concentrated Milk, Cheese, Butter, and most importantly, Milk and Cream [see fig. 3.1]. The chart "Milk Production Highest Peak in U.S. Agriculture," evidenced milk's importance as agriculture's biggest industry. It featured a series

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<sup>57</sup> "Dairy Products Build Superior People"; 16-261; CPC; UIC.

of triangles; the figure labeled with a milk bottle stood at twice the height of the poultry, hogs, cattle, and corn triangles. It enabled instant recognition that income from the dairy industry more than doubled income generated from all other agricultural industries combined.



**Figure 3.1. Dairy consumption exhibit. Source: Photograph N. no.; 16-EX-51; NACP.**

A three-panel installation concentrated on breeding as a means of improving production efficiency; this display, however, did not introduce information about genetics, rather it exalted the cow. The first panel featured cut-outs of five different breeds of US cattle and gave production statistics for the single highest producer in each breed in the US, e.g. “Swiss Valley Girl 10<sup>th</sup>, No. 7887, 25.513 lbs. Milk, 1.106 lbs. Butterfat.”<sup>58</sup> The center panel continued the cow’s glorification [see fig. 3.2]; promotions for this installation referred to the cow as the “foster mother of mankind.”<sup>59</sup> Its three-dimensional mechanical cow was designed ostensibly to

<sup>58</sup> Photograph No. USDA-Dairy COP 1933 29496-C; 51; Photographic Prints of USDA Exhibits and Other Exhibits, 1900-1953; RG 16 (RG 16-EX-51); NACP.

<sup>59</sup> Allen D. Albert, *Official View Book, A Century of Progress Exhibition* (Chicago: Reuben H. Donnelley Corp., 1933); 16-201; CPC; UIC.

show how “Nature’s Greatest Food Factory Transforms Rough Feed into Man’s Most Complete Food.”<sup>60</sup> This automaton moved its head from side to side and switched its tail, while the interior of its midsection was revealed, showing its milk-making machinery/organs. Set within a muscular backdrop, animate industrial tubes, cylinders, and stick-figure laborers replaced the cow’s internal organs. Piping connected the five chambers in the cow’s system needed to produce milk. Two pumps represented the pulsating heart, and stick men’s up and down and back and forth movements stirred vats in three separate chambers, which prepared the milk to travel through the piping leading to the cow’s udders.<sup>61</sup> This machine mother embodied efficiency and offered proof of the third panel’s statement that “The Cow in Her Natural Wild State Produced Barely Enough Milk to Support Her Calf.”<sup>62</sup> The industrialized heifer stood for improved farming practices due to scientific research, which enabled the modern cow to support the nation. The third panel’s images of rural and urban families at leisure and play reiterated how dairy products and scientific research enabled ideal American life: “The Improved Dairy Cow Produces Enough Milk for [...] 4 Adults and 6 Children.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Photograph N. no.; RG16-EX-51; NACP.

<sup>61</sup> *A Century of Progress Exposition: Around the Fair with Burton Holmes*, reel 1; Herford Cowling and Burton Holmes, 1933; FLA 225; Cowling Collection, Library of Congress Motion Picture Collection; LOC.

<sup>62</sup> Photograph No. USDA-Dairy COP 1933 29489-C; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.

<sup>63</sup> Photograph No. USDA-Dairy COP 1933 29489-C; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.



**Figure 3.2. Foster mother of mankind. Source: Photograph N. no.; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.**

The USDA's installation, "Dairy Products Lead in the Well Balanced Diet," instructed visitors about allocating their funds to achieve well-being and, presumably, the superior physique, mental facility, and high-quality life displayed throughout the building. It showed that a "liberal" and a "low cost" diet for a family of five (2 adults and 3 children under age 15) necessitated a foundation of dairy products; recommended familial use ranged from 24.5 quarts of milk per week for the liberal diet to 14 quarts for the low cost diet, with additional dairy products supplementing both. Pictures of fruit, vegetables, meats, and grains (without recommended quantities) indicated the secondary necessity of these food groups to well-being.

From start to finish the Dairy building concerned consumer interest. A.W. Bitting, who was the head of the Food Products Section, commented that this exhibit differed from regular dairy shows focused on production techniques, because "it was felt to be more to the point to inform the public of what it may gain by using more dairy products in the diet."<sup>64</sup> Here, the

<sup>64</sup> Bitting report; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-1970; RG 16; NACP.



“public” apparently refers to consumers, as production techniques certainly would have been of interest to farmers. Belief in milk’s necessity was strong in the US by the 1930s. In his WWII-era history of the American diet, Richard Osborn Cummings enumerates efforts made by various groups during the 1920s to ensure children’s welfare:

School Children's Welfare League, a women's organization in New York, conducted a drive in 1922 for funds to provide a million quarts of milk for undernourished children. "Milk weeks" were indorsed [sic] by city officials, and boxing bouts were held for the benefits of milk funds. John M. Kelley, dairyman and general attorney for Ringling Brothers, preached to farmers of East and West the necessity of using circus methods of advertising for milk. [...] The Department of Agriculture distributed films showing a big-league baseball pitcher in action as an example of what milk could do for one.<sup>65</sup>

Cummings also notes that though consumption of some dairy products remained steady, “Milk consumption [...] declined markedly following 1932;” he goes on to praise 1930s educational initiatives that taught consumers how to substitute cheaper items for less necessary ones in order to “cut expenses and to provide money which could be used for more milk.”<sup>66</sup> Not surprisingly, the dairy industry marketed its central product, but their effort and the USDA’s may have stemmed from genuine belief in milk’s necessity in building superior citizens. *Hoard’s Dairyman* was quite pleased with the exhibit’s potential: “[Visitors] have not only seen everything presented in the most readily comprehended and convincing manner, but have had the opportunity to apply the lesson personally in the model restaurant. It is the most nearly complete

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<sup>65</sup> Cummings 152-3.

<sup>66</sup> Cummings 181, 206.

presentation ever made of a food product.”<sup>67</sup> The Dairy Building’s spectacle attempted to shape consumption practices, perhaps for citizens’ welfare, through the technical extravaganza of the color organ, reverent treatment of the cow, murals of tranquil rolling farm hills, and ideal specimens of Americanness. It also allowed fair-goers to begin to realize their own superior potential by consuming the products shown in the Dairy Industry restaurant.

### **Progress for Consumers’ Pleasure**

“The roof of the two wings of the [Federal] building formed an esplanade connecting with the Agricultural Building on the north and the Electrical Group on the south.”<sup>68</sup> This architecture symbolically extended the Federal government’s influence, and the Meat and Livestock exhibit within the agricultural section explicitly demonstrated the cooperation between the USDA and the agriculture industry. The exhibit’s reproduced environments, narrative trajectory toward consumption, and appetizing exhibition of foods guided visitors to incorporate themselves into the exhibit in the role of consumer.

The exhibit consisted of an enclosed environment; large introductory dioramas framed an entryway through which visitors crossed into a packinghouse cooler, then installations’ arrangement routed visitors onto a refrigerated railcar, past a butcher’s counter and a kitchen, to end at a display of “Meats at Varying Price Levels For Every Occasion.”<sup>69</sup> Inclusion of visitors in “behind the scenes” experiences of the movement of livestock from range and farm to table emphasized visitors’ place in the US food system as consumers. Visitors walked through the

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<sup>67</sup> “The Dairy Industry at a Century of Progress,” *Hoard’s Dairyman* 25 May 1933: 194.

<sup>68</sup> United States Congress, “A Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, 1933,” Joint Letter from the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of Commerce as Members of the Chicago World’s Fair Centennial Commission, 73<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 17 April 1934) (United States Congress), p.2; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

<sup>69</sup> Meat and Live Stock Exhibit brochure, p.12; 16-268; CPC; UIC.

sites of food production, processing, and distribution toward (anticipated) consumption.

Through the course of the exhibit, spectators “participated” in various capacities in the meat industry; at the same time, this exhibit of American culture and its absence of actors portraying consumers prompted visitors to insert themselves as such in the created environments. This exhibit’s production of “actors” through recreated places bears similarity to the performances produced in the museums analyzed by Tracy C. Davis. Davis writes, “Visitors experience something fundamental to the content and are drawn into performing this themselves.”<sup>70</sup> The Meat and Livestock exhibit placed visitors within food industry operations as tourists, while the superseding consumption narrative and food displays in consumer environments induced spectators to enact consumer behaviors; the performance naturalized American plenty.

The entrance into the Meat and Livestock exhibit positioned it as a *tour* of “meat production from the producer to the consumer.”<sup>71</sup> It capitalized on the sense of authenticity implicit in this designation to promote an ideal image of the industry. Above the entryway, different cuts of meat formed the letters of the word, “Meat;” below this, the sign “Live Stock and Meat Exhibit Visitors Welcome” suggested *public access* to the packinghouse cooler and refrigerated car, which were visible just beyond the entrance. The right wall framing the entryway featured a nearly life-size, three-dimensional cowboy diorama. A man on horseback sits in the foreground with his back to the spectator, overlooking the distant range; this diorama of driving cattle allowed visitors to see a romanticized version of the cattleman’s perspective.<sup>72</sup> On the left wall, plaques juxtaposing hogs and cattle of 1833 and 1933 flanked a three-

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<sup>70</sup> Davis, “Performing and the Real Thing” 16.

<sup>71</sup> Biting report; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-1970; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>72</sup> Photograph No. 29382-C; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.

dimensional view of the modern farm in miniature.<sup>73</sup> The *Official Guidebook of the Fair 1933* describes the diorama with images of rural idyll: “The sun shines and there are lush corn fields.”<sup>74</sup> The sign and accompanying introductory dioramas indicated that once inside the exhibit spectators would be privy to the inner-workings of the modern meat industry, which enabled an ideal life for the American consumer.

Large replica dressed sides of beef and pork in coolers and the “chilled” spaces of the packinghouse and refrigerator car transformed three-dimensional, life-size dioramas into lived experience for spectators.<sup>75</sup> The environment “enhance[d] the impression of actually being [there]”<sup>76</sup> at the same time that signs like “BEEF BRANDED with the Grade Name is Available to Consumers” demonstrated USDA protections, and historical murals showing old transportation methods bolstered the sense of progress oriented toward consumers’ health. When spectators walked over the loading ramp into the refrigerator car they actually felt freezer temperatures and saw pork bearing USDA purple stamps certifying purity. A.W. Bitting explicated the dual purpose of this installation: “These were made to do double duty, one to show how the cut should be made to get the maximum of the best edible parts and have it very attractive, and the other to demonstrate the sanitary side of holding these perishable products”<sup>77</sup> [see fig. 3.3]. The installations’ white tile backgrounds emphasized cleanliness, and the omission of slaughtering from the process cleansed the exhibit of the meat industry’s more

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<sup>73</sup> Photograph No. 29383-C; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.

<sup>74</sup> *Official Guidebook of the Fair 1933* 74; CPC; UIC.

<sup>75</sup> Meat and Live Stock Exhibit brochure, p. 7; 16-268; CPC; UIC.

<sup>76</sup> Meat and Live Stock Exhibit brochure, p.7-8; 16-268; CPC; UIC.

<sup>77</sup> Bitting report; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-1970; RG 16; NACP.

controversial aspects: “No part of the slaughtering of cattle, sheep, or hogs was shown as that is repugnant to many persons.”<sup>78</sup> This exclusion attempted to inhibit visitors from having “the disgust response [which] resembles the negative aesthetic response.”<sup>79</sup> As shown by Michael Owen Jones, a “positive aesthetic response” creates affinity; a negative response generates dissociation:

The outcome of this positive experience is a sense of well-being, sometimes even a sense of ‘oneness’ or unity of self with the object of attention or with others in the event. In a negative aesthetic response, however, the tension goes unrelieved. [. . .] People frown, make faces of ‘disgust,’ avert their eyes, and keep their arms close to or in front of their bodies as if protecting themselves from contamination by the object of revulsion. They experience feelings of doubt, loathing, or disgust.<sup>80</sup>

Producing amenable receptivity to the livestock industry required immersion that avoided showing the killing of animals or the bloody and messy work of transforming them into meat. Bitting’s report on the exhibit makes apparent exhibitors’ stress on consumer interest: “The exhibit was not large, but told the part of the story in which the consumer is most interested without injecting unnecessary details.”<sup>81</sup> The exhibit offered an ideal experience, in terms of consumerism, of the industry’s work; it showed high-quality specimens in hyper-sanitary environments.

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<sup>78</sup> Bitting report; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-1970; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Owen Jones, “What’s Disgusting and Why Does It Matter?,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 37.1 (2000): 53-71, Wilson Select Plus, Northwestern University, 2 June 2003 <<http://snap.it.northwestern.edu/p/p.cgi/oclcorg>>, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Jones, “What’s Disgusting” 8.

<sup>81</sup> Bitting report; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-1970; RG 16; NACP.



**Figure 3.3. Packinghouse cooler. Source: Photograph no. 29396-C COP-1933; RG 16-Ex-52; NACP.**

After the refrigerated truck, the exhibit led visitors to a meat counter. A mechanical man placed behind a counter and costumed in white butcher's attire declaimed the different cuts of beef, pork, and lamb by referring to a "United States Department of Agriculture Meat Chart."<sup>82</sup> Again, gleaming white tile served as the scene's backdrop [see fig. 3.4]. The exhibit's physical arrangement enabled visitors to step up to the meat cases to peruse roughly 40 different cuts and preparations of meats, such as luncheon meats, sausages, and steaks while the life-size butcher spoke. This installation's design directed exhibit-goers to complete the display as consumers (the only available role). The exhibit layout prompted spectators to enter a *scene* and enact *real* behaviors used at butcher shops. They "shopped" for meat, while aware of the impossibility of purchasing or consuming it. Visitors offered "performances of everyday life" within a "make-believe" framework; consumer behavior was employed in an explicitly mimetic environment containing mimetic objects.

<sup>82</sup> Meat and Live Stock Exhibit brochure, p.10; 16-268; CPC; UIC.

A pristine kitchen, the next location in the consumption process, followed the butcher shop installation. Prepared entirely by the USDA, this installation featured white modern appliances; the refrigerator and oven each contained meat. A showcase containing three twelve-pound roasts with labels comparing quality and cost of various cooking methods stood in front of the kitchen.<sup>83</sup> Visitors could not walk through the kitchen, but the inclusion of meats previously shown in the butcher's case and the absence of actors preparing the foods in the kitchen display sustained spectators' incorporation into the narrative.



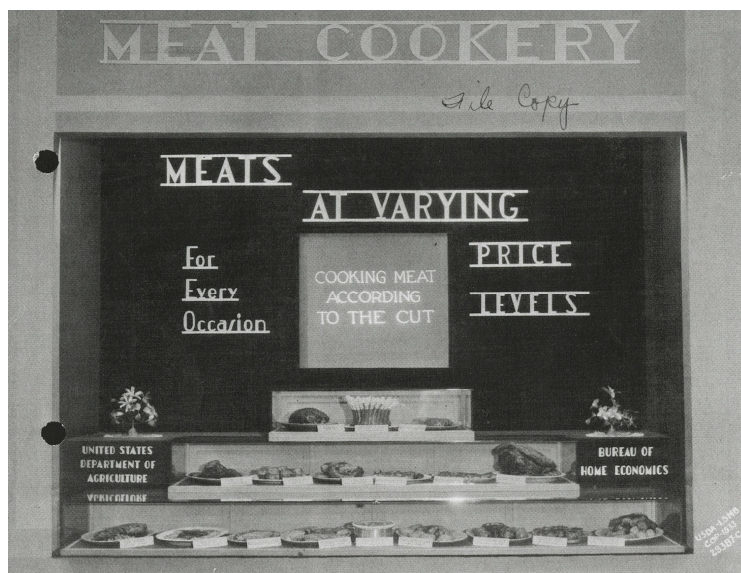
**Figure 3.4. Butcher's counter.** Source: Photograph no. 29389-C COP-1933; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.

The final installation, “Meat Cookery,” consisted of a showcase with three rows “of models of cooked meats, with vegetables and fruits ready for the table. It included 15 combination dishes in which meat was the principal ingredient. Back of this, colored stereopticon slides showed various meats in process of cooking by different methods.”<sup>84</sup> The

<sup>83</sup> Photograph No. 29386-C COP 1933; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.

<sup>84</sup> United States Congress, p.48; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

phrase “Meats at Varying Price Levels for Every Occasion” surrounded the screen [see fig. 3.5]. One slide featured a man’s hands carving a roast above the words, “Plump, brown, juicy, evenly cooked.”<sup>85</sup> The show of “component parts of a satisfying meat meal chang[ed] suddenly into a healthy child playing.”<sup>86</sup> The labels identifying the types of meat and vegetables in the showcase did not offer cooking instruction or dietary information. Likewise, the slide show did not explain the nutritional science of succulent roasts that eventuated in strong children. Instead, the installation used flavorful-looking food models to show the value of the meat industry and the USDA to the American consumer. Beautiful, savory foods signified health while keeping visitor attention on the pleasures of eating. It whetted the appetite and in doing so related a positive aesthetic response to the necessity of the Meat industry and USDA.



**Figure 3.5. Meat cookery. Source: Photograph no. 29388-C COP-1933; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.**

The title card for the slide show, “Cooking Meat According to the Cut,” attributed the exhibit to the Bureau of Home Economics and Bureau of Animal Husbandry, both of the USDA.

<sup>85</sup> Photograph No. 29388-c; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.

<sup>86</sup> *Official Guidebook of the Fair 1933* 74; CPC; UIC.



Illuminated signs, “United States Department of Agriculture” and “Bureau of Home Economics,” on both sides of the showcase emphasized federal contributions. This overt display of federal involvement positioned Progress as New Deal-style cooperation between the federal government, producers, processors, distributors, and consumers that would put an end to the years of “hooverization.” The installation showed that meals at “varying price levels” would be fulfilling; substitution of a lesser foodstuff for a preferred one was not depicted. *All* foods were exhibited as desirable. This installation embodied the New Deal as a program entailing choice and, therefore, satisfaction. Again, the exhibit communicated that the federal government’s and agriculture industry’s combined efforts profited consumers.

Upon exiting the enclosed portion of the exhibit, in the common agricultural area, three additional installations completed the Meat and Livestock Industry display. “Meat in Well Balanced Meals” featured a large shadowbox containing nutritional charts. “By Products of the Live Stock and Meat Industry” showcase contained medicines, leather, baseball gloves, a tennis racket, etc. The explicitly gendered mechanical display, “Radiant Health is Your Best Style,” included rotating cutouts of “The Bride,” “The Stroller,” “The Tennis Girl,” and other figures of ladies at women’s work and play that clearly benefit from meat consumption. Though the by-products showcase held visitors’ attention “even longer than food products” displays, the “Radiant Health” installation failed to meet exhibitors’ expectations: “the average time spent in examining this revolving display was 32 seconds, or approximately one half the time required for one complete revolution.”<sup>87</sup> According to D.S. Burch of the USDA Bureau of Animal Industry

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<sup>87</sup> Burch report, p.6, 8; OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

gender made little difference in preference for the exhibits, instead the level of “human-interest” determined visitor attention.<sup>88</sup>

Burch’s report, “The Effectiveness of Various Types of Agricultural Exhibits,” conducted during the fair’s first year, demonstrates the significance of food objects in these displays. Based on observations of visitors’ behaviors and the length of time visitors spent at exhibits, Burch comments that the perspective that “mechanical movement,” “artistic effects,” and “general attractiveness” determines interest in an exhibit needs revision because: “Among the six characteristics studied the item of human interest had the predominant effect.”<sup>89</sup> The Meat and Livestock exhibit serves as the exemplar from which he concludes:

The display of realistic models of cooked meat held attention considerably longer than similar models of raw meat and sausage. Actual by-products, including medicinal preparations [. . .] and the like held the attention even longer than food products. The revolving display of manikins [. . .] was actually rather abstract and, though reasonably effective, held attention for the shortest period [...] Apparently the movement in the manikin display failed to compete successfully with the very personal appeal of medicine and food.<sup>90</sup>

Burch’s study shows that both self-interest and installations’ concreteness gained and sustained visitor attention. Particular to foods’ display, the rotating ladies may not have produced the visceral connection offered by the savory roasts and colorful vegetables. Understandably, the observed success of this exhibit, specifically the “many favorable comments which the exhibit of

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<sup>88</sup> Burch report, p.8, 5; OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>89</sup> Burch report, p.5; OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>90</sup> Burch report, p. 6; OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

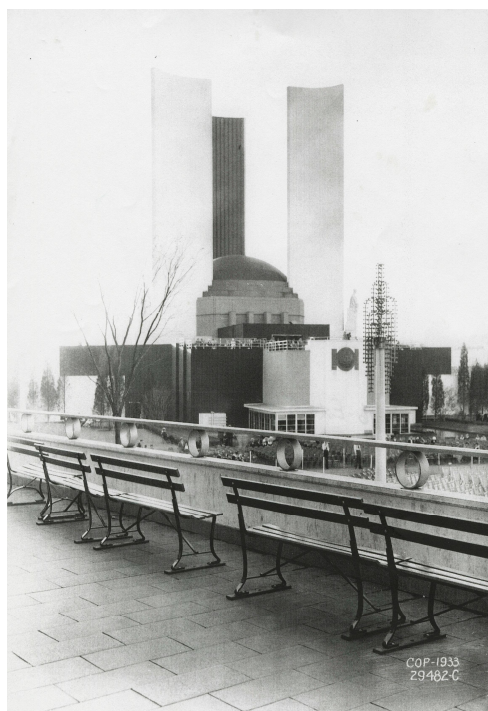
cooked meat models received,” drove Burch to suggest a “permanent [USDA] exhibit on culinary art” of which, “models displayed in the livestock and meat exhibit would serve as an excellent nucleus for such a permanent exhibit.”<sup>91</sup> In his general comments, Burch notes that exhibits have the capacity to give “general impressions” rather than impart detailed information. Food objects could instantly cause recollections of sumptuous favorites or imagined future indulgence. The installations immediately impressed upon exhibit-goers the industry’s capacity, with the help of the federal government, to produce an existence for American citizens that fulfilled more than daily nutritional requirements, it contained pleasure.

The Meat and Livestock exhibit was overtly constructed as a narrative of progress. However, spectators’ movement through the installations reinscribed the exhibit as a consumption narrative. Food object displays in the context of consumption demonstrated the success of operations under federal control which moved delicious and healthful meats from range to table. Simultaneously, the narrative affirmed meats’ “inherent” qualities: pleasure, health, and necessity. Anthropologist Mary Weismantel explains “because they are ordinarily immersed in everyday practice in a material way [...] foods, abstracted as symbols from this material process, can condense in themselves a wealth of ideological meanings.”<sup>92</sup> In the case of the Meat and Livestock Industry exhibit, food objects were not dissociated from ordinary practice. Instead, firm entrenchment of the showcases within a narrative of quotidian consumption reinforced the possibility of plenty (secure access to foods) that the foods materialized.

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<sup>91</sup> Burch report, p. 9; OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>92</sup> Mary Weismantel, *Food, Gender, and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) 7-8.



**Figure 3.6. Federal building. Source: Photograph no. 29482-C COP-1933; 16-EX-51; NACP.**

### **Agricultural Adjustment – A Service to the Nation**

Feelings of national pride may have been most pronounced in the tremendously popular Federal Building and its Hall of States, which housed the USDA’s primary exhibit. In 1933, it had more visitors than any other building, with a total of 15,500,000 patrons.<sup>93</sup> The Federal Building’s massiveness and its service-oriented exhibits worked to stimulate faith in the new administration’s ability to restore prosperity [see fig. 3.6]. In Rydell’s terms, “the building’s exhibits recited a narrative of national progress designed to emphasize the temporary nature of the depression.”<sup>94</sup> The *Official Guidebook of the Fair 1933* made explicit the building’s symbolism: “The Federal Building stands on Northerly island. Above its gold dome three pylons, fluted towers 150 feet high, typify the three branches of United States Government--legislative,

<sup>93</sup> United States Congress, p.85; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

<sup>94</sup> Rydell, *World of Fairs* 150.

executive and judicial. [...] At its back, and in V-shape seeming to embrace it, is the States Building, with its Court of States, thus typifying the increased feeling of loyalty of the citizens to the Union.”<sup>95</sup> The architecture stressed a shared belief in capitalist democracy; it actualized the interdependence of the federal and state governments, while the three towers embodied the federal government’s power. The relatively low-level Food and Agriculture Building and Dairy Building immediately surrounding the Federal Building intensified its awesome stature.

The building’s monumentality allowed for an impressive expanse of exhibits angled toward development and emphasizing improvements from 1833 to 1933. They demonstrated the federal government’s beneficial ubiquity. James O’Donnell Bennett, in a column for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Reporter Sees the Glories of Our Own Land,” makes evident the federal building’s and its accompanying exhibits’ spectacular potential to generate national pride:

The triumph of this federal exhibition hall is its shining vividness – its pictorial quality that lures one on and on despite the aching dogs. Your thirst for knowledge grows by what it feeds on. The exhibition is a great patriotic service. It makes better Americans. I don’t mean blatant ‘hundred per-centers,’ [nationalistic zealots] but Americans who will be humbler, I should think, when here they view in epitome their mighty inheritance and come, please God, into the reverent consciousness that a people’s possession of great riches carries with it a great obligation. Consider thine inheritance and be thankful that thy lot is cast in such a land.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Official Guidebook of the Fair 1933* 85; CPC; UIC.

<sup>96</sup> James O’Donnell Bennett, “Reporter Sees the Glories of Our Own Land,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* 6 June 1933; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

Bennett's tour of the building's exhibits lasted four hours; he claimed that the suffering in his feet was "worth it, for never before had [he] got on such intimate terms with [his] country."

Bennett's employment of religious imagery, his deference, and his joyful sense of responsibility suggests the federal-state exhibits' capacity to inspire patriotic faith.

Though the ideal America was not yet functioning outside the fair's gates, the USDA exhibit demonstrated the manner in which the Agricultural Adjustment Act, with the support of Americans, would shortly restore plenty, stable access to food, and economic prosperity. A 6,500-square-foot display space offered representations of the USDA's nineteen divisions using primarily *in-context* technique. It presented a narrative of advancement through scientific investigation directed toward basic necessities, which ultimately benefited consumers. The displays themselves embodied order, and juxtaposition of past with present (progress made from 1833 to 1933) demonstrated the legitimacy of the USDA's expertise. Agrarian fundamentalist rhetoric framed USDA installations dedicated to consumer protections and positioned agricultural adjustment as a method of sustaining farmers' revered place in the union. Installations' arrangements made the interconnection of government, farmer, and consumer apparent. The exhibit balanced the idea that the nation's prosperity depends on agricultural prosperity – sanctifying farmers' as the nation's providers – with fulfillment of consumers' entitlements –available (secure supply and affordable), healthful, and delicious products – implicit in the American idea of plenty.

Upon entering the exhibit fairgoers encountered a "semicircular alcove," which served as an informal meeting place where they could speak with docents about the USDA's work and

peruse pamphlets regarding USDA programs.<sup>97</sup> In 1933, this installation consisted of a curved wall with a center pillar that identified the “United States Department of Agriculture.” Both the left and right sides of the wall featured pictures of USDA sections’ activities. The words “Serves Agriculture” and “Serves the Public,” which framed the photos, linked the improvement of citizens’ daily lives to a thriving national agricultural industry. Placed high on the center pillar, a plaque, “handwritten” and “signed” by Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, stated: “Science has conquered the fear of famine and has created abundance, and now we must learn to live with abundance.”<sup>98</sup> The handwriting and signature personalize Wallace’s authority; the plaque manifests paternalism. Concomitantly, Wallace’s words intimate an ominous underside to the seemingly beneficial state of bounty. The statement bifurcates the meaning of abundance. It simultaneously denotes the United States as the land of plenty – foods’ availability for all Americans – and surplus – the current glutting of agricultural markets that inhibited national prosperity. He implies the need to attend to agricultural economics in order to assure consumers’ food security. Wallace’s use of the military term “conquer” to describe agricultural research alludes to the USDA’s proven might in the face of adversity and its mandate to protect the American people’s food supply. Positioned near the wall’s apex, the Secretary’s words encompassed the photographs attesting to the pronouncement of the USDA’s service.

Near this main entrance, the Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Adjustment section originally featured an installation titled, “The Shadow of Surplus.” It was designed to grant

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<sup>97</sup> United States Congress, p.42; 16-367; CPC; UIC. This report states that a motion picture was shown in this central feature, which “presented the Department’s field of service beneath a statement by the Honorable Henry A. Wallace.” However, photographic evidence does not show any apparatus on which to show a film.

<sup>98</sup> Photograph No. 29451-C COP-1933; RG16-EX-51; NACP.

“visitors an interpretation of how the vast surpluses of farm crops for which no markets were available had cast their shadows of depressed prices over the whole United States and brought uncalculable [sic] distress to American agriculture.”<sup>99</sup> The installation’s utter gloom highlighted worrisome instability rather than future promise. Dark drapes, hung from the ceiling to the floor, framed a concave niche containing a platform US map.<sup>100</sup> Illuminated sacks of “Surplus Cotton” and “Surplus Wheat” placed on the map’s west side, cast a shadow over the bulk of the United States (map). The signage, “The Shadow of the Surplus Covers the United States,” emphasized the problems depicted in seven drawings underneath the map. The installation had two major problems associated with the present national situation: rhetorical emphasis and mood. This depiction did not sufficiently separate “surplus” from known need or demonstrate how decreasing production would result in plenty for all Americans. The notion of “no markets” conflicted with visible hunger and its economic equivalent: demand. Colonel Causey, Assistant Administrator of the Century of Progress, reportedly disliked the exhibit and suggested that “this is not the time or place to show anything as casting a shadow over the United States.”<sup>101</sup> Early removal of this installation, sometime around July 1933, demonstrates the desire to depict the Agricultural Adjustment Act as part of the New Deal’s promise, with emphasis on a bright forthcoming future, not the depressed present.

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<sup>99</sup> Report of Exhibit of United State Department of Agriculture at A Century of Progress Exposition Chicago, Illinois May 27 – November 12, 1933, p.8-9; Egypt/Fairs and Expositions – Report of Exhibit (A Century of Progress Exposition); OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>100</sup> A small stereopticon box sat atop the map; Photograph No. 29374-C COP 1933; RG16-EX-52; NACP. USDA and congressional reports do not mention the use of slides in the exhibit. However, the Extension Service’s film slide, “Prepared by the Department of Agriculture Washington D.C.,” is visible in photographs. This exhibit would have been an appropriate venue for use of slides from *The Agricultural Crisis*, a film produced in 1933; Motion Picture Films, ca. 1915-ca.1959; Records of the Extension Service, 1888-1966, Record Group 33; NACP.

<sup>101</sup> Joseph Hiscox, Chief of Office of Exhibits, to Dr. C.W. Warburton, Contact Officer Century of Progress Exhibition, 5 July 1933, p.3; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.



The replacement installation used frontier-style rhetoric to envision progress and shifted the emphasis from problem to solution, and from surplus to plenty. “The NEW TRAIL in Agriculture” showed the adjustment program’s benefits for farmers and consumers alike. Above the central tableau, a banner stated that this new trail “Leads to Greater Purchasing Power for [the] Farmer.” Five life-size cutouts demonstrated the manner in which prosperity would circulate from farmer to urban consumer. At the left, the County Agent and Mrs. Wheat Farmer discuss farm production and cost records. In the center, Mr. Wheat Farmer receives a check from Uncle Sam. The Farmer states, “Thanks, Uncle Sam for helping me and my neighbors get organized for production control. I’ll carry out my contract with the Secretary of Agriculture.” Mrs. City Housewife, just to the right of Uncle Sam, is “glad to pay a little more for food” because she knows that the money benefits producers and that the farmers could then purchase her husband’s industrial products. As a consumer, she too could help maintain farm families by maintaining her own.

By modeling types of fairgoers, this installation transformed an economic program into an embodiment of the AAA’s restoration of the American way of life. Narrative emphasis on the farmer and the iconic image of his sturdy body clad in coveralls offered assurance that the AAA would save the family farm. The exhibit condensed the relationship between farmer and consumer by excluding processors and distributors, both essential actors in the AAA program. It depicted Uncle Sam’s facilitation of a beneficial relationship between consumer and producer. This abridged version of the food system under the AAA played upon what Lewis Holloway and Moya Kneafsey describe as “the broader sense of the local, [which] might be associated with an ethical relation of trust between consumer and producer.” In Holloway and Kneafsey’s terms, the exhibit stimulated positive associations of the rural, including “connection,” “closeness,”

“family farming, community and ‘quality.’”<sup>102</sup> The installation positions AAA as born from fundamentally American values. It taps the frontier myth to demonstrate the Roosevelt administration’s ability to take control of the economic situation and make it serve the American people. Agricultural adjustment’s inclusion as part of the USDA exhibit that expressed expertise used for agrarian and, ultimately, consumer interest positioned the legislation as primarily a humanitarian program. Proximity worked in favor of this; installations of ideal food objects obscured the AAA’s programmatic plan of decreased agricultural production.

USDA installations depicted the application of agricultural science to improvements in farming, food production, distribution, and consumption. These flowed into consumer-oriented and domestic displays. In addition to its “New Trail” installation, the Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Adjustment section included dioramas representing stockyards, markets, and food grading processes, along with a display case devoted to “Standards for Farm Products.” This case contained specimens that illustrated quality criteria for commodities such as dressed poultry, canned fruit, butter, and cream. Similarly, the Dairy exhibit showed advances in the production of ice cream, cheeses, butter, and milk.<sup>103</sup> A variety of vitrines helped consumers recognize dangerous and deceptive packaging as well as false advertising. Consumer-oriented displays were interspersed among statistical charts, maps, graphs, and showcases depicting the ways in which USDA experts assisted in the improvement of farms. The Weather section’s “frost-warning service to fruit growers was shown by a diorama representing an orchard at night,

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<sup>102</sup> Lewis Holloway and Moya Kneafsey, “Producing-Consuming Food: Closeness, Connectedness and Rurality in Four ‘Alternative’ Food Networks,” *Geographies of Rural Cultures and Societies*, eds. Lewis Holloway and Moya Kneafsey (Burlington, VT and Wiltshire, England: Ashgate, 2004) 271.

<sup>103</sup> United States Congress, p.47; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

with heaters aglow to keep the atmospheric temperature above the danger point.”<sup>104</sup> The Public Roads and Agricultural Engineering section’s “development of an American farm from an engineering viewpoint” culminated in a diorama of road development’s enhancement of rural and urban life.<sup>105</sup> Two sides of beef, a small one representing 1833 and a larger one representing 1933, confirmed that consumers benefited from the Animal Industry’s near elimination of cattle ticks.<sup>106</sup> Taken together, the installations demonstrated the myriad ways in which the USDA orchestrated the smooth movement of food and other agricultural commodities from field to table, ensuring efficient production (benefiting both farmer and land) of high quality products (in the interest of the consumer). Surrounded by scientific apparatuses, explanatory labels, and statistical charts and maps, food objects in glass cases served as material evidence of the USDA’s capacity to realize the land of plenty.

The Plant Industry display offered the most concentrated encounter with foodstuffs [see fig. 3.7]. It dedicated each showcase to one type of fruit, vegetable or grain, including wheat, corn, apples, cotton, peaches, berries, and sugarcane. Specimens (both real and reproductions) were arranged scientifically in neat rows with labels indicating variety, origin, and other qualities. Baskets of peaches, oranges, and berries were similarly set in angled eye-level displays. Wall displays and waist-high, free-standing cases contained specimens. The exhibit also featured photographs and sketches of grain and fruit varieties. The display demonstrated how the USDA “aided farmers through the introduction, development, and improvement of varieties,” with a view toward the consumer as well; the exhibit cautioned consumers by

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<sup>104</sup> United States Congress, p.44; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

<sup>105</sup> United States Congress, p.46; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

<sup>106</sup> Photograph No. 29448-C COP 1933; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.

showing “the contrast in appearance between the fruit when picked and when packed attractively for market.”<sup>107</sup> A press release by the Century of Progress commission indicates that the collaborative effort of USDA and farmer was positioned as aiding consumers:

In a glass case are wax reproductions of scores of the nation’s best known apples. Labels inform that the Rome Beauty originated in Ohio in 1848; the Jonathan in New York in 1826 [...] and that the Golden Delicious, among the youngest, was born in 1916. Anyone interested can find brief pedigrees of other favorites. [...] Adjoining are samples of the finest hybrid corn in white and yellow varieties, sweet corn and popcorn. The skilled American farmer, guided by government experts, has developed a big eared corn, rich in food values, uniform in shape and color and a heavy producer. No one needs any further argument than these two cases of typical corn to be convinced of the profits that lie in scientific breeding of a grain.<sup>108</sup>

The writer’s demonstration of a consumerist perspective indicates food specimens’ persuasiveness; food offered indisputable evidence of the USDA’s capacity to improve Americans’ lives. Hooper-Greenhill stresses, “It is not possible to grasp or apprehend these material elements [artifacts or specimens] outside an interpretive framework; equally, however, the material character of the object sets its own limits to the meanings that can be produced.”<sup>109</sup> Taxonomical and symmetrical displays emphasized apples, corn, etc. as scientific, rather than ethnographic objects. However, the food displayed epitomized the American mundane and because of this the specimens had the capacity to evoke ordinary pleasures/everyday practices of

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<sup>107</sup> United States Congress, p.47; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

<sup>108</sup> “Federal Agriculture,” press release, A Century of Progress Publicity Office, 10 August 1934, p. 5; 15-137; CPC; UIC.

<sup>109</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 103.

American life.<sup>110</sup> The scientific aesthetic of ordinary but essential objects made the work of the USDA easily understandable, showed the department's fundamental importance to everyday life, and established the legitimacy of the USDA's control over the food supply.



**Figure 3.7. Plant Industry exhibit. Source: Photograph no. 29401-C COP-1933; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.**

According to Milton Danziger, a collaborator in the US Office of Exhibits, “The department [of Agriculture] exhibits gave a feeling of ‘museum’ displays. They were annoyingly neat and orderly.”<sup>111</sup> His appraisal presumably arose from the recurring horseshoe pattern for each section’s exhibit, the symmetry of individual installations, and the glass encasement of nearly all items, whether models or the real thing. Perhaps Danziger felt the exhibit was lackluster in comparison to Midway entertainments or the immersive dioramas and gigantism used by other exhibitors. According to Danziger, the USDA’s conventional

<sup>110</sup> Stephen Greenblatt describes a displayed object’s ability to cause spectators to consider its socio-cultural status as “resonance,” in “Resonance and Wonder,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Routledge, 1992) 42.

<sup>111</sup> Milton Danziger, “A Critique of the United States Department of Agriculture Exhibits at A Century of Progress, Chicago, 1933” (Danziger critique), p.5; Effectiveness Studies – Official Pictures in Color (A Century of Progress); OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

techniques destroyed the exhibit's dramatic potential: "The Department of Agriculture exhibits as a rule are too reflective. 'Don't reason with an audience,' advises a psychologist. 'Give them images! Stir up their emotions! The more emotional a crowd is, the more suggestible it is.'"<sup>112</sup> The USDA did not employ spectacular techniques in order to make their exhibit compelling, rather the department relied on museums' connotations as legitimate educational venues. The exhibit stood in stark contrast to the entertainments available at the fair. *Chicago Tribune* reporter James O'Donnell Bennett admired the techniques used in the federal displays: "You get choiceness, not hugeness. And this is an advantage, for you will find that you can concentrate better."<sup>113</sup> Bennett indicates both his desire to learn and the exhibits' ability to teach.

The exhibit exuded the "educational" through its use of taxonomic object descriptions and causal narrations. The labeling method made high-quality, healthful, and safe objects inextricable from the USDA's efforts. For instance, the Plant Industry's presentation of fruit and vegetable varieties could be easily connected to the Entomology section's "Mediterranean Fruit Fly" exhibit, which explained the "What," "Where," "When," "Why," and "How" of the insect eradication campaign. The "Why" placard stated: "Citrus fruits of the United States are free from worms. It is worth while to keep them so. This fruit fly eradication campaign was the most intensive, vigorous and difficult insect extermination campaign ever successfully carried out."<sup>114</sup> The USDA's presentation of a "cross-section view of Department investigative and research

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<sup>112</sup> Danziger critique, p.6; Effectiveness Studies – Official Pictures in Color (A Century of Progress); OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>113</sup> James O'Donnell Bennett, "Reporter Sees the Glories of Our Own Land," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 6 June 1933; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>114</sup> Photograph No. 29439-C COP 1933; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.

activities”<sup>115</sup> included superficial descriptions of strange and modern apparatuses. These scientific instruments, actual equipment and miniatures, pictures of men in lab coats scribbling on clipboards, and everyday objects positioned as results stood in for in-depth explanation of the science of agriculture itself. Metallic mechanisms, test tubes, and tubes linking one object to another depicted the improvement of such things as fertilizer in the Chemistry and Soils section and Roquefort cheese in the Dairying exhibit. The message was that USDA experts – white men in white lab coats – using potent and beneficent technology produced higher quality products and greater efficiency.<sup>116</sup>

Use of vitrines, a standard museum technique, also bolstered the USDA display as an educational apparatus, while reinforcing USDA authority. Michael Belcher writes: “To many visitors showcases are an irritant, creating a physical and psychological barrier between viewer and object, and filling a gallery with monotonous rectilinear forms.”<sup>117</sup> Belcher’s observation of museum-goers’ aggravation suggests that the glass case inhibits connection. Nevertheless, his observation indicates the way in which use of a vitrine transforms a displayed object. Belcher intimates spectator desire to have physical contact with the real thing; protecting the object within glass denotes authenticity and significance. The bulk of the objects displayed in the USDA exhibit, excluding scientific instruments, were not precious – not costly, nor delicate, nor rare. A brief inventory illuminates the utter ordinariness of some items: newspaper clippings and

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<sup>115</sup> United States Congress, p.42; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

<sup>116</sup> Folke T. Kihlstedt, in her discussion of the utopian tropes of the 1930s world’s fairs, elucidates the public’s fascination with technology, “the technocracy crusade of the 1930s and the engineering ethos it embraced heightened the perception of utopias as feasible. To the adherents of technocracy, engineers were capable of solving all problems with dispatch, and technology was capable of creating a perfect society” (98).

<sup>117</sup> Michael Belcher, *Exhibitions in Museums*, ed. Susan Pearce, *Leicester Museum Studies Series* (Leicester and London, and Washington D.C.: Leicester University Press and Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) 122.

advertisements, fruits and vegetables, plants, meat, noodles, bugs, seeds, etc. (Presumably, the wax models of foods were more costly than actual food objects.) Vitrines elevated the ordinary. Moreover, as Michael Baxandall states, “because it [the displayed object] has been offered for inspection, [the spectator] takes it that the object has been considered worthy of inspection.”<sup>118</sup> Vitrines prompt such behavior. Their design indicates viewing ease; showcases suggest to spectators that contemplation of the objects, within the narrative context created in the exhibit, should occur.

By featuring such items as popular cosmetics, common plants, and staples of the American diet, showcases compelled citizens to consider the USDA’s contributions to their daily lives. Hooper-Greenhill describes artifacts’ power in museum display: “The presentation of what appears to be (and is) visual evidence, materialises and thereby appears to confirm the ‘reality.’”<sup>119</sup> It is a case of seeing is believing, which is born from a learning protocol that poses “an opposition between the use of primary and secondary sources, with the objects being understood as pieces of unmediated ‘reality’ and therefore closer to a primary world of evidence.”<sup>120</sup> The USDA exhibit *simply* portrayed the products of developments made over the course of a century: objects used everyday. Common objects positioned as evidence naturalize ideology. Foods’ inclusion naturalized the federal government’s authority to determine the food system.

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<sup>118</sup> Michael Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) 34.

<sup>119</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 23.

<sup>120</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 106.



The aesthetic predicament of *in-context* exhibition makes food's presence in the displays striking. The exhibit offered privileged views of food objects, concentrated attention on them as destined for consumption, and in doing so enhanced the USDA's paternalistic argument. Vitrites, labels, and ordered arrangements directed visitors to simultaneously think about food as necessary to their well-being and as the products of USDA effort. For instance, the Plant Quarantine and Entomology sections argued that insect extermination efforts yielded greater and higher quality agricultural commodities. The Food and Drug Administration installation advised consumers about product packaging, showing its protections of citizens through the Federal Foods and Drugs Act and teaching consumers how to spot deceptive and dangerous advertising. One display included jars of chicken meat; it demonstrated how the Westchester brand used packaging techniques to make it appear as if the jar contained more meat than it did and how Derby Chicken "veneered" their jars with white meat.<sup>121</sup>

Helen Iball's elaboration of the effects of food used in theatre performance suggests the intensity with which visitors may have experienced USDA displays. Coining the term "foodie gaze," Iball writes: "[I]n the 'moment just before' contact with or absorption into the [actor's] body, it might be suggested that the actor is upstaged by the food. Rather than an acute awareness of the performer's embodiment, the spectator's own corporeality is likely to be foregrounded, because [the spectator's] gaze has been claimed (seduced) by food."<sup>122</sup> In the USDA exhibit, there were no actors to vie for the gaze; no actor enjoyed privileged access to consumption. Instead, the showcases repeatedly engaged spectators in the "moment just before"

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<sup>121</sup> Photograph No. 29506-C COP 1933; RG 16-EX-52; NACP.

<sup>122</sup> Helen Iball, "Melting Moments: Bodies Upstaged by the Foodie Gaze," *On Cooking* spec. issue of *Performance Research* 4.1 (1999): 74.

consumption through the direct relationship established between spectator and food object.

Foods' placement within vitrines may have stimulated recurrent bodily reflexivity as spectators moved from installation to installation examining familiar foods and learning about the USDA's contributions to their families' tables. Displays stimulated visitors to act as consumers. As something citizens cannot do without, the ideal specimens offered in the exhibit, rows upon rows of food in myriad showcases, confirmed the centrality of the USDA to Americans' lives, and may have even generated citizens' gratitude.

The Dairying section's central placard made explicit the USDA's service to the nation's well-being: "A SOUND AND PROSPEROUS DAIRY INDUSTRY is essential to the economic welfare of our Nation and to the physical well-being of our people." A clear pronouncement of agrarian fundamentalism, this statement and its accompanying installations – showing cows' mammary glands and breed markings and the technologies employed to improve cheeses, butters, and creams – reinforced farmers' and consumers' dependency on the work of the USDA. Through such installations, the USDA took credit for the farmers' role as the nation's providers by positioning the department as both enabling prosperous agriculture and protecting consumers.

The Home Economics installation affirmed the elemental intimacy of USDA services to citizens' welfare. On a pillar framing the entrance, a shadow box contained four specimens. The topmost shelf featured a small rat skeleton under which a label read, "He was stunted in his growth and his bones malformed." Beneath this, a shelf with a small white rat was labeled, "This rat ate only meat, potato, bread and butter." On the third shelf, "He grew large and his bones were well-formed" referred to the large skeleton positioned above it. The bottom shelf featured a plump white rat and the description, "This rat ate plenty of milk and vegetables,

besides meat, potato, bread and butter.”<sup>123</sup> A general descriptor beneath the display reinforced the message: “Food Made the Difference in These Twin Brothers.”<sup>124</sup> Personified through familial narration, the rats’ bodies encourage visitor comparison with their own corporeality. The display makes internal health superficially measurable. Simplified, seeable science enables instant judgment of one’s own health. Here, the “brothers” genetic equality highlights the imperative for rigorous investigation; it suggests that diet plays a more fundamental role in health than heredity. The rats’ bodies evidence the irrefutability of the USDA’s dietary recommendations.



**Figure 3.8. Home Economics exhibit. Source: Photograph no. 29414-C COP-1933; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.**

The central feature of this section placed the results of USDA research into the home [see fig. 3.8]. A series of three tableaux framed by the front of a house allowed visitors to peer

<sup>123</sup> Photograph No. 29443-C COP 1933; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.

<sup>124</sup> The USDA Extension Service featured the same example in the film, *Food Makes a Difference: A Bureau of Home Economics Picture*, n.d.; Motion Picture Films, ca. 1915-ca.1959; Records of the Extension Service, 1888-1966, Record Group 33; NACP.

through windows to see a “typical” American family (white family of four, the father’s suit denotes white-collar employment) working out a budget; a pie graph placed behind the family shows the proper allocation of expenditure for particular food groups. In the next window, the family sits at dinner enjoying a well-balanced meal of milk, bread, butter, vegetables, and meat. The final window offers an ergonomic kitchen design.<sup>125</sup> This scene of Americans (i.e. the hegemonic discourse of Americanness) engaged in mundane activity particularized spectators’ experience in terms of felt health or threatened malnourishment based upon a comparison with their own family’s table. The stable, well-fed family embodied the promise of the New Deal. It was the tacit culmination of all of the USDA programs; Mrs. City Housewife and her family could enjoy the success of agricultural adjustment because of Mr. and Mrs. Wheat Farmer’s cooperation.

Food objects in the USDA exhibit doubly manifested farmers’ economic interests and their familial consumption practices. And the USDA depicted the department’s power as subservient to the farmers’ needs (as both food producers and food consumers). Home usage exhibits applied equally to rural and urban women, as did the exhibits regarding processed foods and safety. Farm women, who had the means, purchased food from mail-order catalogues;<sup>126</sup> “processed ‘urban’ foods [...] had become high-status foods in rural areas.”<sup>127</sup> Food objects also verified the economic benefits of USDA research and regulation. Leslie Prosterman’s study of Midwestern county fairs sheds light on the manner in which exhibition of ideal food specimens,

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<sup>125</sup> United States Congress, p.47; 16-367; CPC; UIC. I have not be able to locate a photograph of this portion of the installation in the records of the exhibit at National Archives in College Park, MD, University of Illinois-Chicago, or at the Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>126</sup> Cummings shows that 25% of farm women in 1915 made food orders from catalogues (108).

<sup>127</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty* 27-8.

as well as their framing as products of USDA-farmer cooperation, substantiated the advantages of federal assistance. Prosterman states, “Judges evaluate vegetables and fruits on edibility, which subsumes other criteria like size, quality, uniformity, freshness, texture, and color”<sup>128</sup> and “Every characteristic that these authorities described when they talked about the beauty of an animal related somehow to an economic issue.”<sup>129</sup> Here, food producers’ aesthetic appreciation of livestock and produce is inextricable from potential income, which determines farmers’ way of life. The presence of food objects constructed USDA activities as integral to the American farmer’s and farm family’s well-being.

Thirty-three thousand visitors to the USDA exhibit in the Federal Building picked up the free forty-five-page souvenir booklet, “Science Serving Agriculture.” It offered further explanation of the USDA’s role in citizens’ lives. “The United States Department of Agriculture Touches Your Life in Scores of Ways” headed the opening chapter to this guide of USDA services.<sup>130</sup> The narrative positions the USDA as the paternal protector of American life and the reader as a consumer of agricultural products:

Every day the United States Department of Agriculture does for you a multitude of necessary things that you could not possibly do for yourself. It guards your food supply from adulteration and dangers to health and improves its quality through plant science and animal husbandry. It keeps watch on production at home and abroad, so that the supply may be adjusted to demand and prices kept in line with values. [...] The progress

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<sup>128</sup> Leslie Prosterman, *Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995) 160.

<sup>129</sup> Prosterman, 169.

<sup>130</sup> Arthur P. Chew, “Science Serving Agriculture” (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1933), p.1; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

of science and civilization makes these services indispensable, while at the same time removing them from the sphere of individual action. [. . . ] On rising you reach for the tooth paste or a mouth wash. You can not personally know that the article is fit to use. The Department guarantees the strength and purity of the contents. At breakfast you eat a slice from a ham bearing a little purple stamp. [...] The cream on your cereal came from a dairy using practices standardized by the Department. [...] Your fruit, no matter what its kind or variety, shows the results of the Department's scientific labors.<sup>131</sup>

The emphasis on individuals' vulnerability underlies each of the pamphlet's subsequent examples showing how the USDA positively effects the lives of the American people, from ensuring safety in morning rituals to the promise of adequate physical energy through food inspection. This opening paragraph also highlights the significance of the relationship between farmers and the USDA. It suggests that the Department of Agriculture protects the farmer's way of life and through this relationship the entire nation benefits. Narrative emphasis on the USDA's devotion to farmers and consumers and the connections demonstrated among these groups work to stress an agrarian fundamentalist ideal that is also consumer-oriented: farmers' needs must be met in order to ensure plenty for all in the United States. This frames the Agricultural Adjustment Act as working for the American people's best interest.

The brochure culminates in the section, "Farm Relief Act is a Great New Responsibility." The previous chapters establish the links between the government, the farmer, and the consumer, so this final section easily construes AAA policy as the entire nation's responsibility. The narrative intensifies the duty of the American public through the metaphor of the farmer as bonded slave. The implication is that the Agricultural Adjustment Act will set the country free:

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<sup>131</sup> Chew 1; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

Its [AAA] fundamental purpose is to restore national prosperity by taking the farmers out of bondage. [ . . . ] Farmers surrender to nonfarmers, for no equivalent return, what they have produced by applying their labor, skill, and capital to the land. It is not in the interest even of consumers that this should continue. [...] City dwellers, if they think about the matter, will not want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg or even the hen that lays the ordinary breakfast egg. [...] They will agree that economic justice for agriculture promotes economic progress for the Nation.<sup>132</sup>

The USDA shows the relevance of agricultural economics to consumers' lives by linking it to consumers' daily practices. The economic prospects of the AAA are explained in terms of plenty. In this passage, the farmer's work creates the foundation for economic prosperity (goose) and actually produces plenty (hen). Moreover, use of the word "bondage" in the early twentieth century could not but have connoted slavery. The USDA's comparison of farmers, the nation's providers, with human chattel is at least aggressive if not incendiary. The narrative implies that by allowing the farmer to stay in bondage, the American public starves itself — it perpetuates want. Yet by accepting responsibility as consumers, supporting the act and paying reasonable prices for agricultural commodities, the Agricultural Adjustment Act can provide for the nation; led by the USDA, the People participate as a collective to ensure plenty.

By representing its services, the USDA demonstrated plenty through adjustment. The ripe fruit, prime cuts of beef, filled plates, and harvested fields yielding a healthy bounty materialized the beneficent power of the federal government. Displays of common foods evoked consumers' known needs and validated the federal government's right to control food production. The USDA's exhibit may not have been *dramatic* in terms of exoticism, or even

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<sup>132</sup> Chew 1; 16-367; CPC; UIC.

dazzling design, but its choice of artifacts and conventional presentation technique manifested stability. A profusion of food in pictures, dioramas, and as specimens and their ordered arrangement created a *mise-en-scène* of plenty. The scientific aesthetic in which it was framed legitimated the paternalistic programs of the USDA. It signified the USDA's ability to create normalcy – the mythical sort, the land of plenty.

### **Sustaining Promise – Problems of Context**

Farm week at the fair opened in mid-August 1933 amid dispute about AAA's benefits for small farmers and its disproportionate attention to various agricultural commodities. While powerful American Farm Bureau and National Grange leaders made speeches at the fair praising the AAA before thousands of farmers, and broadcast to thousands more via radio,<sup>133</sup> the National Cooperative Milk Producers' conferees (360,000 dairy farmers meeting in Chicago) announced dissatisfaction with Wallace and AAA administrator George Peek. They stated that the AAA crop reduction program actually only shifted agricultural production by allowing crop farmers (corn, wheat, etc.) to turn fields to pasture, thus inducing some farmers to turn to dairying. This would increase competition for dairymen and worsen current overproduction, driving down already depressed prices.<sup>134</sup> Additionally, though prices rose for some agricultural commodities, the cost of manufactured goods rose more rapidly, continuing to drive up the cost of agricultural production and resulting in little gain for small farmers. Thus, for many farmers, conditions failed to improve, and despite increased levels of industrial employment, urban consumers were also unsettled by increased costs for agricultural commodities.<sup>135</sup> At the close of Farm Week,

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<sup>133</sup> "Farm Woman is 9,000,000<sup>th</sup> Visitor at Fair," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 15 August 1933: 4.

<sup>134</sup> "Federal Farm Program Lags, Dairymen Told," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 16 August 1933.

<sup>135</sup> Saloutos and Hicks 479-80.



Secretary of Agricultural Wallace had the opportunity to allay such concerns by officially announcing new AAA measures.

Farm week began on 13 August 1933; the *World's Fair Weekly* summarized the scheduled celebrations in honor of the nation's providers: "It will be a week packed with events, from the impressive Candle Lighting Company on Sunday, Farm Youth Day, through the parades, bands, barn dancing, and pageants, to the lively contests ranging from sheep shearing to husband calling on Farms Sports Day, which will conclude the week's ceremonies."<sup>136</sup> The week's special programming increased daily attendance figures; attendance ranged from around 170,000 to more than 190,000 visitors each day throughout this week.<sup>137</sup> Daily programming included speeches by prominent members of the Roosevelt administration, as well as farm organization leaders. A mile-long parade down Michigan Avenue and into the World's Fair displayed the great achievements of farm men, women, and industry. A pageant, "Evolution of the Farm Woman," honored rural women's contributions to the nation.<sup>138</sup> Large crowds of farmers witnessed the pageantry and pomp exhibiting national appreciation of agricultural producers.

On the final day of Farm Week, 18 August 1933, Secretary Wallace received a 19 gun salute (only one individual received such a tribute each year) upon his arrival to speak in front of an estimated 15,000 farmers in the Hall of States. The audience also included thousands more

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<sup>136</sup> "Farm Week at the Fair," *Official World's Fair Weekly*, for week ending 19 August 1933: 14; CPC; UIC.

<sup>137</sup> "Wallace Makes Farm Please at Fair Tomorrow," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 17 August 1933: 4; Earl Mullin, "Farmer Throng at Fair to Hear Wallace Today," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 18 August 1933.

<sup>138</sup> Earl Mullin, "Fair Ceremony Pays Tribute to U.S. Farm Women," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 16 August 1933.

who heard the broadcast across the fairgrounds and via radio.<sup>139</sup> Wallace stressed the administration's support of the farmer in his introduction of the Corn-Hog program, an emergency federal purchase of 6,000,000 swine, federal funding of hog processing, and distribution of pork products to relief clients. This program would function in support of the crop reduction programs already in operation and reduce both young pigs (not yet matured for market) and sows (set to produce new litters in spring 1934). From the purchase figures and price increases estimated by Wallace, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* "calculated that relief fed persons have had little meat to eat and that their consumption of this huge amount will not interfere with the normal consumption."<sup>140</sup> Added to this, the day before his speech at the fair, Wallace addressed dairymen's concerns by announcing that the federal government would purchase \$30,000,000 of dairy products, and federal officials reiterated enforcement of Chicago cooperative milk marketing agreements.<sup>141</sup> Officials purported that Agricultural Adjustment programs would benefit producers and relief clients while not unduly burdening consumers.

Opinions on the action varied. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* editor showed the potential pitfalls of the program: "Only an incorrigible optimist, we believe, would express the certainty that the plan will work out satisfactorily. [...] The possibilities of substituting other cereals for corn, other meats for pork and other foods for meat if hog prices are pushed too far out of line are obvious. The inability of many farmers to understand the plan and of many who do

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<sup>139</sup> Earl Mullin, "Farmer Throng at Fair to Hear Wallace Today," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 August 1933; "Wallace Tells \$55,000,000 Aid for Corn Belt," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 August 1933: 2; "Federal Farm Program Lags, Dairymen Told," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 16 August 1933.

<sup>140</sup> "Wallace Tells \$55,000,000 Aid for Corn Belt," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 19 August 1933: 2.

<sup>141</sup> "Wallace Seeks Ways to Boost Farm Revenues," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 18 August 1933.

understand to cooperate must also be conceded.”<sup>142</sup> The *New York Times* editorial, “Plenty and Want,” was perhaps incorrigibly optimistic. It focused on the plan’s moral end and its American character:

This grant is putting the nation as a whole under a share of the burden. What is thus given will come back and much of it immediately – all of it in time ‘as bread cast upon the waters’ – in the saving of a multitude of lives from hunger and utter want, in the purchase of the wheat, cotton and meat from those who have been unable to find a market for their products, and in providing revenues for those engaged in ‘processing’ [...] It is a triple good that should come from this single act. And even if it had but a single good, it were necessary on the ground of humanity. It is all for each. It should, incidentally, stir the devotion of each to all under such a benign purpose as has prompted this provision.<sup>143</sup>

Yet shortly after the emergency program was put into action, the means – pig slaughter and plowing under crops – and failure of the ends – turning many sows and piglets into inedible grease and tankage – received broad and vociferous public criticism. Agricultural historian Roger C. Lambert demonstrates broad condemnation of the program based on shared moral claims of the wastefulness and unnaturalness of destruction of basic necessities. Lambert illustrates farmers’ and consumers’ inability to reconcile the economic need to eliminate surpluses with the visible deprivation endured by Americans, which suggested that surplus was a fiction. Citizens felt that the USDA was attempting to erase the “paradox” by *throwing away* the plenty rather than providing for the nation. Janet Poppendieck’s detailed account of the outcry over the pig slaughter explicates the vehemence of the public’s reaction and the moral dilemma

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<sup>142</sup> “Mr. Wallace’s Plan for Corn,” editorial, *Chicago Daily Tribune* 21 August 1933.

<sup>143</sup> “Plenty and Want,” editorial, *New York Times* 23 September 1933.

experienced by members of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration regarding the program. In it, she describes increasing criticism of the program by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and its revelations about federal “waste” as the stench of tankage from west side processing plants pervaded parts of the city.<sup>144</sup> Like Lambert, Poppendieck concludes that the Roosevelt administration announced the formation of the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC) on 4 October 1933 in order to counter popular condemnation of the pig slaughter.<sup>145</sup> The FSRC was to manage distribution of all agricultural surpluses to relief clients and impoverished citizens.<sup>146</sup> Creation of the FSRC did not put an end to public questioning of the AAA’s ethics, but it was a positive step on the administration’s part and it enabled the USDA to exhibit the AAA as having both moral and economic benefits at the 1934 World’s Fair.

President Roosevelt inaugurated the second year of the Century of Progress by pressing a telegraph key in Washington D.C., which illuminated the fair in Chicago. His address admitted the errors in the administration’s attempt to restore national greatness, but also showed his resolve to continue the New Deal experiment:

The millions of our people who visited the Exposition of 1933 must have seen in it, as I did, an inspiring demonstration of courage and confidence. Those who will come to the Exposition of 1934 will see how abundantly that courage and that confidence were justified. They will discover in this new Exposition many evidences of the recovery that has been brought about and see many signs pointing the way along that upward path up

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<sup>144</sup> Poppendieck 113-4; for a full explanation see her chapter, “The Little Pigs: The Genesis of Relief Distribution.”

<sup>145</sup> Poppendieck 124.

<sup>146</sup> Poppendieck’s study centers on the problems associated with linking agricultural programs to food distribution programs. She argues that “In lieu of a major means of redistributing the nation’s abundance to those in need, it [FSRC] became a sort of safety valve in a program designed to reduce the abundance to profitable levels, to restore scarcity” (xvi).

which we, as a nation, have set our feet. [A] definite objective is also being followed by those to whom has [sic] been entrusted the administration of national affairs. The individual parts in this planned program are by no means inflexible or infallible. As I often have said, we may in some respects change method while the objective remains the same. [...] The big objective is constantly with us. It is restoration of our national well-being and the providing of a greater opportunity for humanity from the bottom up to prosper and find happiness.<sup>147</sup>

Roosevelt did not specify the problems with his initiatives, but USDA correspondence from October 1933 makes clear that this department was actively attempting to repair the AAA's reputation and resurrect its promise of plenty at the 1934 fair.

Director of Extension Work C. W. Warburton sent a memorandum to Secretary Wallace regarding the monetary cost and benefits of participating in the fair during the proposed 1934 season. In it, Warburton stated that altering exhibits to demonstrate the AAA's effects for farmers and the nation (at an estimated cost of \$15,000) was of "transcendent importance" because "the vast potential audience [...] warrants utilization of the opportunity to put before those millions of visitors a visual explanation of the Administration's program of agricultural adjustment."<sup>148</sup> The USDA revised three installations "to present [...] new information which was not available at the time the original exhibit was prepared [for the 1933 season]."<sup>149</sup> The

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<sup>147</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, Sound Picture Address, 27 May 1934; 14-227; CPC; UIC.

<sup>148</sup> C.W. Warburton, USDA Director of Extension Work to Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, 24 October 1933; CC-Chicago WF 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>149</sup> C.W. Warburton, USDA Director of Extension Work to Colonel W.B. Causey, Assistant Commissioner, A Century of Progress, 6 December 1934, included in Report of Exhibit of United States Department of Agriculture at the Century of Progress May 27-November 12, 1933 (Warburton to Causey), p.1; Effectiveness Studies – Official Pictures in Color (A Century of Progress); OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

first of these consisted of adding samples of “pasture and forage crops” to the Plant Industry exhibit; these crops were promoted as replacements for grains no longer cultivated under the AAA.<sup>150</sup> The two additional changes made the economic benefits of AAA explicit and utilized strong agrarian rhetoric to promote a vision of plenty.



**Figure 3.9. USDA introductory exhibit, 1934.**  
**Source: Photograph no. 29510-C COP 1934; RG 16-Ex-51; NACP.**

In order to bring the display more “[i]n line with the new agricultural program,”<sup>151</sup> a pair of simple but very large scale pans replaced the plaque with Wallace’s message to the people as the central feature of the USDA’s introductory exhibit [see fig. 3.9]. The bar weighing the scale pans’ loads of “Supply” and “Demand” was labeled “Prosperity Requires Balanced Agriculture.” On the left side, a sign under the words “The Goal” elaborated the AAA’s purpose: “Adjustment

<sup>150</sup> Warburton to Causey, p.1; OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP and Photograph No. 29509-C COP-1934; RG16-EX-51; NACP.

<sup>151</sup> Warburton to Causey, p.1; Effectiveness Studies – Official Pictures in Color (A Century of Progress); OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

of agriculture to the quantity that the nation and the world will buy at a fair price so the farmer may obtain an equitable share of the nation's income."<sup>152</sup> It replaced most of the photographs signifying various USDA farm initiatives and their label, "Serves Agriculture." The right side of the display no longer featured photographs denoting the ways in which the USDA "Serves [the] Public." Again, the bulk of the photos depicting service to consumers were replaced by a sign that explained the economic "Progress Made" under the AAA: "Prices of farm products improved. Purchasing power of farmers increased by 20 per cent. Business revival accelerated, factory employment gaining. More than 185 million dollars distributed to growers restricting production of cotton, corn, hogs, wheat, and tobacco, under self-financing programs. Producers of the other commodities aided by marketing agreements and licenses. Progress continuing through 1934."<sup>153</sup> This display reformulated USDA "services;" it countered doubt about the AAA's effectiveness by stating results. It no longer professed that the USDA's relationships with agriculture and the public were equivalent, rather the public is shown to be a major economic beneficiary of agricultural fundamentalism. The exhibit, however, transforms agrarian fundamentalism into modern adjustment, i.e. federal regulation of agricultural production or economically-informed production. Now, capitalist savvy farmers cooperating with the government would deliver the country's salvation.

For the 1934 season, the USDA also substituted "Adjusting Agriculture to Fit Today's Conditions" for the "New Trail in Agriculture" installation.<sup>154</sup> Though it employed the same basic structure of the original, this new exhibit retained only the cutouts of Uncle Sam and the

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<sup>152</sup> Photograph No. 29510-C COP-1934; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.

<sup>153</sup> Photograph No. 29510-C COP-1934; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.

<sup>154</sup> Photograph No. 29511-C COP-1934; RG 16-EX-51; NACP.

Farmer. They discuss the agricultural situation in a manner indicating continued improvement and intimating gratitude for the farmers' sacrifices and patience:

This dialogue developed that notwithstanding during the first year, after the Agricultural Adjustment Act was passed, the farm income increased thirty-nine per cent due to higher farm price and benefit payments, agriculture was still getting less than its fair share of the national income, but under the adjustment programs progress had been made towards getting a fair share for the farmer.<sup>155</sup>

Through the embodiment of "Farmer," the display invoked family-owned farms, and by extension traditional values. The display displaced the ongoing consolidation of small farms into large corporate enterprises. Even with federal subsidies, many smaller farmers could not afford to remove acreage from production and continue to compete with large corporate farms, which had the capacity to produce more crops more efficiently on less land and could still receive large federal payments because of their ability to remove huge acreage from cultivation.<sup>156</sup> The installation depicted a *partnership* between the American farmer and federal government, which emphasized preservation of farmers' way of life in order to ensure plenty for all.

Consumer-oriented displays throughout the exhibit reiterated this. The introductory scale pans inducted visitors into the USDA exhibit through the manifestation of plenty as balance, the result of adjustment. Adjustment was framed as part of modern progress, another innovation like those exhibited in the dioramas, maps, charts, and installations dedicated to consumer protections. Even the pamphlet, "Agriculture and the Consumer," written for the 1934 season,

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<sup>155</sup> Warburton to Causey, p.2; Effectiveness Studies – Official Pictures in Color (A Century of Progress); OI, Records Exhibitions, 1889-1949; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>156</sup> Saloutos and Hicks 490-1.



explicated that “The Agricultural Adjustment Act has from the first recognized the necessity of protecting consumers.”<sup>157</sup> Framing the AAA in this manner obfuscated the morally problematic aspects of crop and livestock destruction by focusing on economic outcomes, consumer needs, and high-quality products. Moreover, the displayed food objects enabled visitors’ physical encounters with ordered bounty. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asserts that staged food objects possess the potential to satiate an audience through potent sensory stimulation: “Our eyes let us ‘taste’ food at a distance by activating the sense memories of taste and smell. Even a feast for the eyes only will engage the other senses imaginatively, for to see is not only to taste, but also to eat.”<sup>158</sup> By offering food for visual delectation, the USDA exhibited adjustment’s ability to create stable access to food; food objects applied agricultural economics to consumers’ daily lives.

Following the close of the fair, C.W. Warburton requested \$7,000 to revise certain USDA exhibits for use at state fairs “in the light of present agricultural situations.”<sup>159</sup> Wallace agreed with Warburton and sent a proposal to the Secretary of State, US Commission to a Century of Progress.<sup>160</sup> Four of the ten proposed exhibits, modifications of existing exhibits and new exhibits created through assemblage of various installations, dealt directly with agricultural adjustment. It was estimated that a total of \$1,620 would enable production of the exhibits: “Adjusting Agriculture to Fit Today’s Conditions,” “Cotton Farming to Fit Today’s Conditions,”

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<sup>157</sup> Rexford G. Tugwell, “Agriculture and the Consumer” (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1934); 16-368; CPC; UIC.

<sup>158</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses” 3.

<sup>159</sup> C.W. Warburton, Director of Extension Work USDA to Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, 23 November 1934; CC-Chicago WF, 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>160</sup> Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture to Secretary of State, US Commission to a Century of Progress, 18 December 1934; CC-Chicago WF, 1933; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

“Livestock Farming to Fit Today’s Conditions,” and “The Dairy Industry of the United States.”<sup>161</sup> Destined to circulate throughout the nation in venues that celebrated states and bred pride, these installations would continue to promote AAA’s promise of plenty.

Attending the world’s fair constituted spectatorship by choice, a planned venture stimulated by anticipated pleasure. This generates affinity. Moreover, in 1933 visitors entered the fair as citizens of a nation in transition, with the hope of a new beginning. Inside the federal building, the government’s ability to provide for its citizens shone through the very *limits of the material objects*. One week before Wallace’s announcement, the *World’s Fair Weekly* article “Your Uncle Sam Thinks of Everything” opened its laudatory description of the USDA exhibit by stating, “You wonder how so many farmers can be so up against it when you pace through the tremendous show that the Department of Agriculture has staged here.”<sup>162</sup> This statement makes apparent spectators’ potential comparison between the reality of agricultural depression (and its attendant corn rotting on stalks, oranges and apples left unpicked on trees, and farm foreclosures), with the stability made manifest in the exhibit. However, the writer’s assurance that “You will never imagine that nobody cares what becomes of you after you visit the U.S. government building” points to promise rather than insincerity.<sup>163</sup> In 1934, controversy replaced the hope vested in the Roosevelt administration as the meaning of emergency measures became clear. Gains shown in the exhibit confirmed progress toward future stability and effaced the conflict between capitalist imperatives and human rights. The exhibit showed both

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<sup>161</sup> Renovation of Department Exhibits at a Century of Progress to Make them Suitable For Use at State Fairs, 1934; Charges-Chocolate; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>162</sup> “Your Uncle Sam Thinks of Everything,” *Official World’s Fairy Weekly* for week ending 6 August 1933: 6; Folder 16-146; UIC.

<sup>163</sup> “Your Uncle Sam Thinks of Everything,” *Official World’s Fairy Weekly* for week ending 6 August 1933: 6; Folder 16-146; UIC.

accomplishment and a vision of the future under adjustment. Achievements served to validate the USDA's ability to create plenty, a goal currently in progress. This feeling extended to the performative play in the Meat and Livestock exhibit, the imaginative achievement of physical perfection in the Dairy Building, and throughout the festive environment of the entire fair.

#### Chapter 4: Re-presenting the Paradox:

##### Performing Hunger, Gluttony, and Food Destruction in *Triple-A Plowed Under*

*Triple-A Plowed Under* presented to audiences “Flash News in the Flesh,” a dramatization of contemporary events.<sup>1</sup> The play begins in 1917 with the World War I call to farmers to produce and ends in 1936, in the moment of performance, urging citizen unity to secure America’s future. In the first three scenes, which take no more than a few minutes to play, eighteen years elapse from World War I to the midst of the Great Depression. The narrative advances in a loose chronology, showing the depressed state of the nation, the enactment of the Agricultural Adjustment Act and its effects on citizens, the Supreme Court’s ruling of AAA’s tax on processors unconstitutional, and in the penultimate scene, the passage of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act as a replacement for the AAA.

Throughout the play’s progression, each scene contributes to a vision of interdependence, either through juxtaposition of urban and rural news stories or through fictional interaction between constituencies. The scenes embody the “paradox:” farmers strike and destroy products; middlemen profit from underpaying farmers and overcharging consumers; traders watch the market escalate and decline; housewives riot over the rising cost of meat; farms are foreclosed upon; sharecroppers lose their places on farms; a mother surrenders to authorities after committing infanticide because she could not feed her child; a man cannot afford coffee; a farmer is unable to pay for clothing; and a laborer cannot find work. Juxtapositions of differently invested groups created a panoramic portrait of the contemporaneous national situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Playbill for *Triple-A Plowed Under* New York Biltmore Theatre 7 March – 13 March 1936 (Playbill NYC); TAPU Playbills; Tailor-Tree; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

In this chapter, I examine how *Triple-A Plowed Under's* mise-en-scène argued that the right to food was a right beyond politics. Crucially, this argument deploys universalistic rhetoric and recognizes political-economic inequalities as hunger's cause. Of course, with the exception of the scenes "Cotton Patch" and "Sharecroppers," examination of such inequities was restricted to white consumers, workers, and farmers (i.e. the "Depression Poor"). Despite pointing out problems with the AAA's approach to the situation, this living newspaper did not specify the political party or ideology that would resolve the "paradox." Instead, to involve as many spectators as possible, it drew on the journalistic conventions of "fairness" and "impartiality," employed the rhetoric of the morality play by giving concrete facts and current events "universal" significance, and demonstrated citizens' economic interdependence. The play's incorporation of food objects, narrative treatment of food, and mimetic hunger and food destruction transformed incidents of economic exploitation into a human rights issue. Actual government-sponsored food destruction as part of the agricultural recovery program was framed as violence. At the same time, farmers' and consumers' acts of food destruction were presented as non-violent by means of techniques that stimulated in-depth audience identification. Narrative focus on food and scenic focus on food objects utilized spectators' first-hand bodily knowledge of food as a necessary commodity. Nevertheless, *Triple-A's* re-presentation of hunger, the ultimate expression of food's universal human necessity, enabled accusations of political propaganda.

I consider *Triple-A Plowed Under's* aesthetic techniques as *contemporary re-presentation*; in doing so, I synthesize Temple Hauptfleisch's "eventification" concept and David Román's theory of the "contemporary." Hauptfleisch coined the term "eventification" to describe "a process of *framing*, where the particular live event is placed in a dramatic/theatrical

frame, and shown and/or looked at and interpreted as if it were a scripted event.”<sup>2</sup> He considers everyday behaviors recycled within a fiction; he does not attend to the impact of framing non-fictional occurrences as “scripted events.” The Living Newspaper Unit positioned the portrayals in *Triple-A Plowed Under* as factual, while making acting and a contrived mise-en-scène apparent to the audience. I use the term “re-presentation” to denote the framing of non-fictional events *as scripted*. Obvious mimesis of actual people, events, and situations prompts not only comparative analysis between the original and its repetition<sup>3</sup> but consequentially stimulates symbolic interpretation of real events. Depiction of real events using theatrical devices suggests to the audience that meaning beyond the facts exists within the incidents. This potentially politicizes phenomena, particularly when the mimesis concerns contemporaneous events.

The production’s timing and the play’s content positioned *Triple-A*’s audience in the “contemporary.” David Román theorizes that theatre creates the contemporary: “the present [becomes] a time in which an audience imagines itself within a fluid and nearly suspended temporal condition, living in a moment not yet in the past and not yet in the future, yet a period we imagine as having some power to shape our relation to both history and futurity.”<sup>4</sup> The context in which *Triple-A* appeared and its aesthetic magnified the sense of the contemporary produced in theatre. The play included depictions of incumbent government figures, spectators’

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<sup>2</sup> Hauptfleisch 281.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin Carlson asserts that staging a well-known drama stimulates a comparative perspective in an audience: “each recycling almost inevitably encourage[s] audiences to be alert to the particular features of the new version and to experience it in part as a contribution to an ongoing process if not a direct competition” (26). He further suggests that such focus is desired: “the sought-for effect in such drama relies primarily upon an audience’s binocular vision - its members’ familiarity with the previous treatment of this same material” (27), *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Román 11.

urban and rural contemporaries, and events that were currently effecting their lives. *Triple-A* opened in New York City on 14 March 1936, two months after the Supreme Court declared the AAA unconstitutional and just weeks after Congress passed the SCDA, which reframed the AAA crop reduction program as land conservation. Indeed, the SCDA was brand new at the time of the play's opening in New York. I examine how *Triple-A's contemporary re-presentation* both politicized actual events and was seen as "playing politics."

The play itself ends in the present, making its ephemeral presentation part of life outside the theatre. Its final moment called for action, but did not prescribe a solution to the "paradox." Perhaps the absence of a definitive answer derived from the FTP's attempts to negotiate the politics inherent in publicly-funded, government-sponsored theatre, or from the Living Newspaper Unit's directive to represent the news. *Billboard* determined that the play's failure to provide a definitive answer stemmed from its aping of newspapers: "It really is a muddled presentation, giving several viewpoints – which is just what most newspapers do."<sup>5</sup> The *New York Sun* concurred and pointed out a major problem of embodying newspapers: "It was far too impartial for drama; it gave too much to all sides."<sup>6</sup> The Living Newspaper Unit stated that "[a]uthenticity should be the guiding principle,"<sup>7</sup> as the "Living Newspaper seeks to dramatize a new struggle – the search of the average American today for knowledge about his country and his world; to dramatize his struggle to turn the great natural and economic and social forces of

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<sup>5</sup> Typed copies of newspaper and magazine articles from across the country are located in Triple-A Plowed Under – Living Newspaper Publicity (4-7) (TAPU Publicity); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC. *Billboard* 28 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (6); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>6</sup> "The Stage in Review: Terrors of Impartiality," *New York Sun* 21 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (5); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>7</sup> "Writing The Living Newspaper," n.d., p.2; 25.8 Living Newspaper "Writing The Living Newspaper," (25.8); Lighting – Theatre Construction (L-TC); Technical Studies File, 1935-39 (TSF, 1935-1939); FTC; LOC.

our time toward a better life for more people.”<sup>8</sup> This agenda, manifested as *contemporary re-presentation*, resists political alignment and promotes the living newspaper as a dialogic forum. Regardless of cause, by ending without offering a solution and by featuring multiple points of view, the play purported that history was happening in the moment and that the audience had to shape America’s/their own future.

In order to represent food as a fundamental right *Triple-A* emphasized common morality. Showing farmers’ inability to obtain merely cost of production for their agricultural products, citizens’ inability to participate as consumers, and this situation’s resultant hunger made prioritizing one group’s needs over another’s difficult. Indeed, *Triple-A* resembles a morality play. The play allegorized the audiences’ contemporary rural and urban counterparts (farmers and consumers); the staging of these characters transformed them into Everymen and women. Additionally, the play framed contemporary economic dysfunction through an idea of gluttony that maintains a direct connection between one person’s hunger and another person’s indulgence, an understanding of gluttony that William Ian Miller refers to as “criminal negligence.”<sup>9</sup> This unified urban and rural citizens, farmers and consumers, against a common enemy: the profiteer. However, *Triple-A Plowed Under* does not demonize capitalism. Instead, it vilifies the abuse of capitalism, and in doing so regards it as an economic system with moral limits.

Related to this, the play also deployed the gluttony paradigm to express the government’s failure to protect its citizens or alleviate the present situation; it placed the AAA in the realm of human rights: “At its core, a human right is a claim against government, a claim that the

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<sup>8</sup> Hallie Flanagan qtd. in “Writing the Living Newspaper,” p.9-10; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

<sup>9</sup> Miller 97.



government must do or desist from doing specific things to further human dignity.”<sup>10</sup> The play called for examination of the moral implications of the federal decision to enact agricultural reduction within the context of the “paradox.” For instance, Frank Mittauer, in his review of the August 1936 Los Angeles production, concluded: “If it leaves its audience bewildered as it ends, it is only because, as the play ably demonstrates, our efforts under compulsion to repair our faltering economic system do not make very good sense viewed in retrospect.”<sup>11</sup> *Triple-A* suggested that when purchasing power determines consumers’ food security and legislation results in higher prices for food commodities, stimulation of agricultural recovery – no less through the dubious channels of crop and livestock reduction and destruction – may effectively deprive citizens of food.

Though each of the five 1936 productions of *Triple-A Plowed Under* present interesting individual case studies, this chapter considers them collectively. Each was produced in the midst of the AAA controversy, between March and August 1936, in the urban centers of New York, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Chicago, and all used similar staging techniques. I will point out significant differences in productions. Unless otherwise noted, all scenic descriptions refer to the original New York City production. The manuscript of the New York City production is my primary source for the play’s narrative because each subsequent production used this script. I employ the production notes from the New York City production, which contain property and costume lists, and scenery, sound and light cues, as well as plots denoting light and scenery placement. Additionally, photographs, narrative reports, programs, and

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<sup>10</sup> George Kent, *Freedom from Want: The Human Right to Adequate Food* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005) 80.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Mittauer, “Federal Propaganda,” *Evening News* 3 August 1936; J. Howard Miller; Theatre of the Thirties (TOT); Federal Theatre Project Collection (FTPC); Fenwick Library, Special Collections and Archives Department, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA (GMU).

production bulletins from the various productions assist in reconstructing the mise-en-scène that accompanied the narrative.

### **Techniques of Contemporary Re-presentation**

In his discussion of theatre as a social process, Temple Hauptfleisch examines the reciprocity of a theatrical company, venue, and context on a performance's meaning and a play's ability to establish a theatre company's reputation.<sup>12</sup> The theatrical company (Federal Theatre Project sponsored by the US government), the venues (urban playhouses rented by the FTP), and the context (economic depression) influenced reception of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, as *Triple-A* and the living newspapers affected the public's characterization of the FTP. After *Triple-A* premiered, John Mason Brown examined the ethical burdens faced by the Living Newspaper Unit: "One is forced to wonder, too, how much liberty of expression can be really had in any production for which the Government stands sponsor. Perhaps there are not only too many strings tied to the gift, but too many conflicting obligations that go with Government patronage."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, critics variously interpreted *Triple-A* through encounters with "the red, white, and blue official emblem, U.S.A. Works Program, W.P.A. on the doors of the Biltmore Theatre."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the knowledge that "actors and actresses [were] being saved from hunger and idleness and demoralization" may have framed attending *Triple-A* a civic duty for some

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<sup>12</sup> Hauptfleisch 286-88.

<sup>13</sup> "'The Living Newspaper' Acted at the Biltmore: 'Triple A Plowed Under,' A Vigorous Federal Theatre Experiment Which Raises Some Ethical Questions" *New York Post* 16 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (7); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Macfadden, "Inciting to Riot," *Liberty Magazine* 23 May 1936; TAPU Publicity (7); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

theatergoers.<sup>15</sup> For others, “spending public money to educate our citizenry on a delicate political problems [sic] via the dramatic stage [was] revolting and impertinent.”<sup>16</sup>

*Triple-A*, the first living newspaper played before an audience, became the litmus test for the aesthetics and politics of this new dramatic form.<sup>17</sup> The dramaturgical choice to represent Communist Party USA leader Earl Browder and his opinions on the Supreme Court decision spurred FTP officials to request police assistance on opening night. *Triple-A* also included portrayals of Secretary of Agriculture Wallace, Supreme Court justices, Farm Holiday President Milo Reno, NRA Administrator General Hugh Johnson, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and ordinary citizens. However, members of the Federal Theatre Veterans League working on *Triple-A* threatened to strike unless the scene featuring Browder was cut because “as loyal Americans, [they] regard[ed] as an insult the placing of Earle [sic] Browder on a level with our patriotic forefathers, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, and our distinguished fellow citizen [former New York Governor and anti-New Deal democrat] Alfred E. Smith.”<sup>18</sup> The actor portraying Browder stood on the same platform as actors portraying historic and contemporary elected officials. *Triple-A* literally gave equal footing to Browder’s denunciation of the Supreme Court’s decision; without qualification (or announcement of party affiliation) actors representing

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<sup>15</sup> Excerpt from *Milwaukee Leader* 23 June 1936, qtd. in Narrative Report Covering June 16-30; WI Apr.-Sept. 1936; NC – WI; Narrative Reports, 1935-1939; Work Projects Administration Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Record Group 69 (RG 69); NACP.

<sup>16</sup> Editorial, *Oneonta Star* 28 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (6); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>17</sup> The State Department shutdown the first living newspaper, *Ethiopia*, “on the grounds that the impersonation of foreign statesmen might lead to diplomatic embarrassment,” qtd. in “Uncle Sam is Producer Now,” *New Jersey Press* 15 May 1936; Living Newspaper Publicity, April – 1936; Administrative File 1934-40; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>18</sup> “Actors Resent Red in Scene,” *New York Sun* 14 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (4); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

Senator Hastings (Republican-Delaware), Alfred E. Smith, Browder, and Thomas Jefferson each stated their opinion regarding Congress's and the Supreme Court's powers.

On the day the play premiered, newspapers ran the strike threat story under headlines such as: "Veterans in U.S. Play 'Insulted' By Role of Browder: 'War Slacker'," "WPA Living Show Threatened Again: Opposition Develops on Role of Communist - 2 Plays Previously Banned," and "Actors Resent Red in Scene."<sup>19</sup> Philip Barber, New York City FTP administrator, recalled with amusement the police's confusion about their role:

At any rate word spread that on the opening night there was going to be violence [...] the plan was to storm the back of the theatre and pull off the lights and destroy the scenery and so forth [...] we got about 20 police in [...] the Police Captain said, 'Don't you worry Mr. Barber, we won't let this play open not at all we'll shut it right down.' [...] He never got over being confused about that cause it was the only time in his life that he ever heard of the police being called out to keep a play open.<sup>20</sup>

Representation of Browder became fodder for critics claiming the FTP was, at best, "boondoggling" and, at worst, a communistic enterprise unwittingly sponsored by US tax-payers. Contention surrounding Browder's depiction followed the play to subsequent production sites in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Cleveland and into the 1939 Congressional Hearings on Un-American

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<sup>19</sup> "Veterans in U.S. Play 'Insulted' by Role of Browder: 'War Slacker'," *New York World-Telegram* 14 March 1936; T.P. Headen, "WPA Living Show Threatened Again: Opposition Develops on Role of Communist - 2 Plays Previously Banned," *New York Post* 14 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (4); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Barber, New York City FTP administrator, interview with Diane Bowers, Lorraine Brown, Mae Mallory Krulak, John O'Connor, Sol Schulman, Michael Sundell, Elizabeth Walsh, Louanne Wheeler, Fairfax, VA, 11 November 1975 (Barber interview); Oral History New Deal Culture (OHNDNC); FTFC; GMU.

Propaganda Activities.<sup>21</sup> This makes apparent Hauptfleisch's contention that a producing company and a play mutually influence each other.

In 1936, a desire to determine whether *Triple-A* represented communist, pro-New Deal, or anti-New Deal interests eclipsed all other discussion of the play in the press. Of the hundreds of newspaper reviews and magazine articles about *Triple-A* archived by Federal Theatre personnel, the majority categorize the play as propaganda. Yet no unanimity existed as to whether the play was WPA, anti-New Deal, or communist propaganda. This indicates that social and theatre critics perceived *Triple-A* as politicizing current events and significantly, that regardless of depiction of Browder, the play thwarted easy political categorization.

Theatre historiography has paid considerable attention to the FTP as a social process, with some focus on living newspapers as a genre.<sup>22</sup> Scholars and critics often link the aesthetic

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<sup>21</sup> The Los Angeles unit aimed to avert negative publicity by cutting Browder from the show at the Mayan Theater. Hallie Flanagan, recounts her testimony regarding *Triple-A* to the congressional committee in *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940) 343.

<sup>22</sup> Hallie Flanagan's comprehensive and seminal work, *Arena*, highlights the FTP's therapeutic, entertainment, educational, social and economic capacities while arguing that the project was misconstrued as promoting a leftist political agenda. Barry Witham and Tony Buttitta examine the FTP's unique position as a relief project and artistic endeavor and argue that the living newspaper made the government's control over information difficult in *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982). Jane DeHart Mathews's *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* examines the Federal Theatre Project as part of a government bureaucracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown present photographs, costume and scenery sketches, publicity posters and FTP personnel commentary as evidence of the constraints and potentials of government-sponsored theatre in *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Project* (Washington D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978). George Kazacoff argues that the FTP enjoyed certain artistic freedoms because it existed outside the commercial market, while government sponsorship created a patron-artist relationship that confined artists to produce specific works pleasing to the government in *Dangerous Theatre: The Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays* (New York: Peter Lange Publishing, 1989). Stuart Cosgrove asserts that government subsidization of artists caused the decline in the American workers' theatre movement in "From Shock Troupe to Group Theatre," *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935*, eds. Stuart Cosgrove, Raphael Samuel and Ewan MacColl (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) 259-79. John O'Connor demonstrates the strategies used in the Federal Theatre Project to attract a working-class audience to productions, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*, eds. Bruce MacConachie and Daniel Friedman (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985) 171-83. Barry Witham suggests that the FTP economic structure made it egalitarian, "The Economic Structure of the Federal Theatre Project," *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, eds. Ron Engel and Tice Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 200-14. Rena Fraden explicates the ways in which the FTP imagined its audiences as single entities with identical interests

origins of the living newspaper to its politics. They perceive such precedents as the 1920s Soviet Union agit-prop group the Blue Blouses and Marxist artists of the Weimar Republic. Consequently, historians categorize the FTP's living newspaper form as quintessentially left-wing or workers' theatre, citing as evidence Federal Theatre head Hallie Flanagan and FTP stage director Joseph Losey's travels in the Soviet Union, left-wing affiliations of FTP personnel, and similarity of techniques. Such attribution is not incorrect, but it is partial. Consideration of contemporaneous framings of the living newspaper by the unit's personnel, theatre critics, and social critics, as well as understanding *Triple-A* as a *contemporary re-presentation* elucidates the complexity of this play's broad reception as propaganda.

The Living Newspaper Unit employed theatrical techniques associated with various politically-affiliated forms: the conservative *March of Time*, the Group Theatre's social realism, and communist agit-prop. However, living newspapers also incorporated the aesthetics of film documentary, newsreels, sociology, journalism, and folk art – none exclusively associated with one political agenda. Moreover, *Triple-A*'s absence of a solution or closure disabled definitive political readings. Its re-presentation of competing narratives about dysfunction in the US food system encouraged opposing perceptions about the political position espoused by *Triple-A*.

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based on race in *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Barry Witham looks at the tensions caused by the regional –national structure of the FTP in *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Bonnie Nelson Schwartz compiled interviews from FTP personnel, many of which concern the project's social functions in *Voices from the Federal Theatre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). Mark Franko discusses a strike held by FTP dancers against program cuts in *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002). Susan Manning shows that the conservative element of the FTP kept most performing groups segregated, but how integrated audiences enabled cross-identification in *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Barbara Melosh distinguishes the conservative gender ideology in FTP performances in *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater*. Michael Denning's theory of the "Cultural Front" explains how Federal Arts programs enabled cultural work to be seen as labor and stimulated increased unionization of artists in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth-Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

Writers and personnel on the Living Newspaper Unit asserted that the form was born out of the need to “encompass the wide scope of present-day events.”<sup>23</sup> They found the conventional three-act drama inadequate for communicating the news’s “many component parts,” and contemporary stage design’s elaborate realism too “decadent.”<sup>24</sup> Authors of “Writing the Living Newspaper” credit Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia’s new stagecraft as the “abstract technique, which widened the scope of action and mood” and the direct address employed in Clifford Odet’s *Waiting for Lefty* as enabling “direct sharing of a problem with the audience.”<sup>25</sup> The writers insist such theatrical approaches facilitate broad depiction of national issues. *Federal Theatre Magazine*, a vehicle for communication between regional units of the FTP, attributed the living newspaper form to the demands of press reporting, asserting that artistic personnel were “subject to the newspaper rules – brevity, simplicity, clearness.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the New York City program credits the New York Newspaper Guild with the “idea of living dramatization of current news events.”<sup>27</sup> In a 1938 *Theatre Arts Monthly* article, Arthur Arent, lead writer for living newspapers, both noted “the possibility of a whole avalanche of predecessors” and “[denied] their influence.”<sup>28</sup> Arent concedes minor indebtedness to revue and

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<sup>23</sup> “Writing the Living Newspaper,” p.2; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

<sup>24</sup> “Writing the Living Newspaper,” p.8; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

<sup>25</sup> “Writing the Living Newspaper,” p.8,12; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

<sup>26</sup> “Editing the Living Newspaper: It’s Not so Simple as It Seems,” *Federal Theatre* 1.5 (April 1936): 17; 1.4.17 Federal theatre [Magazine] Vol.1, No.5 Apr. 1936; Nov. 1935 – Dec. 1936; Publications File, 1935-39; Administrative Records, 1935-42; FTC; LOC.

<sup>27</sup> “Guild Sponsors Living Newspaper,” Playbill NYC; TAPU Playbills; Tailor-Tree; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Arent, “The Techniques of the Living Newspaper,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* (November 1938): 820.

the *March of Time*, but in imagining drawing-room debates about the living newspaper's lineage, he writes:

Soon the air is heavy with scholarly references to the Blue Blouses, the commedia dell' arte, to Bert Brecht, and the March of Time.

What are the sources of this technique? As far as I know, there aren't any. At least if there are, we didn't know about them. Among those immediately concerned – author, director, producer, designer, technician, and composer – each had ideas as to what could be done in his particular orbit, and we all had a healthy respect for the opportunity for experimentation that the Federal Theatre offered.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, three years of red-baiting by anti-New Deal press and government officials suggests the impossibility of acknowledging indebtedness to left-wing or radical aesthetic movements without jeopardizing the project. Nevertheless, in interviews conducted in the late-1970s and 1980s as part of George Mason University's oral history project on the Federal Theatre, participants offered conflicting answers. Philip Barber stated that the living newspaper form derived from a Viennese theatre company that "improvise[d] on the day's news" and that the idea for a Federal Theatre Project version was Elmer Rice's, an expressionist playwright and the original director of New York City FTP.<sup>30</sup> Norman Lloyd, an actor in *Triple-A Plowed Under*, told interviewers that Meyerhold and Eisenstein influenced living newspaper aesthetics, but stated only that their techniques "lent to the quickest telling of that story in the most direct

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<sup>29</sup> Arent 820.

<sup>30</sup> Barber interview; OHNDC; FTTPC; GMU.



way.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, regardless of their origins, the techniques employed in *Triple-A Plowed Under* did just that.

It took between forty-five and fifty-five minutes to perform *Triple-A*'s twenty-five scenes.<sup>32</sup> The rhythm and imagery produced in the production occupied reviews; scenes described as “lighting-like flashes” impressed critics.<sup>33</sup> Remarks regarding the swift tempo indicate that blackouts between every scene amplified each scene's terse dialogue and brevity. Narrative swiftness and the range of stories invoked a newspaper sensibility. Consistent use of backlighting, scrims, and projections created larger-than-life images reminiscent of newsreel in size and sound. The number of roles (around 100) and scenes featuring large gatherings of people gave the play the scope of news. For instance, the Chicago production opened with 41 actors onstage.<sup>34</sup> *Billboard* communicated the aesthetic to readers by enumerating the use of a “fast peppering of blackouts, interspersed with graphs thrown on a scrim drop” and compared the play both to newspaper headlines and *March of Time* newsreels.<sup>35</sup> The combination of Voice of

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<sup>31</sup> Norman Lloyd, interview with John O'Connor, Hollywood, CA, 5 January 1976 (Lloyd interview); OHNDC; FTFC; GMU.

<sup>32</sup> This estimate is based on newspaper reviews. However, the short duration between the two nightly performances (8:30 and 9:40 p.m.) at the Great Northern Theatre in Chicago suggests that *Triple-A* may have been performed in less than fifty minutes. The minimal scenery, lighting, and basic costumes indicate that resetting the performance would not be time consuming. However, time would be needed, presumably more than twenty minutes, to empty the theatre of patrons and then seat new patrons. The narrative report from the Wisconsin production states that at the final rehearsal the show was timed at forty-three minutes; WI Apr-Sept. 1936; NC- WI; Narrative Reports, 1935-1939; RG 69; NACP.

<sup>33</sup> W. Ward Marsh, “Federal Theater Opens With Sensational Melo of the Farmers' Woes,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer* 3 June 1936; Book 2; Scrapbooks Compiled by the Department of Information, NYC Office, Feb.–June 1936; RG 69; NACP.

<sup>34</sup> Playbill for *Triple-A Plowed Under* Chicago Great Northern Theatre 6 July 1936 (Playbill Chicago); TAPU Playbills; Tailor-Tree; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Denis, “Two Smash Hits Scored by Federal Theater Project,” *Billboard* 28 March 1936; Triple A Plowed Under – NYC-Newsclippings; SW – TR; Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotion Materials, 1935-39 (Vassar, 1935-39); RG 69; NACP.

the Living Newspaper's (VLN) declarations, scenes' concision, blackouts ending each scene, and iconic images produced an episodic narrative that stimulated audiences to infer meaning from the totality. The sparse language and settings enabled an epic portrait of the national crisis; in the speed of its presentation historical phenomena became tightly linked.

If attentive to the articles included in the newspaper-style playbills for the New York and Chicago productions of *Triple-A*, theatre patrons would have learned about the process of creating a living newspaper, entailing its journalistic research and editing [see fig. 4.1]. For example, the Chicago program includes an article titled "Dramatized News Now Offered in Famous Play." It discusses the forty researchers' work on the play's topic and how fifteen dramatists then turned news incidents into scenes.<sup>36</sup> The New York program offered a bibliography of newspaper, book, and miscellaneous sources of *Triple-A*. Programs also featured stories on critical praise for the living newspaper, other Federal Theatre successes, and promotions for upcoming shows. Programs' length suggests that spectators could not read them in full while waiting for the show to begin. Nevertheless, a quick skimming of headlines, captions, and photos positioned *Triple-A* as a document of the times that dramatized citizens' real lives, leaders' real words, and the problems with which the nation struggled.

Though the Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Los Angeles productions used conventional playbills, every program featured scene titles. They function similarly to the titling of acts in revue or news headlines, indicating the narrative independence of each scene as well as its content. Titles created a timeline and demonstrated which episodes from the nation's recent past and present would be depicted. For example, the Cleveland production titled *Scenes Eleven through Twenty-One*: "Birth of Triple A," "Payments," "Gruel," "Wine," "Drought," "Prayer,"

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<sup>36</sup> Playbill Chicago; TAPU Playbills; Tailor-Tree; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

“Cotton Patch,” “Sharecroppers,” “Housewives Rebel,” “Sherwood Case,” and “Triple A Killed.”<sup>37</sup> A pre-show glance over the scenes would have provided adequate information to predict the narrative’s unfolding.



Figure 4.1. Chicago program.  
Source: Chicago Reprint; Triple A Plowed Under; FTP Prints; FTPC; GMU.

Following an overture, *Triple-A* opened with the Voice of the Living Newspaper announcing “Triple A Plowed Under.”<sup>38</sup> This directly related every incident that followed to the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The title evoked Secretary of Agriculture Wallace’s controversial emergency program of 1933. “Plowed under” alludes to federal payments made to farmers to

<sup>37</sup> Playbill for *Triple A Plowed Under* Cleveland Carter Theater 29 May 1936 (Playbill Cleveland); TAPU Playbills; Tailor-Tree; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>38</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p. 2; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC. In the Los Angeles production, a projected outline of a giant plow preceded the stage action; Max Pollock, interview with Frances Warde, and Mayfair Freud with Lorraine Brown, Los Angeles, CA, 8 January 1976; OHND; FTPC; GMU.

plow up cotton and corn to avoid continued surplus. It also called to mind this program's concurrent slaughter of six million pigs, intended to increase hog prices by diminishing supply. The title also referred to the recent Supreme Court decision, which effectively ended the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act. Using the phrase "plowed under" to describe the Supreme Court decision associated it with the same carelessness thought to be shown by the USDA in their food destruction program. It suggests problems with the entire federal government's management of the "paradox," but not outright condemnation of the judiciary or legislative and executive branches. *Triple-A* thwarted a clear point of view on current issues through multiple perspectives. VLN's announcement ushers the audience into the "contemporary" with ambiguity.

The initial and the subsequent announcements by the VLN foreground each scene as a dramatization of the real, not a fiction. VLN offers brief exposition or introduces scenes with facts. For instance, in Scene Four-A, the audience hears: "Des Moines, Iowa. Farmers pin hopes on farm holiday leader, Milo Reno."<sup>39</sup> VLN, like the programs' scene titles, balances headlines' sensationalism and factuality. Its dramatic brevity prompts the audience to attend to specific elements by pointing out scenes' emotional and informational significance, while also inspiring trust in the narrator's objectivity. VLN capitalizes on newspapers' connotation of fact and impartiality. It framed all scenes, whether fictional or non-fictional, as authentic news objects. Scene Twelve begins with VLN announcing: "Triple A. Pays out four million dollars daily."<sup>40</sup> A farmer is then shown receiving his AAA subsidy for reducing acreage, but when he attempts to buy a shirt he finds that the price has increased by 25% because of higher cotton prices. Framed

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<sup>39</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.11; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>40</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.33; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

by the actual figure of federal expenditure, the fictional encounter between the farmer and the salesman evidences the legislation's negative impact on consumers, including farmers. VLN's announcements position the fictional as factual.

*Triple-A's* presentational style also reiterated the experience of performance. Scenery such as a two-dimensional drop painted to look like a butcher shop or one table to stand for an entire restaurant foregrounded the play as a play; it did not attempt verisimilitude. The *Survey Graphic* listed the various scenic effects used, describing them as "ingenious"; for example, showing characters in silhouette made the actors appear to the reviewer "like drawings, shadow pictures."<sup>41</sup> When seen, actors appeared in stereotypical costumes: the characters of farmers dressed in coveralls, workers dressed in khakis, and government officials and businessmen wore suits. The *WSC Bulletin* felt the actors in the scenes offered "living 'tableaus.'"<sup>42</sup> Sketches precluded realistic acting technique; their brevity and the constant change in characters prohibited audience involvement in an individual character's psychology. Repeated use of the Voice of the Living Newspaper, blackouts, scenery changes and a cavalcade of new characters – spanning the nation and rarely reappearing – approximately every one to three minutes reminded the audience that they were watching a produced event. Scene titles, the VLN, a spotlight's isolation of a character, a projected statistic, or use of other obvious theatrical devices produced awareness of *arrangement* of the news. The theatrical frame indicated that the audience should make meaning of these discrepant news events. Encompassing all the scenes within "Triple-A

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<sup>41</sup> *Survey Graphic* May 1936; TAPU Publicity (6); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>42</sup> "'Triple A Plowed Under,' Presented by the Living Newspaper, A Federal Theatre Project," *WSC Bulletin* 30 March 1936; Book 1; Scrapbooks Relating to the Theatre Productions in the States, August 1935 – June 1939 New York City; RG 69; NACP.

Plowed Under” asked the audience to link the portrayals to the legislation. The play linked contemporaneous events occurring nationwide and offered no neat ending.

Laura Browder asserts that “Living Newspapers used documentary [...] to] demand political activism from the mass audiences who saw the productions.”<sup>43</sup> *Triple-A*’s closing tableau calls for action, but does not charge the audience with a precise task. The finale begins at the Farmers’ Convention, as announced by VLN and signified by farmers holding signs featuring the names of Midwestern states. They stand in a straight line across the front of the stage pronouncing that the new Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act must provide farmers with “cost of production” in order that they obtain a “decent standard of living.”<sup>44</sup> Curtains then open to reveal the full stage. The actor playing Secretary of Agriculture Wallace stands center-stage, elevated above actors portraying the unemployed who are positioned on a stage right ramp, and the farmers clustered stage left. Distanced from the “people,” a wealthy profiteer and woman in evening clothes stand upstage left [see fig. 4.2]. Consumers, farmers, and workers reiterate the problems depicted throughout the play. They direct their complaints to Wallace and the profiteer. Short lines and choral responses escalate the economic impasse dividing farmers, the unemployed, and consumers:

ALL UNEMPLOYED. [. . .] We need a decent standard of living.

ALL FARMERS. So do we.

A FARMER. Then all our problems are the same.

ALL UNEMPLOYED. Then all our problems are the same.

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<sup>43</sup> Laura Browder, “Finding a Collective Solution: The Living Newspaper Experiment,” *Prologue* (Summer 1998): 88.

<sup>44</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.68; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

WOMAN in EVENING CLOTHES. All must be helped, John.

FARMER, UNEMPLOYED, and WOMEN. No charity!

An UNEMPLOYED. Jobs!

All UNEMPLOYED. Jobs!

A FARMER. Help.

An UNEMPLOYED. We need a state that permits no man to go hungry.

[.....]

One FARMER. We can't harvest.

ALL FARMERS. We can't harvest.

One WOMAN. We can't buy.

ALL WOMEN. We can't buy.

One UNEMPLOYED. We can't eat!

All UNEMPLOYED. We can't eat!<sup>45</sup>

Over the loudspeaker, the Voice of the Living Newspaper announces recent Farmer-Labor coalitions. Actors playing farmers and the unemployed move together, extending their arms as they chant out to the audience, "We need you."<sup>46</sup>

Did *Triple-A* close with an appeal for a third party as suggested by the *Survey Graphic*?<sup>47</sup> Was *this* Farm-Labor party in line with a communist agenda as stated by the *Times*?<sup>48</sup> Was the play's "clos[ing] with a poignant plea for a strong Farmer-Labor Party [...] vicious satire on the

<sup>45</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.72; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>46</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.73; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>47</sup> "State Theater," *Survey Graphic* May 1936; TAPU Publicity (7); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>48</sup> "The Living Newspaper Finally Gets Under Way With 'Triple A Plowed Under'," *Times* (?) 16 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (4); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

Administration's farm program"?<sup>49</sup> The *Topeka Journal* felt *Triple-A* demonstrated Democratic partisanship, "if the Republicans were in power the Biltmore Theatre would doubtless witness a different [play]."<sup>50</sup> An Indianapolis editorial commented: "Those who see the New York play are subtly invited to become convinced that permanent joy and happiness, peace and prosperity would have come to the home of every American farmer had the supreme court [sic] decided for the administration."<sup>51</sup> *Variety* thought the "melodramatic" finale suggested that the legislation, the play, and the FTP itself were campaigning for President Roosevelt's reelection.<sup>52</sup> Contradictory charges of propaganda illustrate the difficulty of politically-aligning *Triple-A*; press disagreement regarding what the play advocated demonstrates that *Triple-A* generated dialogue about the politics of food rights.

Framed by a title that refused a clear point of view and ending without closure, the presented episodes of economic interdependence and mutual moral obligation implicate the audience in their own future. Mark Randall, writing for the *Brooklyn Ridgewood Times*, stated, "With the problem [the "paradox"] still unsolved, as is still the cast [sic] today, the curtain is drawn and the audience left to ponder on what happens next."<sup>53</sup> David Román asserts "[t]he critical investment in futurity – the idea that the future will bring forth the perspective that will enable an insight unavailable in the present – disregards the work that the arts achieve in their

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<sup>49</sup> J.H. Pollack, "Two Significant Plays," *Pennsylvanian* 6 April 1936; TAPU Publicity (7); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>50</sup> "Uncle Sam as Producer," *Topeka Journal* 21 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (5); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>51</sup> "Federal Plays," *Indiana News* 27 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (6); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>52</sup> "'Living Newspaper' In trouble Again on Charge of Radicalism," *Variety* 18 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (5); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Randall, *Brooklyn Ridgewood Times* 24 April 1936; TAPU Publicity (7); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.



contemporary moment.”<sup>54</sup> Though Román is concerned with challenging historiographic bias, his observation suggests that audiences may approach theatre as a device which not only makes sense of the problem, but can offer answers. *Triple-A*'s lack of resolution and final gesture, which incorporated/implicated spectators, left the audience in the midst of the problem.



**Figure 4.2. Finale.** Source: Photograph No. 18; Triple A Plowed Under (186) (TAPU); RG 69-TC; NACP.

### Re-presenting the “Paradox”

The first three scenes recount the popular narrative of economic decline following World War I. Though these scenes elaborate the domino effect of foreign markets’ decline following increased US production during World War I, they focus on the personal cost to farmers and how agricultural economic crisis effects urban workers. The opening scene represents the ideological machinations used on farmers to make them feel responsible to the war effort. A scrim foregrounds the actors, silhouetting all performers. Following the VLN’s introduction “1917 – Inflation,” at stage left a red light highlights a continuous march of soldiers; the sound of their

<sup>54</sup> Román 259.

trek into battle increases as the scene progresses. On stage right, three figures tower above a crowd of farmers. These speakers implore farmers to work for the war effort, appealing to their revered position as food producers and protectors of American values. A stream of short, morally-charged statements barrage farmers and invoke their responsibilities as patriots and men:

FIRST SPEAKER. The fate of our country rest upon the farmer.

FIRST SPEAKER. Do you want our land invaded?

SECOND SPEAKER. Do you want your daughters ravaged by Huns?

WOMAN. Farmer, save the Nation! (Trumpet)<sup>55</sup>

The threat to women, land, and the consequential ruination of US civilization configures the farmer as protector: “Every bushel of barley is a barrel of bullets” and “Every hand with a spade is a hand-grenade.”<sup>56</sup> These martial metaphors, complete with memorable alliteration and rhyme, recall the war-time propaganda sponsored by the US government. Amidst appeals to masculine duty, the Woman character signifies multiply. She is mother, wife, land, and democracy. A trumpet punctuates each of her entreaties, in which each of the Speakers’ solicitations culminate. She positions the farmer as savior, beseeching him to *save* “our boys,” “democracy,” “our honor,” “civilization,” “our flag.”<sup>57</sup> Silhouettes erase the Speakers and the Woman as individual characters; their daunting shadows demonstrate the ubiquity of the moral imperatives put to farmers, which called on them to produce, “More! More! More!” to ultimately “SAVE THE WORLD.”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.2; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>56</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.3; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>57</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.2-3; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>58</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.3; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

Three short scenes grouped together by VLN's announcement, "The 1920s. Deflation," constitute Scene Two. The first section, Two-A, demonstrates the effect of foreign markets' closure on the banking system, large lenders, and rural mortgage holders. Scene Two-B establishes the country banker's need for funds to repay large city lenders. Scene Two-C shows the interconnection of city worker and rural farmer as the economic effects of World War I reverberate across the nation. It also introduces the "paradox's" inconceivability to the farmer. The country banker demands that the farmer pay his debt. The farmer's inability to sell the wheat rotting in his fields dumbfounds him: "Well, hell, people still need to eat, don't they. And they can't tell me there aren't people who couldn't eat what's lying out in my fields now. My son, Jim, in New York says he can't walk down the street without having hungry men beg him for money."<sup>59</sup> While both supply and demand exist the requisite conditions of capitalism have left farmers struggling and urban groups hungry.

Scene Three's brief statistical account of the fall in farm income and rise in unemployment from 1920 to 1935 ushers the audience into the recent past, wherein Farmer, Dealer, Manufacturer, and Worker experience the effects of interdependence. Various titled "Depression," "The Circle," and "Farmer to Worker," in this scene livelihood insecurity directly results in hunger. Each man stands facing the audience; they are arranged in a straight line from stage right to stage left (Farmer far SR, then Dealer and Manufacturer, and Worker far SL). Four different spotlights isolate each character. The characters remain motionless; when they speak they turn only their heads to look at the character immediately to the left. Following each line,

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<sup>59</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.6; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

the spot lighting the speaker turns off.<sup>60</sup> One-line statements about each man's inability to participate economically, combined with receding illumination and isolated movement from stage right to stage left, culminates focus on the Worker, who speaks directly to the audience:

FARMER. I can't buy that auto.

DEALER. I can't take that shipment.

MANUFACTURER. I can't use you any more.

WORKER. I can't eat. (Count one, two, light out.)<sup>61</sup>

The singular movement, a head turn, links each man to the next. These figures serve to make economic interdependency concrete.

Explicit linking of economic collapse/dysfunction with the inability to eat brings morality to bear on capitalism. Contrary to Federal Theatre archivist and historian John O'Connor's opinion that in *Triple-A* "[t]he farm plight is defined in economic rather than moral terms,"<sup>62</sup> the play foregrounds the human toll of the national situation. The staging evidences the Living Newspaper Unit's aim to "[stimulate] unanimity between actor and audience" by a "direct sharing of a problem with the audience."<sup>63</sup> Worker's presentation of his state to the spectators constitutes acknowledgement of their involvement in the situation. The scene begins with the Farmer's inability to purchase industrial products, but does not end with Worker's lack of purchasing power. Worker's inability to buy food will rebound on Farmer, whose crops will rot or cease to be planted. The head turn from Farmer to Dealer to Manufacturer to Worker to the

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<sup>60</sup> Set and light plots; Technical Dept. Living Newspaper W.P. A. 486-1B Theatre; Triple A Plowed Under – NYC Stage Sets; SW—TR; Vassar, 1935-39; RG 69; NACP.

<sup>61</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p. 9; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>62</sup> O'Connor, "The Drama of Farming" 331.

<sup>63</sup> "Writing the Living Newspaper," p.12; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

audience shows mutual dependence and, in turn, mutual vulnerability. Worker's direct address to the audience is not merely a plea for empathy, for it also asks: how will you be effected by this "Circle?"

The play's first few minutes make clear the reasons for the contemporaneous glutting of agricultural markets, ecological problems, and national economic crisis. In fulfilling his patriotic duty, the farmer bought more land, clear-cut forest to make fields, and produced "more." By historicizing the "paradox" in this way, the play dismisses any inclination an urban audience might have to blame farmers for the agricultural crisis, while it involves them intimately in the present situation. Moreover, though the blame lay with the administrations from Wilson to Hoover, the scenes oblige the Roosevelt administration to fix the crisis. From the start, *Triple-A* positions economic issues as moral by suggesting that the government's agenda caused citizen insecurity.

### **Food: The Problematic Commodity**

Capitalism *per se* is not condemned in *Triple-A*. The play portrays only capitalistic greed as immoral, embodied in the characters of middle-men and profiteers. It offers a chronology that acknowledges abuses of the capitalist economy prior to the AAA, but it also ties excessive profiteering to the legislation. Scenes imply federal inability to curb exploitation, and AAA's exacerbation of circumstances. The play positions profiteering as a human rights abuse, not merely economic exploitation; thus, it implicates the federal government. Philosopher Elizabeth Telfer writes, "Indeed, part of the concept of a human right is that it provides a standard whereby the level of protection which a government gives to its people may be judged."<sup>64</sup> Scenic contrasts between men, women, and children suffering from hunger and those gaining from it

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<sup>64</sup> Telfer 8.

demonstrate AAA's inadequacies. Juxtaposition of indulgence and deprivation establish hunger's cause as gluttony (profiteering depicted as gluttony and profiteers indulging in food). In William Ian Miller's terms, the play shows a version of gluttony in which "the more you [eat] the less someone else [does]."<sup>65</sup> Here, Miller refers to gluttony within a society faced with food scarcity. Inaccessibility of food caused by high prices and livelihood insecurity due to profiteering is the economic manifestation of such a state.

The first of these scenes (Scene Five) occurs prior to AAA's passage in the play's narrative and immediately before scenes depicting the 1932 Iowa dairymen's protest (Scenes Six and Seven). Only ten lines long, it shows how, in the words of the VLN, "Milk flows to market."<sup>66</sup> The scene plays out Farmer and Woman Consumer's desperation; they are trapped in a system that leaves them powerless. It also represents one of the few scenes in which food objects actually appear. Middleman, in a business suit, sits at a desk; a farmer and a female consumer stand on each side of him.<sup>67</sup> Middleman offers Farmer three cents for his quart of milk. His "Take it or Leave it" offer epitomizes his control over the Farmer's livelihood.<sup>68</sup> With no other outlet for his product, Farmer sells his milk. Middleman then pours the milk from the farmer's can into a bottle and offers it to the woman at a price of fifteen cents. The female consumer, of course, cannot leave the milk because of its necessity to her family's well-being, so

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<sup>65</sup> Miller 97.

<sup>66</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.13; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>67</sup> Photograph No. 12; Triple A Plowed Under (186) (TAPU); RG 69-TC; NACP. A photograph catalogued as from an unidentified location features Middleman standing between Woman Consumer and Farmer. Middleman clutches a bottle in each hand; Farmer pours his product into the bottle and Woman Consumer waits for her milk. The disparate pricing signs hung above Middleman's shoulders and his firm grasp on both milk bottles evidences his control over both producer and consumer. Photograph No. P588-U-1; AAA-city ?; FTC; LOC. The actor playing Middleman in this scene appears in photographs from the Cleveland production available in TAPU; Ohio; Prints and Negatives FTP States' Files, 1935-39; RG 69-TS; NACP.

<sup>68</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.13; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

despite the astronomical price, she states, “I’ll take it.”<sup>69</sup> Middleman takes her money without remorse and pats his pockets as the scene goes to blackout.

Middleman’s placement between producer and consumer literalizes both his character and the advantage he takes of his position. The nearness of Farmer, who initially holds a tin of milk, to Woman Consumer, who at scene’s end clutches her newly-purchased milk bottle, suggests Middleman’s dispensability. Unlike Farmer, Middleman has not labored for his profit. Also, the Consumer’s responsibility for an entire family connoted by her female gender strikingly contrasts the Middleman’s masculinity, which the scene frames as a lack of familial obligation. Burns Mantle’s appraisal of the scene demonstrates the staging’s moral legibility, “The picture of an arrogant middleman buying milk for 3 cents [...] and selling it for 15 cents [...] on a ‘take it or leave it’ basis is eloquent of a situation that cannot be effectively driven home in headlines.”<sup>70</sup> The scene’s portrait of a mother’s and a farmer’s desperation embodies belief in farmers’ right to cost of production plus profit and consumers’ rights to a reasonable cost of living. Historian Barbara Melosh asserts that *Triple-A*’s scenes featuring families presented moral imperatives, which she describes as “immediacy [given] to abstract sociological data [...] to urge ordinary citizens to take action.”<sup>71</sup> I also perceive a sense of urgency in the play; however, I want to finesse Melosh’s assertion to suggest that the data presented was not abstract, but lived by, or at least visible to, *Triple-A*’s audiences. Though represented ideological worth certainly bolsters the claims presented, milk’s material presence may have amplified

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<sup>69</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.13; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>70</sup> “They Boo and Cheer Living Newspaper at the Biltmore Theatre,” *New York Daily News* 18 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (5); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>71</sup> Melosh 77.

audience members', even middle-class urban spectators', susceptibility to profiteers, in turn emphasizing capitalism's moral implications.

Helen Iball asserts that "a very small amount of food onstage can be made excessive by its framing."<sup>72</sup> The scene's narrative centers on obtaining milk and the transfer of milk from can to bottle is the scene's primary physical movement. Moreover, the simplistic setting (a single desk placed in front of a dark curtain, which closes off the unused portion of the proscenium and stage) emphasizes the prop; there is nothing to distract from the milk containers. Dialogue and setting draw audience attention to the tin and bottle. Stanton B. Garner Jr. states that inclusion of food onstage "activate[es] the spectators' appetites, call[s] to attention their bodily sentience [. . .], and pierc[es] illusionism as it forces the audience into involuntary empathy."<sup>73</sup> Like the generic audience Garner references, *Triple-A*'s audience most likely had bodily knowledge of milk's taste. However, *Triple-A* was not merely a fiction with which an audience could identify generally. This audience possessed first-hand knowledge of milk price fluctuation, and shared a cultural investment in milk's necessity. Palpability of the female Consumer's desperation intensified the Middleman's greed. Even more, milk's onstage presence may have given sensory stimulation a political and moral edge because a somatic response may have accompanied the presented economic vulnerability.

Desperation and exorbitant profit depicted in Scene Four become hunger and gluttony in Scenes Fourteen and Fifteen, following AAA's enactment [see fig. 4.3]. Scene Fourteen's staging placed focus on a food prop: as stage directions stipulate, "Counterman stands right of counter [. . .] customer left of counter. Light from overhead spot. Bowl and ladle on counter.

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<sup>72</sup> Iball 77.

<sup>73</sup> Garner 99.



Customer very shabbily dressed, with hat over his eyes.”<sup>74</sup> The simple design highlights the food object. The Customer, clearly impoverished, finds that the bowl of oatmeal that cost him two cents yesterday is now three cents and unaffordable. A brief blackout then separates this man’s inability to pay for the most ordinary foodstuff from a tuxedoed man and his date, stylishly attired in an evening gown,<sup>75</sup> dining at a table draped in white linen.<sup>76</sup> Strauss’s elegant *Blue Danube* waltz plays as the lights come up on the man ordering expensive menu items: “Imported Beluga Caviar. Broiled Roual Squab. Grilled Mushrooms.” He offers a champagne toast to “Wheat.”<sup>77</sup> In response to his date’s inquiry about whether he has been “affected by these new [AAA] processing taxes,” Man uses a dinner roll to explain how he fleeces the system:

MAN. [I]t’s the consumer who pays. [ . . . ] When I buy this roll I pay the processing tax.

WOMAN. I thought you paid it on wheat and hogs and things like that.

MAN. Look, this roll, not so long ago, was wheat waving in the fields of Kansas.

Somewhere between the harvesting of that wheat and this roll there was a processing tax.

WOMAN. Go on.

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<sup>74</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.38; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>75</sup> Both the Cleveland and New York productions costumed the female character in white evening gowns. In the Los Angeles production, the woman wore a velvet wine-colored gown. Photograph Speculator celebrating raise of wheat prices, Scene from AAA; Triple A Plowed Under; Ohio; Prints and Negatives: FTP States’ Files, 1935-39; RG 69-TS; NACP. Photographs No. 20 and 21; TAPU (186); RG 69-TC; NACP. Costume Notes, “Triple A Plowed Under Production Bulletin 1936,” Bureau of Research and Publications, Georgia S. Fink, Regional Director, Cyrilla P. Lindner, Regional Research Supervisor, Federal Theatre Projects Region V, Los Angeles, CA (Production Bulletin LA); Triple-A Plowed Under (LA); PTF, 1934-1939; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>76</sup> Photograph No. 20 of the Biltmore production shows Scenes Fourteen and Fifteen as simultaneously lit, TAPU(186); RG 69-TC; NACP. However, stage directions in the manuscript and light cues from the Production Notes call for a blackout between scenes. Additionally, the notes call for the truck on which the lunch counter stands to be struck while the restaurant truck is brought in during the blackout. *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.38-41; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC; and Production Notes, p.34, 9; Triple-A Plowed Under Production Notes [New York]; PTF, 1934-1939; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>77</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.40; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

MAN. That's all . . . and it's the man who eats it who pays for it."<sup>78</sup>

The profiteer treats the dinner roll as a prop; in its juxtaposition to unobtainable oatmeal this otherwise innocuous use of food emphasizes his ruthlessness. The scene indicates how processors passed the cost of the AAA onto consumers and farmers, virtually robbing consumers and farmers of food while fattening their own pockets.



**Figure 4.3. Scenes fourteen and fifteen.**  
**Source: Photograph No. 20; Triple A Plowed Under (186); RG 69-TC; NACP.**

Barbara Melosh claims that Scenes Fourteen and Fifteen exemplify the play's use of "food to represent consumption [...], associating it with the two poles of consumption ["nonnegotiable subsistence" and "conspicuous"]."<sup>79</sup> The opposition between gluttony and necessity is clear. However, Melosh's attention to the symbolism of the scenes' juxtaposition neglects the ways in which a 1936 audience might have viewed the scenes' depictions more literally. Profit made by manufacturers and distributors was in fact news, at least in the sense

<sup>78</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.40-1; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>79</sup> Melosh 195.

that people perceived corporations to be profiting from the processing tax to the detriment of consumers and farmers. The scenes do not merely, as Melosh states, “incite indignation about an economy where one class produces so that another may consume.”<sup>80</sup> Rather the outrage is more specific, not directed at capitalism as an economic system, but at governmental facilitation (even if unintentionally) of profiteering off struggling farmers and workers. Even the review of the play in the *New Leader*, a left-wing publication, directed criticism at the legislation: “Triple A tried to bring back prosperity by artificially creating high prices -- which profited only the capitalist [...] And high prices created by Triple A, themselves created triple distress.”<sup>81</sup> Scene Fifteen’s placement immediately after a portrait of impoverishment epitomizes the concept of gluttony; AAA enables profiteers to feed on the hungry.

Scene Fifteen, however, only implies – it does not show – overindulgent consumption. Gluttony as “excessive refinements in quality”<sup>82</sup> appears only in the narrative: the man’s order to the waiter. Significantly, this hinders audience marveling at the presentation of elegant foodstuffs; the narrative concentrates audience attention on what the objects indicate about the character’s status rather than allowing the audience to imagine the food objects’ smell or taste. John Mason Brown of the *New York Post* asked “Is [a federally funded] project justified in implying in the regulation manner of a Communist script, that any one who wears a Tuxedo or orders the kind of good meals that all of us would occasionally like to order, is a villain?”<sup>83</sup> In

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<sup>80</sup> Melosh 196.

<sup>81</sup> “American Living Newspaper Scores a Social Beat,” *New Leader* 21 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (5); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC

<sup>82</sup> Miller 101.

<sup>83</sup> “‘The Living Newspaper’ Acted at the Biltmore: ‘Triple A Plowed Under,’ A Vigorous Federal Theatre Experiment which Raises Some Ethical Questions,” *New York Post* 16 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (4); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

Brown's inquiry about the ethical use of federal funds, he points to the foods' broad inaccessibility and highlights the politics that re-presenting its inaccessibility demonstrates. Despite food's material absence from the stage, it discursively puts focus on the conditions creating hunger and suffering for farmer and consumer. It also makes the re-presentation vulnerable, as the debate shifts from the economic instability causing hunger to whether embodying this concept of gluttony is anti-capitalist, anti-New Deal, etc.

In the New York, Cleveland, Chicago, and Wisconsin productions, scenes Sixteen, Seventeen, and Eighteen depict the 1934 drought. Weather predictions play incessantly over the loudspeaker: "Fair and warmer." A farmer finds his land turned to "Dust!" A rural congregation asks for divine intervention as a projection shows dying cattle. And with the unceasing rise in temperature (shown on a giant thermometer), a clock ticks away the summer months and agricultural commodity prices climb.<sup>84</sup> The weather report portends the dust storms and drought that threatened food scarcity through natural disaster.

The Los Angeles production included five additional scenes within this sequence.<sup>85</sup> Named "The Drought," "Hunger v. Plenty," "Burial Scene," "Drought Relief," and "Exodus," these scenes are largely portraits of human suffering.<sup>86</sup> In the first two scenes, VLN repeatedly

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<sup>84</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.41-7; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>85</sup> "Chicago Version"; 52093 (1); Playscripts File, 1936-39; FTC; LOC. The added scenes are attributed to Edward Lynn in the Los Angeles program and his notes appear throughout the script archived as the "Chicago version." However, I believe that this version was written specifically for the Los Angeles production because New York and Chicago shared central members of the production staff. In George Kondolf's report to Hallie Flanagan regarding the Chicago production, he states, "I told him [the director Graham] that I felt the only way to do TRIPLE A was to do it exactly as it was produced in New York [...] If any changes were to be made in the production, they should be improvements based on Graham's past experience; we should add only what we were SURE were improvements, etc.," 10 July 1936 (Kondolf report); IL – Kondolf, George – Dramatic Director; Illinois; Correspondence of the National Office with the Regional Offices, 1935-39; RG 69; NACP.

<sup>86</sup> This information is based on the playbills, which detail each role and performer in every scene. I found no written justification for the inclusion of such scenes in the archives. Choosing to represent sympathetically victims of the drought to a Los Angeles audience who may have been experiencing the influx of a mass of Midwestern rural

intones, “Fair and Warmer.” First, a sickly-looking, perhaps malnourished father and mother can give only black water to their coughing child. Next, a split scene (“Hunger v. Plenty”) consists of a young rural couple caring for their invalid mother and “an enormously fat woman” hosting a dinner party.<sup>87</sup> Here, “Hunger v. Plenty” indicates a further perversion of the “paradox” by greed.

Lacking food to feed their dying mother, the rural woman goes offstage and “shoots” her husband’s ailing horse for the meat. Simultaneously, the fat woman clad in jewels mimes “very haughty” attitudes as a slew of waiters present her with an array of elegant meals, each of which she refuses.<sup>88</sup> Finally, the appearance of a roast pig satisfies her, a waiter sets it on the table and she raises a carving fork and knife. While those that work the land are resigned to horsemeat, i.e. they eat an animal culturally deemed *not* food, only a few can afford items now increasingly scarce and therefore greater luxuries. Interviewed prior to its LA premiere, stage manager Walter Clyde referred to this split scene as “hot stuff” for which he expected the company to take “a lot of heat” and to “pack ‘em [the audiences] in.”<sup>89</sup> Clyde’s statement suggests that this fictional scene makes hunger political (rather than simply unfortunate). This is because it is positioned as related to federal legislation and as a legitimate re-presentation of the contemporaneous situation.

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migrants offers one possible explanation. Though this living newspaper depicted diverse constituencies as interconnected, the effects of the drought were a pressing regional concern for Californians and, as such, expanded attention to the issue was warranted.

<sup>87</sup> “Chicago Version,” 16-6-16-10 [scene-page]; 52093 (1); Playscripts File, 1936-39; FTC; LOC.

<sup>88</sup> “Chicago Version,” 16-10; 52093 (1); Playscripts File, 1936-39; FTC; LOC.

<sup>89</sup> Lyle Downing, “Dynamite-Packed Revue of Theatre Project Expected to Rock L.A. July 13,” newspaper unknown; J. Howard Miller; TOT; FTPC; GMU.

The scene's writer Earl Lynn noted, "I think the audience will get that this matches her own piggishness."<sup>90</sup> In response, Barbara Melosh asserts that the self-sacrificing farm woman is this character's class-based counterpoint, and that the fat woman "embodies untrammelled consumer desire, the end point of a process of exploitation and waste."<sup>91</sup> I concur, but interpreting the scene in terms of the national experience of increased inaccessibility of food highlights the debate regarding the drought and the AAA's effects. That this woman finds only the roast pig appetizing alludes to the USDA's continual denial that the 1933 pig slaughter led to high prices in late-1935; the department argued that the drought caused high prices and the meat shortage.<sup>92</sup> The scene blacks out as VLN's voice rings, "Fair and warmer, wheat is rising." These words make ambiguous whether drought or the AAA enabled the woman's self-indulgence, however gluttony is once again made inextricable from hunger.

As Lynn's note on the scene suggests, the actress's (Diana Hope's) body evidences the character's immorality. Miller explains: "Gluttony for us is the sin of ugliness and ill health, but chiefly ugliness. [. . .] There is nothing quite like the sin of fat. Its wages, we are told, is death – physical, moral, and social."<sup>93</sup> As in Scene Fifteen, consumption never occurs. However, the actress's corporeality proves the character's gluttony without needing to show the act of indulgence. This element of realist staging (a material object symbolizing an internalized moral attitude) functions through commonly-held bias against fatness. Dislike of her "ugly" body

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<sup>90</sup> "Chicago Version," 16-10; 52093 (1); Playscripts File, 1936-39; FTC; LOC.

<sup>91</sup> Melosh 195.

<sup>92</sup> Choate 138-9.

<sup>93</sup> Miller 93.

bolsters condemnation of the character's "plenteous consumption in the face of the starvation of others."<sup>94</sup>

This split scene contrasts food onstage with its marked absence. Framing it as *contemporary re-presentation* transforms the onstage parade of "special viands on platters; squab, chicken, turkey, goose"<sup>95</sup> from delectable to disgusting. Like Garner, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asserts, "the eyes play a critical role in stimulating appetite. Visual appeal literally makes the mouth water, gets the juices going, starts the stomach rumbling."<sup>96</sup> Each introduction of a new food item newly stimulates the audience. Yet in this scene, the processional of foodstuffs focuses attention not on specific items, but rather on the amount and richness of selection. In this instance, the physical response stimulated in the audience by the display's aesthetic appeal (beauty based on the knowledge of the foodstuffs' deliciousness) intensifies the depiction of gluttony while heightening the narrative of hunger; measured against horsemeat, the fat woman's refinements appear disgusting. More precisely, in this scene, food's material presence may have caused the audience to feel disgust; they might have physically experienced the fat woman's immorality.

### **Food "Destruction"**

The staging of food destruction in *Triple-A* instances the aesthetics referred to by the Living Newspaper Unit as "space stage."<sup>97</sup> The unit developed this style as an alternative to realism's psychological portraits in order to manifest materialist analysis of the systemic and

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<sup>94</sup> Miller 101, 100.

<sup>95</sup> "Chicago Version," 16-9; 52093 (1); Playscripts File, 1936-39; FTC; LOC.

<sup>96</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing to the Senses" 3.

<sup>97</sup> "Writing the Living Newspaper," p.11; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

institutional “forces that motivated the act.”<sup>98</sup> It involves dialogue, lighting, sound, and other scenic techniques that, instead of focusing on verisimilitude or manifesting idiosyncratic characters, present the effects of political-economic forces on citizens’ lives. Depiction of food destruction as an economically-motivated act recurs throughout *Triple-A*. Multiple groups with varied interests commit this violence, and whenever it occurs threats to livelihood and the inability to eat always frame the action. *Triple-A* situates two such scenes prior to the Agricultural Adjustment Act’s passage; both entail farmer destruction of food commodities.<sup>99</sup> A scene depicting consumers’ food destruction follows the drought sequence and two scenes showing sharecroppers’ evictions under AAA. Portraying violence committed by both urban consumers and rural farmers reiterated the level of distress experienced by citizens nationwide while calling into question whether AAA benefited either group.<sup>100</sup>

Scene Four, which quotes Farm Holiday President Milo Reno’s reasons for calling off a strike, and Scene Five, depicting Middleman’s unjust milk pricing, result in farmers’ determination to dump milk. VLN’s announcement opening Scene Six integrates the audience into the action: “Sioux City – September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1932 – Farmers organize Relief Conference in

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<sup>98</sup> “Writing the Living Newspaper,” p.10; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

<sup>99</sup> This chronology suggests that farmers’ protests were pre-Roosevelt administration phenomena rather than persistent problems throughout the Depression; a number of violent episodes directly stemmed from dissatisfaction with the Agricultural Adjustment Act itself. See my chapter three on the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool strike. The Missouri sharecroppers’ protest is subsequent to the writing of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, however it attests to the persistence of conflict regarding the AAA to the end of the decade (see my chapter five). Additionally, Jean Choate’s book regards farm groups’ opposition to New Deal programs.

<sup>100</sup> Despite this, as the play progresses it also fails to show the benefits many farmers received from participating in AAA. In *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers’ Holiday Association*, Shover attributes the decline of the Farmers’ Holiday Association movement to overall satisfaction with the AAA in Iowa. Michael Schuyler’s article “New Deal Farm Policy in the Middle West: A Retrospective View,” identifies the many benefits farmers received from the various programs of the AAA. Such narrative omissions substantiate Laura Browder’s conclusion that this and other living newspapers strove to make audiences consider the nation as a whole.



*theatre.*”<sup>101</sup> Dispersed through the audience, five actors playing farmers breach the fourth wall; they speak directly across the footlights to the Chairman seated center stage:

([...] Cries of “strike” “dump the milk” and “Turn over the trucks.”)

FIFTH SPEAKER. (From audience) Men! – we’ve got to save ourselves, with or without Milo Reno – and the only way to do that is to dump every truck and spill every can of milk we can lay our hands on – let’s stop talking and do something! (Tremendous roar)<sup>102</sup>

The perspective shifts abruptly to position audience members as witnesses amidst rural unrest. During the blackout, as Scene Six transitions into Scene Seven, voices crying “Strike” in the darkness transport the audience to Midwestern rural roads.<sup>103</sup> Farmers’ cries fade into “an ominous musical undercurrent” created by violins.<sup>104</sup> The lack of light obscures the spatial differentiation between audience and stage, while ambient noise surrounds spectators, putting the audience in the scene. In the darkness, VLN’s voice projects: “The challenge echoes through Wisconsin, Ohio, Iowa, Indiana. Over the middle West embittered farmers act.”<sup>105</sup> Truck noise and a lighting effect mimicking headlights simulate a vehicle’s approach in the night. As the light fully illuminates a rock and sign-post, farmers lying in wait are revealed. They indicate their readiness to attack. When the moment to strike comes, the farmers run off stage, the audience hears brakes screech and Voice Off-stage yells: “Get down off that truck.”<sup>106</sup> Offstage

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<sup>101</sup> Emphasis added, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.15; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>102</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.16; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>103</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.18; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>104</sup> The manuscript calls for an “ominous musical undercurrent,” *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.18; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC. The production notes indicate that “soft violin” is played, p.2; *Triple-A Plowed Under* Production Notes [New York]; PTF, 1934-1939; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>105</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.18; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

farmers shout “Dump the milk!” and crashing sounds effect the chaos of milk being thrown from a truck. Spectators hear a riotous directive ordering the truck overturned, lights swirl, and a “final terrific crash” roars from offstage.<sup>107</sup>

In discussing Horace’s view on the classical theatre’s performance of violence offstage, Thomas Gould notes that if performed onstage “[violence] will be seen for what it is, sensationalism, theatrical trickery. That is why the best dramatists avoid such scenes.”<sup>108</sup> The introduction of milk (whether real or a look-a-like prop) and its onstage destruction may have focused attention on the mastery of the illusion (i.e. “theatrical trickery”) or perhaps on the wastefulness of the theatrical entertainment.

Gould’s comment raises the question of theatre’s capacity to adequately convey the implications of violence without disrupting the theatrical illusion or calling attention to the play as a play. Combined with food’s capacity to “pierce illusionism” as noted by Garner, or Deborah Geis’s observation that “part of the appeal of food in narrative drama, then, is simply the novelty of its ‘realness’ when encountered in a medium that we are aware is *not* ‘real’,”<sup>109</sup> onstage food destruction might cause consideration of the ethics of performance itself. Even more, *Triple-A Plowed Under*’s aesthetics and the context within which the production appeared suggest a greater propensity for audience attention to the politics of performance. The farmers’ act

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<sup>106</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.18; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>107</sup> This description of Scene Seven synthesizes sound and lighting cues from the production notes, stage directions in the manuscript, and what appears to be a rehearsal photo of the scene. Production Notes, p.2, 8; *Triple-A Plowed Under* Production Notes [New York]; PTF, 1934-1939; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC. *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.18-9; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC. Photograph No. 7; TAPU (186); RG 69-TC; NACP.

<sup>108</sup> Thomas Gould, “The Uses of Violence in Drama,” *Violence in Drama*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 7.

<sup>109</sup> Geis 218.

portrayed in *Triple-A* happened in the real world in 1932. Other farmers in other parts of the country engaged in acts of food destruction throughout the decade, and urban consumers still suffered an increased cost of living, unemployment, and hunger. Including food destruction in a play depicting the real might draw condemnation upon the theatrical act as a repetition contributing to the nation's hunger, while diminishing attention to circumstances motivating farmers' action.

As staged, the scene prompted spectator identification with the farmers' action. The two previous scenes attend to the motivations for food destruction: farmers' helplessness to financially continue food production without receiving cost of production for agricultural commodities. Staging the scene in the audience implicated spectators as farmers, and the scenic effects enabled momentary spectator involvement in the action. It manifested the Living Newspaper Unit's objective to re-imagine performance space: "[the dramatist] should often conceive of the entire theatre as a single unit, as opposed to the concept of a stage separated from its audience [ . . . ] In most theatres the audience has paid to attend and watch the spectacle of a group of characters [ . . . ] The characters may have the sympathy of the audience but there is a conscious effort to retain their own identity as something separate from the observers'."<sup>110</sup> Unifying the audience and performers poses an alternative to Yi-Fu Tuan's observations regarding spatial differentiation and identification in theatre:

To the spectator, space is kinesthetic feeling to the extent that he is able to identify with the performer. But to the spectator, space is also a visual pattern "out there" – a pattern woven by the performing figure. Again, compared with performers, spectators are more fully conscious of the overall visual pattern of space: the space of spectators – even while

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<sup>110</sup> "Writing the Living Newspaper," p.11-12; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

it visibly changes before their eyes – is less packed with tingling energy than the space experience by performers.<sup>111</sup>

When performers share space with the audience, as they do in Scene Six, the audience questions the “out there” perspective. The transition to Scene Seven continues action; spectators do not sit in darkness waiting for a new scene, rather sound effects change conventional theatrical darkness into night on a Midwestern rural road. Audio emphasis and limited visibility expand the performance space, encompassing not only the stage but also the house. This suggests the possibility of intensified identification with farmers, as the “energy” of farmers’ desperation surrounded spectators; elimination of spatial delineation diminished the audience’s separation from the characters.

Scene Ten stages a fictional encounter between Nebraskan farmers’ and New York City workers’ families. Over the loudspeaker, VLN elaborates capitalism’s dysfunction in terms of the “paradox”: “As our economic system works, the greater the surplus of wheat on Nebraska farms, the larger are the breadlines in New York City.”<sup>112</sup> Silhouetted in blue, figures in cowboy hats, bonnets, and derbies replace individuality with iconicity, creating rural and urban Everymen and women.<sup>113</sup> The families face one another in lines behind their patriarch, literalizing their opposition. Each consisting of husband, wife, two sons, and a daughter, the families are mirror images of one another. As they talk back and forth, becoming increasingly

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<sup>111</sup> Tuan 238-9.

<sup>112</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.27; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>113</sup> In the Los Angeles production, the silhouette effect was not used, however the basic blocking was maintained. Farmer families occupied the ramp from downstage right to center stage and Worker families stood on the opposing ramp. The actors’ posture – stoic, arms at sides with palms facing up, choral three-quarter turn out to the audience – suggests Everymen rather than individuals. Photograph No. P588-CA-LA-1, Episode 4 Item 2 “Farmer v. Worker”; Triple-A-California-Los Angeles; Photographic Prints File, 1934-39; FTC; LOC.

incensed and despondent, it becomes clear that their troubles reflect one another's. The situation seems irreconcilable, and this leads the farmer to desperate destruction:

WORKER. We have been evicted from our homes.

FARMER'S WIFE. And we from our land.

FARMER. We plough our sweat into the earth.

FARMER'S WIFE. And bring forth ripe provender.

WORKER. We starve. [...]

WORKER'S DAUGHTER. Feed us.

FARMER'S FIRST SON. Pay us.

WORKER'S FAMILY. Feed us.

FARMER. The wheat is better destroyed. I say, burn it.<sup>114</sup>

The blue light turns to red, and a massive shadow of a farmer holding a pitchfork looms over both families. The Farmer raises his hand in a gesture of camaraderie with the radical shadow [see fig. 4.4]. The Worker asks, "Why?," and his family members reach out to one another in horror, as the red light signifies fields aflame.<sup>115</sup> The wash of red light symbolizes not only burning wheat but also the violent effects of revolution. The audience hears the re-presented voice of General Hugh Johnson, administrator of Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration. He insinuates that the "paradox" will end in insurrection by comparing this crisis to the American Revolution. Both families turn toward the origin of his voice and together disdain his

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<sup>114</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.28; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>115</sup> Photograph No. 19; TAPU (186); RG 69-TC; NACP.

“Words!”<sup>116</sup> They call for action, for the government to fulfill its obligation to provide for its citizens (“Feed us”) while providing its citizens with a stable capitalist economy (“Pay us”).



**Figure 4.4. Food “destruction.” Source: Photograph No. 19; Triple A Plowed Under (186); RG 69-TC; NACP.**

The silhouettes and the enormous shadow occupy the entire stage. Monumentality of scale emphasizes the “paradox’s” significance, its pervasive effects, and the urgency of finding resolution. Moreover, the scenic effect portends the implications of mass food destruction without engaging in the spectacle. Unlike Scenes Six and Seven, which diminish the aggression in food destruction by focusing on identification with farmers, Scene Ten stresses violence. This differential treatment of food destruction seems to indicate a distinction between actuality and futurity. As stated earlier, milk destruction actually occurred. Farmers also burned their wheat,

<sup>116</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.29; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC. There is a disparity between the manuscript, the published script, and the productions’ playbills, excluding Chicago. The playbills indicate that Secretary of Agriculture Wallace is heard in the scene via loudspeaker. The scripts make no such indication and do not attribute any lines to Wallace. Federal Theatre Project, *Federal Theatre Plays: Triple-A Plowed Under by the staff of the Living Newspaper, Power: A Living Newspaper by Arthur Arent, Spirochete: A History by Arnold Sundgaard*, ed. Pierre de Rohan (New York: Random House, 1938) 25-7.

left produce to rot on trees, and plowed under acres of food products and cotton, however “[g]eographical lines are broken down” in this scene.<sup>117</sup> Side by side representation of Nebraska and New York City encompasses the nation. Added to this, the colossal shadow embodying all farmers, and General Johnson’s calculation that an inability to eat the bread earned eventuates in revolution symbolize the political endpoint of hunger. The “Birth of Triple A” (Scene Eleven) immediately follows. On the one hand, this prompts a conclusion that the Roosevelt administration averted insurrection with the AAA. Alternately, the initial depiction of the Agricultural Adjustment Act raises the question of whether the federal government only forestalled national rebellion and committed a more devious form of violence: food reduction.

Scene Eleven, “Birth of AAA,” is positioned as the government’s response to the people’s call for action to end the crisis. An actor representing Secretary of Agriculture Wallace explains the Agricultural Adjustment Act in terms of farmers’ increased purchasing power positively effecting industrial employment levels. However, as the lights fade on Wallace, massive projections depict his rhetoric of “organized control” as the reduction of vital foodstuffs. A voice speaking in “staccato” spouts statistics regarding decreased production and price increases. An image of small pigs labeled: “1934” stands in front of another with large pigs labeled: “1933.” Then a projection of two equal-size bread loaves demonstrate the price increase due to wheat acreage reduction from 1933 to 1934. Pairing Wallace’s careful language about AAA’s economic benefits with images of loaves and small and large pigs (veritable piglets and sows) highlights the moral complexity of the agricultural recovery program.

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<sup>117</sup> “Writing the Living Newspaper,” p.14; 25.8; L-TC; TSF, 1935-1939; FTC; LOC.

The projections clearly allude to the resultant increase in cost of living due to acreage reduction and the 1933 pig slaughter, by far the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's most controversial action. Defending his decision in 1934, Wallace wrote:

They [people opposed to the slaughter] contended that every little pig has the right to attain before slaughter the full pigginess of his pigness. [...] Nor would they realize that the slaughter of pigs might make more tolerable the lives of a good many human beings dependent on hog prices. We simply had to make up our minds to face an unfavorable public reaction, despite the diversion of 100,000,000 pounds of baby pork to relief channels.<sup>118</sup>

Regardless of Wallace's assurances that the government distributed meat to the needy, "79 percent [...] by number, or 61 percent by weight [of pigs slaughtered], were made into inedible products."<sup>119</sup> Failure of mechanisms of distribution, rumored burials, and pig carcasses dumped in the Mississippi River were public knowledge not forgotten by the time *Triple-A* premiered in 1936.<sup>120</sup> In a May 1935 address to farmers, President Roosevelt insisted, "we have not wastefully destroyed food in any form. [...] The crocodile tears shed by professional mourners [...] over the slaughter of little pigs and other measures to reduce surplus agricultural inventories deceive very few thinking people."<sup>121</sup> Likewise, in December 1935, Wallace was still attending

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<sup>118</sup> Henry Wallace, *New Frontiers* (New York 1934), *The New Deal: A Documentary History*, ed. William E. Leuchtenburg (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968) 118.

<sup>119</sup> Poppendieck 114.

<sup>120</sup> Levenstein *Paradox of Plenty* 54.

<sup>121</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address to Farmers," 14 May 1935, *Vital Speeches I* (1935), *The New Deal: A Documentary History*, ed. William E. Leuchtenburg (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968) 115.



to the public outcry against this emergency measure when he spoke on the *National Farm and Home Hour* radio program.<sup>122</sup>

The projection of bread and pigs, ostensibly only an illustration of agricultural production statistics, reformulated Wallace's rhetoric. It demonstrated deep doubts about the AAA's benefits to American people. It suggested troubling contradictions regarding a program for food commodity reduction in light of food insecurity in urban centers. The projections symbolize the misguided attempt by the government to fix the crisis of the paradox by diminishing supply rather than fulfilling demand and agriculture's connection to the human right to food. The scene manifests federal violence hidden as agricultural recovery, hunger as tied directly to food destruction.

*Triple-A* demonstrated the AAA's effects on the "paradox" by dramatizing the 27 July 1935 consumer strike in Detroit (Scene Twenty).<sup>123</sup> Dressed in street clothes indicative of middle-class status, female protesters picket a local butcher shop with signs reading, "Strike for 20% Cut on Meat" and "Women's Action Committee Against High Cost of Living."<sup>124</sup> Above the storefront drop hangs a chart denoting the gross escalation in beef, pork, wheat, corn, and cotton prices during the year. A man and woman begin to approach the shop, but upon seeing the protesters decide to shop elsewhere. A male customer exits the shop and protesters swarm him, tearing apart his purchase [see fig. 4.5]. To calm the fray, one woman rallies the others by stating that consumers' fight is not against the small businessman but the "big packing

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<sup>122</sup> Choate 135-6.

<sup>123</sup> There is a typographical error in the manuscript which dates the consumers' strike as 17 July 1936, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.54; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC. In the published version the date is correct and cites a 28 July 1935 *New York Times* article as the scene's source, in *Federal Theatre Plays* 41.

<sup>124</sup> Photograph No. 8; TAPU (186); RG 69-TC; NACP.

houses.”<sup>125</sup> A man in the crowd asks why the women are not protesting in Washington instead because, as he believes, the government caused these problems. The woman responds: “Maybe they started it by killing the little pigs and cattle. We don’t know and we don’t care. But we’re not going to pay such high prices for meat.”<sup>126</sup> The audience hears the sound of a truck, identified by one woman as a packing house truck, and the women chase after it offstage, vowing to soak the meat in kerosene.<sup>127</sup> Again, the hog slaughter becomes the reference point for government culpability, and this instance implies the advantage taken by corporate food processors.



**Figure 4.5. Consumers’ protest.** Source: Photograph No. 8; *Triple A Plowed Under* (186); RG 69-TC; NACP.

This violent scene again denies the audience the thrill of seeing food destroyed. It titillates with the spectacle of women engaging in physical struggle, but stops short of showing

<sup>125</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.54; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>126</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.55; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>127</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.55; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

the stated endpoint. This enables focus on the conditions driving women to such behavior without overwhelming their motivation with the spectacle of conflagration or the potential savagery of pouring kerosene over meat. On the one hand, the scene does, as Melosh asserts, “recognize consumption as part of women’s unpaid work and as a site of social action.”<sup>128</sup>

However, the form of social action in which they engage (manhandling) violates gender convention but, paradoxically, reinforces normative performances of gender. These women use “unladylike” behavior because New Deal legislation and profiteers infringed upon their cultural roles as homemakers and nurturers.

Anthropologist Janet M. Fitchen suggests that when an individual obtains an item above her status she enacts a “symbolic inversion” because access to certain food objects defines social identity.<sup>129</sup> The female activists advocating for a lower cost of living seek to retain their middle-class status; they do not desire a “handout.” The protest expresses women’s need to remain arbiters of well-being *as consumers*. This need most probably struck women in the audience as commonsensical, because women nationwide spent between one-third and one-half of each day fulfilling meal-related tasks.<sup>130</sup> Immediate identification and sympathy with the destruction occurs through consumers’ first-hand knowledge. The Agricultural Adjustment Act threatened women’s self-perceptions. The “new self,” as described by Sidney Mintz, encompasses the ways in which identity is linked to consumer choice: “Exercise of choices heightens the illusion of individuality. [...] But this individuality is conditioned by the postulation of a ‘group,’ membership which is attainable among other things by certain consumptions [...] Using the

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<sup>128</sup> Melosh 198.

<sup>129</sup> Fitchen 399.

<sup>130</sup> Scharf 157.

products [...] is how the imagined group is joined.”<sup>131</sup> Exorbitant price hikes inhibited women’s freedom of choice, thus limiting their province over family consumption. Furthermore, the women’s status suffers when such prices cause deprivation of foods formerly consumed regularly. In this case, inaccessibility threatened group membership as middle-class wives and mothers.

In this scene and Scene Seven, signifying food destruction offstage enacted bloodless violence in that no milk was actually spilled or meat burned. This concentrated audience attention on the reasons for farmers’ and consumers’ actions. It fulfilled a goal of the living newspaper, “concerned not with surface news, scandal, human interest stories, but rather with the conditions back of conditions.”<sup>132</sup> Offstage “destruction” also assured audience members that no real destruction occurred, thus enabling continued focus on narrative content rather than tapping into the public predilection to contemplate the federally-funded living newspaper itself. Focusing on the conditions driving citizens’ food destruction may have neutralized actual violence. The scenes avoided inquiry into why consumers and farmers chose violence and what violent action indicates about an activist group’s “moral vision.”<sup>133</sup> Instead, Scenes Ten and Eleven question the moral vision of the government, asking how the conditions creating desperation could be allowed to persist and whether the means of stimulating economic recovery were justifiable; is a policy of food scarcity reasonable when citizens cannot participate as consumers?

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<sup>131</sup> Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* 82-3.

<sup>132</sup> Hallie Flanagan, “Introduction,” *Federal Theatre Plays: Triple-A Plowed Under by the staff of the Living Newspaper, Power: A Living Newspaper by Arthur Arent, Spirochete: A History by Arnold Sundgaard*, ed. Pierre de Rohan (New York: Random House, 1938) viii.

<sup>133</sup> Jasper 80.



**Figure 4.6. Dorothy Sherwood. Source: Photograph No. 17; Triple A Plowed Under (186); RG 69-TC; NACP Hunger vs. “Hunger”**

In *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the Agricultural Adjustment Act’s operation culminates in an incident of infanticide. Taken from a report published in the *Daily News*, Scene Twenty-One recounts what occurred when Dorothy Sherwood turned herself in for the murder of her child. VLN announces: “Newburgh, New York: August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1935. Mrs. Dorothy Sherwood,” and lights come up on a woman bearing the body of a small child<sup>134</sup> [see fig. 4.6]. At stage right, a desk and two actors in police uniforms indicate that the woman presents herself for arrest. She explains to the officers how she drowned her son in a creek because she “couldn’t feed him, and [...] couldn’t bear to see him hungry.”<sup>135</sup> Lights fade on the officers and the scenery, while an overhead spotlight illuminates the childless mother. A voice, heard over the loudspeaker, asks her questions:

<sup>134</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.57; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>135</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.57; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC. Photographs 10 and 17; TAPU (186); RG 69-TC; NACP.

VOICE. Why did you do it?

MRS. SHERWOOD. I couldn't feed him. I had only five cents.

VOICE. Your own child. Did you think you were doing the right thing?

MRS. SHERWOOD. I just thought it had to be done, that's all. It was the best thing to do.

VOICE. How could a mother kill her own child?

MRS. SHERWOOD. He was hungry. I tell you. Hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry. (As her voice mounts it is blended with that of another which commences in a progression of nine voices crying 'guilty')<sup>136</sup>

Performed by a different actor than the man performing VLN, it is unclear exactly who this male voice represents.<sup>137</sup> The Chicago playbill characterized the role as the district attorney. The exchange's staging lends itself to interpretation as a cross-examination; a bright spotlight that isolates her and the amplified voice represent Sherwood's sense of powerlessness under interrogation. The lighting's isolation of Sherwood makes the scene's location unidentifiable. Her utter aloneness and the voice also suggest a conversation with God. The Cleveland production highlighted this possibility through the actress's posture: she stands with her hands clutched in supplication and her head and eyes turned upward.<sup>138</sup> This re-presentation shows distress but not mental instability or malice. The narrative, and Sherwood's offering of herself and her child's body to police, renders the drowning an act of mercy. She killed her son to save him from the pain and torture of slow starvation.

<sup>136</sup> *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Ms., p.57; T-A PR NYC; PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43 FTC; LOC.

<sup>137</sup> This is at least the case in the New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago productions. The voice is not credited in the Cleveland or Milwaukee productions' playbills.

<sup>138</sup> Photograph No. 364-26A; TAPU; Ohio; Prints and Negatives: FTP States' Files, 1935-1939; RG 69-TS; NACP.

Two separate publications judged that the scene served as evidence of the play's communist propaganda. A photograph of the scene appeared in the *New York American* with a caption explicating, "Here the Soviet Bait That Consumers Are the Victims of 'Capitalistic Speculators' Caused by High Bread Prices Due to Drought and AAA Crop Reduction, Is Emphasized as the Woman hands the Baby She Has Killed Because She Says She Couldn't Buy It Food."<sup>139</sup> *The Saturday Evening Post* ran an extensive review. Reviewer Gareth Garrett commends *Triple-A's* "skill and technique," stating that "the amount of suggestion sometimes evoked by a scene lasting only two or three minutes was extraordinary."<sup>140</sup> Yet such effective staging seems to have caused Garrett alarm because the "radicals," which dominated the audience in number, "controlled the applause." In his opinion this is why the Sherwood scene received praise.<sup>141</sup> Garrett rhetorically questioned inclusion of the Sherwood scene in a play about the Agricultural Adjustment Act claiming that "[t]his case had no more relation to AAA than any other case of psychopathic infanticide."<sup>142</sup> Under the heading "The Communist Cry," Garrett answers his own suspicions about the reason why the scene was included. He asserts that the play's "theme" of the AAA was a red herring facilitating use of the communist word "hunger." Noting that talk of hunger and use of the word dominated the play from beginning to end, he states that the claim of hunger is merely ingrained communist rhetoric. Moreover, he asserts that "The cry of hunger has not been heard in America – not yet. There is less hunger

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<sup>139</sup> "U.S. Contributes to Reds Through Theatre Project," *New York American* 21 March 1936, J. Howard Miller, TOT; FTPC; GMU.

<sup>140</sup> Gareth Garrett, "Federal Theatre for the Masses" *The Saturday Evening Post* 20 June 1936: 86.

<sup>141</sup> Garrett 85-6.

<sup>142</sup> Garrett 86.

here than any other large country in the world, certainly less than in Russia.”<sup>143</sup> In this vein, Garrett characterizes such claims of hunger in the US as untrue and in Sherwood’s case, the desperate excuses of a deranged woman.<sup>144</sup> Garrett’s and the *New York American* writer’s evaluations of the scene as political propaganda suggest the problems of onstage representation of hunger in terms of the moral significance of the human right to food. The scene manifests infanticide as humane in comparison to starvation, according to ideological conception of the mother. The perceived depth of a mother’s love magnifies the physical and emotional misery suffered by a starving child. Linking the child’s starvation to federal agricultural policy makes the moral political.

Theatrical representation complicates the meaning of claiming hunger. First of all, it is extremely difficult to depict hunger mimetically. Performance scholar Enzo Cozzi believes that “hunger [cannot] easily be simulated and hunger cannot even be represented.”<sup>145</sup> Often signifiers of impoverishment, such as the tattered and dirty clothing used in *Triple-A*, suffice and hunger is made known through diegesis (i.e. dialogue).<sup>146</sup> William Ian Miller explains the commonality of conflating the fat body with gluttony, regardless of the actual cause of corpulence.<sup>147</sup> The Los Angeles production’s use of “an enormously fat woman” to depict “piggishness” manifests this belief. Such an aesthetic choice is based on the inseparability of the body from the perception of

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<sup>143</sup> Garrett 86.

<sup>144</sup> Garrett equates the scene with hunger parades covered in the communist publication *The Daily Worker*. He derides protesters, stating that while the marchers carry signage with slogans like “Abolish Starvation, or, These Babies Want Food” they are dressed warmly in “the height of bourgeois comfort” (86).

<sup>145</sup> Enzo Cozzi, “Hunger and the Future of Performance,” *On Cooking* spec. issue of *Performance Research* 4.1 (1999): 122.

<sup>146</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 189.

<sup>147</sup> Miller 93.



its healthfulness. It follows that the theatrical depiction of hunger would require the inverse of the gluttonous body. Yet conflation of body type with its state of wellness suggests that using emaciated actors might violate mimesis. The representation becomes all too real if the actor's body is perceived by the audience as being in crisis; this brings into question the morality of the performance itself. Alternately, the bodies of actresses portraying Sherwood were not exceptionally gaunt; Jane Jonson, the actress in the New York production had a petite frame, and Marguerite Byrant of the Cleveland production had a fuller figure. These actresses' body types rendered hunger purely mimetically. In turn, this enables symbolic interpretation of hunger. Hunger's mimesis seems to be a catch-22. If realistically represented, it stands to focus attention on the ethics of representation (concern over the actor's physical state); if represented using theatrical and narrative devices, real accounts of hunger can be interpreted as politically-motivated editorializing. The representation of the Sherwood case using overtly theatrical devices (lighting, costuming, properties, etc.) empowers the *New York American* and *Saturday Evening Post* writers to interpret hunger as other than a material fact based on food's inaccessibility. They capitalized on theatre as a mimetic event in an attempt to diminish the validity of real claims of hunger. While both reviewers transform hunger into "hunger"/partisan rhetoric, they draw forth *Triple-A*'s capacity to politicize phenomena and the moral implications of the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

### **Politicizing Current Events: Audience Response to *Triple-A***

The initial production of *Triple-A* enjoyed huge popularity, so much so that *Triple-A*'s originally scheduled two-week run was repeatedly extended until it had played for three months

to nearly 38,000 people.<sup>148</sup> The play also ran for many weeks in Chicago, and reports from Los Angeles stated that it “was well attended during its entire run.”<sup>149</sup> Earl Browder’s inclusion, aesthetic innovation, re-presentation of current events, or cheap tickets all may have motivated audiences to attend *Triple-A*. Regardless of the reason for its success, and despite the paucity of available evidence regarding audiences’ specific opinions of the play, FTP communication, theatre critics’ reviews, and FTP personnel interviews make evident spectators’ perception that *Triple-A*’s aesthetic approach attempted to intervene in the national dialogue of that moment.

John O’Connor, in his article on *Triple-A Plowed Under* and other agricultural living newspapers, considers critics’ knowledge an indication of spectator knowledge and collapses theatre-going and new-comer audiences into one another to prove that *Triple-A*’s aesthetics had the capacity to alter audience members’ perceptions:

The variety of comments by reviewers about the play’s form also revealed the great disparity in the theatre experience and knowledge of the reviewers. If some of them saw the form and stage techniques as new experiments, then some theatergoers were also unlikely to be unfamiliar with the dramaturgy. As a result, many in the audience were not only viewing material vaguely familiar to them, but also were seeing (learning) it in a new form. [...] The result was a disruption of the audience’s usual expectations and an emphasis on the immediate action within an epic narration.<sup>150</sup>

Though I agree that citizens, regardless of familiarity with theatre, were seeing the news in largely a new form, I differ with O’Connor on two counts. First, I disagree that audiences were

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<sup>148</sup> NYC 3 Month Reports – Dec 1935–March 1936 and March – May 1936; Box 97 NY-NYC; Narrative Reports, 1935-39; RG 69; NACP.

<sup>149</sup> Production Bulletin LA; Triple A Plowed Under (L.A.); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>150</sup> O’Connor, “The Drama of Farming” 344-5.

only “vaguely familiar” with the play’s central topic. Based on the productions’ locations, it seems likely that many spectators lived in urban centers. The press often characterized the play as depicting “farm plight” (i.e. not “national” difficulties). However, the play is not solely about agricultural crisis. Rather, it presents the interconnection of industrial/urban and agricultural/rural problems. *Triple-A* continually juxtaposes scenes regarding the AAA’s effects on farmers, urban workers, and consumers. Since 1929, widespread media coverage of agricultural unrest and urban impoverishment, as well as coverage of drought and dust storms, suggests that spectators would have had more than vague familiarity with rural problems, particularly given their effects on consumers. Pictorial juxtapositions of “food being destroyed side-by-side with ones of men waiting at soup kitchens” also appeared commonly in newspapers and magazines.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, the scenes featured in *Triple-A* regarding stock-market fluctuations, angry consumer groups, men out of work, and disenchantment constituted daily existence across the United States.

O’Connor’s own interview with Norman Lloyd makes apparent that the episodes shown in *Triple-A* were common to its audiences:

JO: Do you think part of that [not needing a central character] was also that, at least for New York audiences, that the Midwest was a problem they weren’t aware of for the farmers, that they were struck by a new problem [. . .]

NL: Why, I never thought of that. Actually, I think of something else as you mention it. I’m surprised when we talk about it that New York audiences were so moved considering it was a Midwest and Southwest problem, but they were, whatever it was. Of course, the world was a raw nerve in those days. People were, because of the Depression,

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<sup>151</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty* 54.

were [sic] on such an edge. They really didn't know where they were going to be the next day in regard to where they were going to live or eat. And they were ready for anything, and I think the play sort of touched it.<sup>152</sup>

Lloyd does not concur with O'Connor, rather he speaks to *Triple-A*'s relevance to both rural and urban groups and the fact that many felt insecure about daily existence. Similarly, Assistant Stage Manager Philip Schrager told interviewer Karen Wicke about the living newspapers' abilities to address contemporaneous issues:

PS: When we all realized as we did that there weren't isolated sectors of the country that felt the terrible impact of the Depression that all of a sudden we were all in the same pot literally.

KW: You felt as if these productions were really speaking to the whole country? It wasn't just what a New York audience would go for?

PS: Yes, I think the importance of what they did spoke to that. [. . .]

[Wicke inquires about *Triple-A Plowed Under* specifically]

PS: It really every time went right to the heart of the problem and dealt with it in human terms.<sup>153</sup>

Again, a journalist out of Mobile, Alabama noted that "Any safety exhaust valve is better than none."<sup>154</sup> These individuals stress the centrality of the "paradox" to citizens' lives.

My second point of contention with O'Connor regards conflating critics' and audiences' opinions. Theatre reviews make evident critics' knowledge, and many reviewers do focus on the

<sup>152</sup> Lloyd interview; OHNDC; FTPC; GMU.

<sup>153</sup> Philip Schrager, interview with Karen Wicke, The Drama Lab, Torpedo Factory, Alexandria, VA, 28 February 1979; OHNDC; FTPC; GMU.

<sup>154</sup> "Safety Exhaust," *Alabama Post* 10 April, 1936; TAPU Publicity (7); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

originality of *Triple-A*'s technique. However, critics' professionally attend the theater; to equate their knowledge about theatre with the general public's may mischaracterize patrons' experience.

Though most theatre reviews of *Triple-A* intimate little about the audience, a few exceptions exist. The reviewer for the *New York News* wrote, "the house [was] evenly divided between approval and dissension as the character Earl Browder [...] denounced the [Supreme Court's] move as unconstitutional."<sup>155</sup> Three weeks later, Stark Young, writing for *The New Republic*, stated that, "in majority [the audience was] anything but farmers. Doubtless they were consumers. At any rate, they knew what they liked [...] which is to say they clapped and booed, loved and hated."<sup>156</sup> Unfortunately, Young fails to offer specifics about which scenes merited praise and condemnation. One writer stated that *Triple-A* "is definitely propaganda" and showed confusion that the audience applauded Browder and the union of farmers and workers, but also the Supreme Court.<sup>157</sup> The evening J.H. Pollack of the *Pennsylvanian* saw the production the audience booed Al Smith, Hugh Johnson, and the Supreme Court, while showing praise for Wallace, Jefferson, and Browder.<sup>158</sup> A *Spur Magazine* article by Cy Caldwell offers the only extended account of the New York audience's behavior and demographics. However, it exudes anti-Semitism, and therefore it is quite difficult to read his observations as unbiased:

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<sup>155</sup> "Boos, Cheers Greet Federal Farm Drama," *New York News* 16 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (4); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>156</sup> Stark Young, "Expressionistic," *The New Republic* 1 April 1936; TAPU Publicity (6); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>157</sup> "'Triple A Plowed Under' Presented by the Living Newspaper, A Federal Theatre Project," *W.S.C. Bulletin* 30 March 1936; Book 1; Scrapbooks Compiled by the Department of Information, NYC Office, Feb. –June 1936; RG 69; NACP.

<sup>158</sup> J.H. Pollack, "Two Significant Plays," *Pennsylvanian* 6 April 1936; TAPU Publicity (7); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

I thoroughly enjoyed watching the reactions of the audience, who were rather on the greasy side, with short hair on the women and long hair and dandruff on the men. You should just jear [sic] them applaud the actor who takes the part of Secretary Wallace as he shouts that the farmers must be made happy by raising less and charging the city folks more for what they do raise. The audience went wild - everyone wanted to pay more. When it was illustrated [...by] a little pig after the six million pigs had been plowed under, that people in the city would have less pork chops to eat, the applause was tumultuous – most of the audience were Jewish, anyhow. They apparently considered it a distinct triumph for the Administration to get rid of all those pork chops.<sup>159</sup>

Perhaps this audience did find favor with Wallace's plan; however, Caldwell's editorial comments typify the gender inversions and accusations of filth used to deride Jews, an ethnic group frequently associated with left-wing politics. Denigrating the audience while demonstrating their support of the New Deal allowed Caldwell to mutually constitute the immorality of both the New Deal and its champions.

Information solicited on audience surveys compiled for later FTP productions, such as "opinion of play," knowledge of theater, and demographics may offer insight into the effects of living news's aesthetic models on theatre-going and new-comer audiences.<sup>160</sup> Unfortunately, no audience surveys exist for *Triple-A Plowed Under*. Neither does FTP internal correspondence clarify *Triple-A's* public reception. George Kondolf, reporting to Hallie Flanagan about early response to the Chicago production, wrote: "The whole thing seemed to genuinely stir the

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<sup>159</sup> Cy Caldwell, "Looking over Broadway," *Spur Magazine* 1 May 1936; TAPU Publicity (7); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

<sup>160</sup> "The Audience is the Best Critic," Audience Survey; Administrative Records, 1935-42; Card File, 1935-42; FTC; LOC.

audience. The majority was definitely on the cheering side. That, however, may be explained by the fact that it was largely composed of our own friends. It is still too early to really know just what we have.”<sup>161</sup> Kondolf’s reference to “friends” is unclear. However, he subsequently stresses his ignorance about the size of the “liberal” constituency in the area; the term multiply suggests New Deal advocates, left-wing democrats, and FTP supporters. The production bulletin from Los Angeles records numerous conflicting responses by audience members, one of which indicated relief that “the day of ‘art-for-art’s sake is gone.” Diverse opinions led these authors to report that “[t]he audience wither [sic] enthusiastically liked it, or noisily didn’t like it; there were few who did not feel impelled to voice an emphatic opinion either one way or the other.”<sup>162</sup>

Excluding the rare, and occasionally overtly prejudiced, instances when critics attend to the audience in reviews, political affiliations of the citizens who patronized the Biltmore, Mayan, Great Northern, Carter, and Alhambra theaters in the five cities that produced *Triple-A Plowed Under* are unclear, as is their knowledge of theatre and their opinions about the play. However, from the vigorous responses to re-presentations of contemporary figures and scenes recorded by reviewers and FTP personnel, it appears that *contemporary re-presentation* politicized the “paradox of want amidst plenty” and spectators’ lives.

*Contemporary re-presentation* contained the potential to reveal the morality of economic decision-making. *Triple-A Plowed Under* vividly depicted the problems of the federal government’s agricultural experiment. Repeated references to food and the juxtaposition of hunger and gluttony using food objects drew attention to the entanglement of agriculture in

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<sup>161</sup> Kondolf report; IL – Kondolf, George – Dramatic Director; Illinois; Correspondence of the National Office with the Regional Offices, 1935-39; RG 69; NACP.

<sup>162</sup> Production Bulletin LA; Triple A Plowed Under (L.A.); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.

human rights. On the one hand, this aesthetic strategy facilitated moral indignation. Yet while its mimetic choices argue for the fundamental human right to food, it also demonstrates an inability to reconcile American capitalism to this right: “Where the dramatic effort falters is that it fails to clearly show just how this *miracle* is to be brought about.”<sup>163</sup> Association of the “paradox’s” end with the miraculous emphasizes the complexity in determining government obligations that ensure access to food while not impeding on other citizens’ rights (e.g. farmers’ property rights) in a democratic capitalist economy. How was the government to sustain agriculture without endangering the “Depression Poor’s” access to necessities? Relief was not only an untenable economic measure, it was an ideologically unacceptable answer to many Americans, who disdained charity and desired jobs in order to participate as consumers. In the popular imagination the United States was the land of plenty, but *Triple-A Plowed Under* revealed the challenge and charged the People with realizing an America “that permits no man to go hungry.”

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<sup>163</sup> Emphasis added, ““Triple-A Plowed Under,”” *Variety* 18 March 1936; TAPU Publicity (5); PTF, 1934-39; PR, 1934-43; FTC; LOC.



## Chapter 5: Staging the “Tactic”:

### Exhibition of Everyday Hunger in the 1939 Bootheel Sharecroppers’ Demonstration

On 1 December 1938, Reverend Owen Whitfield, an African American sharecropper who would emerge as the leader of the Bootheel sharecroppers’ demonstration,<sup>1</sup> sent a letter to Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) Secretary H.L. Mitchell informing him about landowners’ plans to evict 900 farm laborer families. He told Mitchell of the croppers’ intention to “pile their household goods on sides of the hightway [sic] and see what happens.”<sup>2</sup> What happened in January 1939 was a performance of this disenfranchised population’s – poor, rural, and predominantly black – hunger and humanity to a national audience.

In his memoir *From Missouri*, Thad Snow, a farm owner, friend to Whitfield, and advocate for croppers, states that in addition to himself Whitfield told both Hans Baasch, manager of the Farm Security Administration’s (FSA) La Forge Project, and Congressman Orville Zimmerman about protest plans. According to Snow, Whitfield asked Baasch to keep the demonstration a secret and went to Zimmerman days before the protest hoping to secure tents for shelter.<sup>3</sup> Jarod Roll’s study of the demonstration shows that throughout the fall of 1938 Whitfield had been campaigning for support, and local STFU-CIO union leaders were organizing for the protest.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, during the demonstration, the decision to move to the highways

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<sup>1</sup> The southeastern portion of Missouri is known as the “Bootheel.” Though farm laborers of different statuses were involved in the protest, I will use the terms “sharecropper” or “croppers” throughout the chapter for ease, because croppers predominated in the protest, and the protesters were represented as such by the media.

<sup>2</sup> Reel 9; STFU; NU. The STFU would later deny any foreknowledge of the sharecropper protest. In his 1939 “Report of the Secretary” H.L. Mitchell wrote, “The National Office of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, although it had received no word of the proposed roadside demonstration went into action immediately;” Sixth Annual STFU Convention Blytheville, AK 5-7 January 1940; reel 14; STFU; NU.

<sup>3</sup> Thad Snow, *From Missouri* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954) 246-7.

<sup>4</sup> Roll 283-6.

was represented as occurring on 7 January 1939 – a mere two days before the protest – at a clandestine meeting in an African American church. A sense of spontaneity masked the diligent grassroots organizing that enabled the protest to take place. Snow states that Whitfield invited reporter Sam Armstrong to attend the meeting, but debated whether to allow Armstrong to publish the story before the protest started. Snow quotes Whitfield as finally saying, “‘Mr. Sam, I’ve been thinkin’ [sic]. You go ahead and print what you wants in tomorrow’s paper. Nobody won’t believe it, so it won’t make no difference.’”<sup>5</sup> The accuracy of Snow’s recollection of Whitfield’s exact words is less significant than Whitfield’s notion that such an action would be unbelievable to powerful landowners and state officials. In fact, Whitfield was right. Despite Sam Armstrong’s article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* detailing sharecroppers’ plans, farm owners reportedly doubted that the demonstration would actually occur. At the protest’s start, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that C.L. Blanton, publisher of the local *Sikeston Standard*, “shared the doubt of planters that any organized demonstration would be held.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the FBI report on the demonstration concluded that “the majority of those [landowners] who did learn of the contemplated demonstration prior to its occurrence took the view that such a demonstration could not take place in their district.”<sup>7</sup> The reason for such skepticism is unclear, but croppers’ more or less docile acceptance of the sharecropping system, the imbalance of power between owners and croppers, racial dynamics, and six years of evictions because of the Agricultural Adjustment Act offer possible explanations. Nevertheless, in January 1939, the

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<sup>5</sup> Snow 250.

<sup>6</sup> “Sharecroppers Evicted, Camp Along Highways,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch* 10 January 1939: 1.

<sup>7</sup> “Investigation Concerning the Sharecropper Situation Existing in Southeast Missouri,” Memorandum for the Attorney General 11 February 1939, p.28; Federal Bureau of Investigation United States Department of Justice Washington D.C. (FBI report); HD 1527.M8; University of California Library, Berkeley, CA (UC).

compounded effects of the declining sharecropping system and the AAA appear to have been major motivating factors for sharecroppers' public exhibition.

In taking landowners by surprise, the roadside demonstration exemplifies Michel de Certeau's concept of the "tactic." As de Certeau describes it, the "tactic" relies on "opportunity;" in a sense, it is performed in the moments when no one is looking or in the instances when the powerful show vulnerability. The powerless can become empowered in such moments, while the powerful remain so.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the Bootheel croppers, plantation owners were vulnerable the moment the evictions that they imposed took effect. Under the cover of darkness, protesters moved onto Missouri's highways 60 and 61 on 9 January, and on the morning of 10 January the cruelty of evictions was exposed. Roll substantiates sharecroppers' *tactical* use of evictions: "Whitfield latched onto the idea [of moving to the roadside from one of his followers], realizing that the landless could use their greatest trouble – eviction – as a weapon against the planters."<sup>9</sup> Roughly 1,500 women, men, and children (approximately 400 families) with little food or shelter but with what appeared to be all their worldly possessions lived on the edge of these major roadways until 13 January when state troopers began moving them from the highways, an effort which was concluded on 15 January. Under the pretense that they were a health menace, Missouri authorities loaded the croppers into trucks and then dumped the families out of sight. Authorities discarded croppers into places such as an abandoned church, barns, and spillways, which were referred to as "concentration camps."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> De Certeau 36-7.

<sup>9</sup> Roll 284.

<sup>10</sup> The term "concentration camp" was used as if it did not require explanation in the newspaper article subheading, "Concentration Camp for Outstate Cotton Pickers," in "Roadside Camps Removed by Highway Patrol to Farmer Homes," *Sikeston Herald* 19 January 1939: 1. Louis Cantor writes: "The state police, government officials and local newspapers openly referred to the croppers' new home as a 'concentration camp'" (87). According to the *Oxford*

The families' exhibition of daily living on the highways demonstrated sharecroppers' slow starvation due to labor exploitation and protested landowner abuse of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. News coverage quoted Whitfield's language of conscious exhibition: "'Let's go out on the highway' [. . .] 'If we are going to starve, let's starve out there where people can see us!'"<sup>11</sup> Staging the protest on Missouri's two major highways took advantage of public roads. Because of its location, the protest generated two immediate audiences: local community members and travelers. Urban and national media constituted distant observers, some of whom traveled to the region and attempted to bring the croppers relief. The protest both succeeded and failed. Despite Missouri authorities' removal of croppers from public view and landowners' denial of wrong-doing, the demonstration prompted a series of interventions from private and federal sources seeking to help croppers attain better lives. Croppers received significant monetary, food and clothing donations, a private organization with federal assistance set up a cooperative farm residence, and the FSA established housing for day laborers. However, many croppers also returned (willingly and unwillingly) to plantation-style labor arrangements and continued to suffer from livelihood insecurity.

In this chapter, I argue that the sharecroppers' protest epitomized an efficient version of de Certeau's "tactic" because the tactic was displayed and legible *as* a tactic. Showing a tactic reveals power dynamics and, significantly, expresses the powerlessness of those utilizing it. Its efficacy is contained in the ability to demonstrate the authenticity of powerlessness and show the

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*English Dictionary*, the term "concentration camp" had been in use since the early 1900s and by 1934 was used to describe the Nazi's internment practices, "Concentration camp," 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Northwestern University, 5 March 2007 <<http://dictionary.oed.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/cgi/entry/50046174/50046174se1?single>>.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Morris Ridpath, "The Case of the Missouri Sharecroppers," *The Christian Century* LVI.5 (15 February 1939): 147.

injustice of the power imbalance. Bootheel protesters attempted to shame landowners by exhibiting their hungry bodies as evidence of their exploitation. They insisted that their exhibition was unmediated – not a performance, but daily life in public view. By engaging in ordinary interactions with their fellow protesters the sharecroppers demonstrated that the only tool available to them was the humiliation and objectification of exhibition. In turn, landowners insisted that the exhibition was pretense – a performance designed to manipulate the nation and federal government.

In fact, the protest was an orchestrated event designed, in Owen Whitfield's words, to "put [the sharecroppers'] condition before the entire world."<sup>12</sup> Here again, Whitfield employs the language of performance. Using Michael Kirby's "acting – non-acting" continuum, I theorize the ways in which the Bootheel protesters' demonstration was both "real" and "acted." I combine his taxonomy with museum and protest theory to explore how the Bootheel protesters' strategy of passive exhibition helped to establish their display as "real" and positioned the croppers as powerless. I analyze the ways in which the construct of "family" and inversion of the "shifting" tradition instilled the protesters with credibility and created the possibility for recognition of social and economic exclusion as the cause of croppers' poverty. On the other hand, I examine how despite this counter-text about shiftlessness, the performative implications of race and class enabled Missouri officials to round up sharecroppers and remove them from public view. Additionally, though the croppers did not organize a hunger strike, I compare the protesters' actions to hunger strikes in order to explicate how the Bootheel sharecroppers'

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<sup>12</sup> Owen H. Whitfield letter to all Locals in Missouri Southern Tenant Farmers' Union 5 February 1939; reel 10 STFU; NU.

exhibition of dehumanization enabled the perception of hunger, an unverifiable pain, as undoubtedly authentic.

While Kirby's scale implies applicability to non-theatrical events, he stops short of analyzing the social and material consequences of his taxonomy. The struggle between croppers and landowners over the "truth" demonstrates the high stakes involved in determining whether "acting" was occurring. If the sharecroppers' demonstration of hunger and suffering was perceived as authentic, landowners would face public disgrace and possibly lose federal AAA subsidies and low-wage labor. Croppers stood to gain federal relief, public support, and improved labor conditions. However, authenticity alone could not ensure croppers' relief; croppers needed to demonstrate that their hunger was a result of unjust social and economic exclusion and not due to their "inherent" degeneracy. Moreover, Baz Kershaw observes that "the audience members always have a choice as to whether or not a performance may be efficacious for them,"<sup>13</sup> what is significant in the sharecroppers' case is that croppers' admission of spectators' choice was an integral part of their performance.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas writes: "it appears undeniable that starvation and undernourishment are the result of social rejection more than of physical deficiency of food supplies."<sup>14</sup> This was clearly the case in the Bootheel. Referred to as "surplus population," these farm laborers had been viewed as an economic and social burden on the communities where they lived. Though the problems of seasonal labor were widely acknowledged, particularly the disparity between the numbers needed to pick cotton and those needed to plant and cultivate it,

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<sup>13</sup> Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance* 28, qtd. in Davis, "Theatricality" 129.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Douglas, "Standard Social Uses of Food," Introduction, *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities*, ed. Mary Douglas (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984) 12.

the characterization of these individuals as “surplus” points to general disregard (in both senses: neglect and disdain) of croppers. Eleanor Roosevelt’s response to Secretary Wallace’s attempt to convince her that the AAA was not culpable for the sharecroppers’ plight by stating that theirs was a problem of “basic population facts” indicates her decision to *theatricalize* the demonstration.<sup>15</sup> Wallace was met by Mrs. Roosevelt’s refusal to dehumanize farm laborers through abstraction:

Your letter on the subject of farm population and conditions among the sharecroppers is most interesting. Thank you very much.

Should we be developing more industries and services? Should we practice birth control or drown the surplus population?<sup>16</sup>

The First Lady’s Swiftian solution demonstrates her opinion that the federal government has the responsibility to develop infrastructures that will include the croppers. That the Bootheel demonstration prompted her to write such a letter indicates the protest’s extensive reach. For Eleanor Roosevelt, and others, the protest’s show of continued deprivation demanded immediate amelioration; she recognized how slow starvation by economic exploitation sustained the cotton industry and the federal government’s complicity in its neglect of these citizens. Of course, other citizens, media, and officials expressed alternative responses ranging from indifference to Wallace’s ultimate denial of responsibility through his disregard of the croppers as a consequence of their own “surplus.”

### **Sopping it Up: The AAA’s Exacerbation of Farm Laborers’ Ills**

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<sup>15</sup> Wallace to Eleanor Roosevelt; Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>16</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady, to Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, 15 June 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

Rufus Lark sent a letter to the STFU about one month after the sharecroppers' demonstration in southeast Missouri concluded. Mr. Lark did not camp on highways 60 and 61, but his situation epitomizes that of the 1,500 who did: "I had to move Because [sic] the man told me to move he say we didn't due the [3 cents] money an said if any gravy was in the Boal [sic] he was going to sop it his self this year."<sup>17</sup> The landlord's use of a food metaphor to describe how he would ensure monetary gain is fitting. Farm owners' economic exploitation of sharecroppers literally deprived croppers of food. Food shortage among farm laborers appears as a persistent problem in countless letters sent to the STFU, in the Farm Security Administration's 1938 study of Missouri sharecropping, "Rich Land – Poor People," and in the FBI report on the demonstration. FSA findings stated that hunger, malnutrition, and resultant disease and high infant mortality rates among sharecroppers were caused by inadequate access to food. The inability to obtain food stemmed from croppers' dire poverty, landowners' discouragement of tenants maintaining subsistence gardens, and the lack of capacity for food preservation.<sup>18</sup>

Three types of laborers worked cotton plantations: renters, sharecroppers, and day laborers. Renters supplied their own equipment and paid for leased land with either cash or crops. Sharecroppers provided their labor in return for a share of the crop they produced. Day laborers worked for a wage. Croppers and renters lived on the farm and landlords provided them with credit to sustain them throughout the year. At the end of cotton season, landowners deducted croppers' and renters' "furnish"—cost of housing, food, equipment rental, etc. — plus interest (often around 10%) from their portion of crop income. Calculations invariably came out

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<sup>17</sup> Rufus Lark to STFU, 19 February 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

<sup>18</sup> Max R. White, Douglas Ensminger, and Cecil L. Gregory, "Rich Land – Poor People," Research Report No.1, USDA Farm Security Administration Region III, Indianapolis January 1938; reel 17; SRF 1193-1197; Lot 12024; FSA-OWI, 1935-1946; LOC.



in the landlord's favor because "the landlord keeps the books, and the tenant is often too ignorant, or, particularly in the case of the Negro, afraid to question the accounts."<sup>19</sup> The three cents Mr. Lark did not receive for his family's labor was not exceptional. Such unfair dealings kept croppers indentured to owners or perpetually reliant upon "furnish" and government relief to sustain them through the winter months following the cotton harvest.

In order to maximize the land's productivity, cotton often surrounded tenants' homes leaving little or no available space for subsistence gardens. Moreover, farm labor families had little time to tend to other crops since they were dependent upon their own fields' productivity. Even when home gardens existed, Missouri heat and inappropriate space for food storage made effective preservation improbable.<sup>20</sup> In response to an FSA interviewer's question regarding the colitis endemic on farms, one woman stated, "Yes, there is an awful lot of colitis around here, but no wonder – we can't change our food, can't afford it. It means greens, when it is season, but otherwise potatoes and beans or nothing. We would eat differently if we could get it."<sup>21</sup>

Mr. Lark's testimony of why he and his family were evicted also discloses the Agricultural Adjustment Act's exacerbation of the cotton industry's problematic power dynamics. Before the 1933 federal program had been in operation for even one year, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration was receiving complaints from tenants and croppers regarding evictions and unfair distribution of benefit payments. Both the 1936 Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act and the 1938 Agricultural Adjustment Act included benefit payments for sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Nevertheless, landlords managed to skirt

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<sup>19</sup> White, et. al., p.5; reel 17; SRF 1193-1197; Lot 12024; FSA-OWI, 1935-1946; LOC.

<sup>20</sup> White, et. al. p.6, 46; reel 17; SRF 1193-1197; Lot 12024; FSA-OWI, 1935-1946; LOC.

<sup>21</sup> White, et. al. p.45; reel 17; SRF 1193-1197; Lot 12024; FSA-OWI, 1935-1946; LOC.

provisions for croppers by making them give up rights to benefit payments as part of their lease or by using furnish debt to reduce croppers' share. Landlords often avoided paying benefits by simply evicting tenants and croppers and hiring day laborers to work the land.<sup>22</sup>

Organizations such as the Southern Croppers' Union (SCU) in Alabama and the STFU sought to protect croppers' rights under the law. The SCU instructed their members "not to sign the joint parity checks unless the landlords paid their portion in cash rather than use the funds to settle debts."<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the STFU created pamphlets such as "Government Programs Lesson One: The Agricultural Adjustment Act," which explained the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, the 1938 AAA, and the benefit payments under each. It stressed the legal right to these payments: "This check is your own money and you should be careful not to sign it over to the landlord."<sup>24</sup>

AAA county committees generally consisted of powerful landowners who oversaw operations and made judgments on complaints, so sharecroppers and tenants often had little recourse. A minority report by W.L. Blackstone, representing the STFU, was included in the 1937 Special Committee on Farm Tenancy findings. It emphasized the problems with local governance of the AAA: "we recall vividly our inability in the days of the [1933] A.A.A. to get adequate redress of our grievances as to the disposition of benefit payments and as to dispossessing us from our slight foothold on the land in violation of the cotton contract."<sup>25</sup> In

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel 101.

<sup>23</sup> Kelley 54.

<sup>24</sup> STFU, "Government Programs Lesson One: The Agricultural Adjustment Act"; Reel 16; STFU; NU.

<sup>25</sup> "Farm Tenancy," A message from The President of the United States transmitting The Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy, 75<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, House Document No. 149, 16 February 1937 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1937) ("Farm Tenancy") p.25; LOC.

light of such problems, the committee proposed numerous programs, many of which would become part of the Farm Security Administration's rehabilitation efforts.<sup>26</sup>

A month after the protest concluded, Louis La Coss, writing for the *New York Times*, stated that the crop reduction program "aggravated" problems between owner and laborer, but pointed to the La Forge project as the impetus for the demonstration.<sup>27</sup> In 1937, the FSA (formerly the Resettlement Administration) bought a 6,700 acre plantation near La Forge, MO in New Madrid County. This was an experiment designed to improve the land's fertility and create better economic and social conditions for farm laborers. Tenants and croppers living on the land at the time of purchase became the project's residents (about sixty white families and forty African American families). "It wanted to find out whether these run-of-the-mill share-croppers could make a decent, secure living if they had a chance under different conditions."<sup>28</sup> Fully operational in spring 1938, the FSA built new homes for the families. Residences included "an efficient barn, a sealed well, fences, food storage vaults and a sanitary privy."<sup>29</sup> The land was divided into individual farms (on which cotton, corn, and soil-regenerating crops were planted), and the FSA gave each family a \$1,300 loan. Families rented the homes and land from the federal government. La Forge residents cooperatively purchased major equipment and ran the gin on the plantation. Additionally, the FSA provided educational programs on such things as

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<sup>26</sup> One such effort was to facilitate better relations between farm owners and farm laborers by stressing the importance of written lease agreements, even offering a template for landlords and tenants to follow, "Landlord-Tenant Cooperation Use of Flexible Farm Lease"; Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>27</sup> Louis La Coss, "Cropper Ills Vex Missouri," *New York Times* 19 February 1939: E10.

<sup>28</sup> Farm Security Administration, "La Forge Farms," 5 October 1940, attached to memorandum for Mr. Russell Lord from John Fischer, Chief Information Division, 5 May 1941, p.2 ("La Forge"); Southeastern Missouri Projects (SMP); Project Records, 1935-1940 (PR, 1935-1940); Records of the Farmers Home Administration, 1918-1975, Record Group 96 (RG 96); NACP.

<sup>29</sup> "La Forge," p.4; SMP; PR, 1935-1940; RG 96; NACP.

home gardens and raising livestock. Schools were built for the white and African American children, and a health program was established. By December 1939, each family's worth had increased from \$28.00 to \$1,474.71, and the government already recouped nearly \$100,000 on an approximately \$800,000 investment.<sup>30</sup> La Forge was an indisputable success according to the federal government and the residents. This project helped a small proportion of farm workers, but union and federal advocacy on behalf of other tenants and croppers failed to stem farm owners' abuses of the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

Changes in the cotton contracts from 1937 to 1938 were cited as a reason for increased evictions at the end of the 1938 season. Thad Snow publicly characterized the 1938 increase in payments to croppers as "doubl[ing] planters' incentive to turn to day labor in 1939."<sup>31</sup> In a confidential memorandum to Secretary Wallace, to which Snow's article was attached, Assistant Director of Information S.B. Bledsoe stated that the AAA "provides direct inducement" for landowners to dismiss croppers and employ day laborers.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Bledsoe suggested that despite the safeguards for croppers included in the 1938 AAA, allowing the county committees ("members [of which] are landlords") to continue to adjudicate the merit of croppers' complaints rendered legal protections ineffectual.<sup>33</sup>

The AAA's actual responsibility for changes in the sharecropping system is less significant than the fact that it was perceived as a catalyst for the Bootheel protest by protesters,

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<sup>30</sup> "La Forge," p.10; SMP; PR, 1935-1940; RG 96; NACP.

<sup>31</sup> Thad Snow, "Missouri Roadside Sit-Down is Dramatization of One of America's Biggest Social Problems," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 5 March 1939.

<sup>32</sup> S.B. Bledsoe, Assistant Director of Information USDA to Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, 9 March 1939 (Bledsoe to Wallace) p.1; Agricultural Adjustment Act; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>33</sup> Bledsoe to Wallace, p.2; Agricultural Adjustment Act; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

landowners, and newspapers alike. Sam Armstrong's article cites Whitfield as explicitly faulting the AAA for triggering landowners' change to day labor.<sup>34</sup> In local and national newspapers, reportage on the demonstration almost always mentioned the AAA. Assistant Director of Information Nathan W. Robertson sent an "Editorial Reaction Report" to FSA Administrator Dr. Will Alexander that summarized national press response to farm issues. Regarding the demonstration, Robertson reported: "The burden of the blame was laid on the AAA and increased mechanization of farm work."<sup>35</sup> The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, which covered the demonstration extensively and sympathetically, featured an editorial titled "Dispossessed by the A.A.A." beside a drawing of huddled cropper families on a roadside captioned "Missouri's Refugees."<sup>36</sup> The article was scathing; it suggested that Wallace and the administration kowtowed to landowners because farm laborers "usually don't vote."<sup>37</sup> AAA administrators did respond to the demonstration; AAA agents were sent to the Bootheel, and FSA agents conducted a thorough investigation of the demonstration. Moreover, the AAA administration announced that owners found to have violated AAA provisions by changing to day labor would not receive benefit payments.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Sam Armstrong, "Sharecroppers, Ordered Evicted, To Camp on Road," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 8 January 1939: 1.

<sup>35</sup> Nathan W. Robertson, Assistant Director of Information USDA, to Dr. Will Alexander, FSA Administrator, "Editorial Reaction Report," 31 January 1939; Farm Security, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>36</sup> "Dispossessed by the A.A.A.," editorial, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 12 January 1939.

<sup>37</sup> "Dispossessed by the A.A.A.," editorial, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 12 January 1939.

<sup>38</sup> "Evicted Campers on Roads Await Food from State," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 11 January 1939. Jarod Roll shows that Whitfield, as a leader in the STFU-CIO, had been demanding federal prevention of evictions since 1937; see his dissertation chapter "'Organizing for Power': A New Deal for Rural Workers, 1937-1938."

In response, landowners and officials alleged that federal assistance and the transformation for some from cropper to farmer was a direct cause of the sharecroppers' demonstration. The *Southeast Missourian* described landowners' theory that "the squatters, particularly the Negroes, have been impressed by the 'luxury' of those living [...] at La Forge" and stated that the demonstrators believed the federal government was going to give them "'40 acres' and an easy life."<sup>39</sup> This article is indicative of racism's performativity, which produced croppers as shiftless. The idea that La Forge's basic amenities constituted "luxury" also demonstrates the normative class and racial superiority of landowners.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* suggested that union organizers easily convinced impressionable demonstrators (by which they meant: "stupid" African Americans and white "trash") with "promises of extravagant largess from the government" as "Capital was made of the federal resettlement project at La Forge."<sup>41</sup> By providing new housing, space for gardening, fixed rental costs, a long-term arrangement, and greater self-determination for black and white sharecroppers, the federal government modeled a desirable form of patronage: one which entailed the possibility of independence. In fact, Roll demonstrates that the STFU encouraged use of La Forge as an example of progress that could be made through unionization.<sup>42</sup> The link between the FSA and cropper rebellion indicates the problems that La Forge (or the idea of the proliferation of government-sponsored cooperative farms for sharecroppers) and federal interference was

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<sup>39</sup> "Squatters Quit Camps on Highways," *Southeast Missourian* 16 January 1939: 1.

<sup>40</sup> In his study of southern sharecropping culture, Pete Daniel quotes a Federal Emergency Relief Administration report regarding relief and racial bias, "a feeling in general [exists] that the Negro does not 'need' so much as the white. This is a direct outgrowth of the widely accepted belief in racial superiority" (86).

<sup>41</sup> "Sharecropper Eviction Hoax," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 18 January 1939, reprinted in "What Others Say About the Sharecropper Problem," *The Enterprise Courier* 19 January 1939: 1.

<sup>42</sup> Roll 276.

believed to have created for the southeast Missouri social order. According to landowners, the croppers' exhibition constituted a manipulation designed to dupe the federal government and public.

### **Live Exhibits: Dehumanization on Display**

The highway demonstration was “uneventful.” Elements that performance scholars generally cite as evidence of protests' theatrical aspects were absent: there were no constructed signs or symbols, no parades or costumes emblematic of the croppers' grievances. Croppers simply lived. The lack of what is typically theatrical contributed to the authenticity of the display. The demonstration offered the “drama of the quotidian” to spectators.<sup>43</sup> To explicate this term and the going about of everyday life while on display, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett draws on John MacAloon's idea of generic confusion in which one person's life becomes entertainment for another person. In such an instance, the event is framed as a performance while the sense that the real thing is happening is stimulated; the role of spectator is taken on while the “performer” maintains authenticity as “non-performer.” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is concerned with such performances in *in situ* museum exhibits wherein performances are perceived on a par with artifacts. *In situ* exhibits' re-creation of environments “immerse” spectators in the displayed culture. Like the artifact and its accompanying labels, contextualizing objects, or instructing docent, subjects' “formal performance” of their daily lives become metonymic of their culture.<sup>44</sup> Sharecroppers' familial bodies – without shelter, without adequate food, and without an end to their suffering in sight – testified to the economic and social injustices of Missouri cotton culture.

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<sup>43</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 3-4, 47.

<sup>44</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 55.

Interior objects that incongruously occupied the roadsides along with trucks, chickens, and campfires contextualized croppers' lives. Meager personal effects and the arrangements of households indicated both poverty and displacement [see fig. 5.1 and fig. 5.2]. Bed frames, blankets, rugs, dolls, pots, books, indeed all of the croppers' belongings were piled in mounds, one family unit distinguishable from another only when a distance existed between huddles. The absence of personal/private space indicated croppers' daily degradation. The sheer effort of moving, implicit in the presence of children and a family's possessions (heavy, awkward, and loose objects) to roadsides suggested the genuineness of evictions.



**Figure 5.1. Sharecropper belongings. Source: Digital ID: fsa 8a10486; Arthur Rothstein, Evicted Sharecroppers Along Highway 60, New Madrid County, MO; Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information (Rothstein photos); American Memory Project (AMP); LOC.**





**Figure 5.2. Sharecroppers with their belongings.**  
**Source: Digital ID: fsa 8a10411; Rothstein photos; AMP; LOC.**

Unlike the displays in which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is interested, demonstrators were not “re-creating” their daily lives, though in the fact of displaying them they may have been offering a “formal performance.” She states that such performances “create the illusion that the activities you watch are being done rather than represented, a practice that creates the effect of authenticity, or realness. The impression is one of unmediated encounter.”<sup>45</sup> Performance scholar Christopher B. Balme argues that performers can “destabilize the authenticity of their own ritual” by drawing attention to the presence of spectators, thus complicating its framing as unmediated.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that in attending live exhibits spectators must suspend disbelief in their own presence in order to preserve the illusion that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes. The typical sites of *in situ* performance – tourist entertainments and educational venues – promotes slippage as does spectators’ volitional attendance. Though it may be purposefully deemphasized,

<sup>45</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett *Destination Culture* 55.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher B. Balme, “Staging the Pacific: Framing Authenticity in Performances for Tourists at the Polynesian Cultural Center,” *Theatre Journal* 50.1 (1998) 53-70: 69, Project Muse, Northwestern University, 20 July 2006 <[http://muse.jhu.edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/journals/theatre\\_journal](http://muse.jhu.edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/journals/theatre_journal)>.

the location itself (its designation as a “Cultural” venue) frames the live exhibit as repeatable and therefore performed. Conversely, the space occupied by sharecroppers facilitated the presentation of authenticity. Sharecroppers appeared on public roads and in bitter January weather. Drawing attention to spectators (or interacting with highway travelers, police, reporters, and federal investigators) also confirmed the presentation’s authenticity; repeatedly, croppers narrated that they chose the highways as their new home in order to make their homelessness and hardship visible. They situated their display as the consequence of forced evictions. In turn, their quotidian drama was framed as exposure based on economic circumstance and therefore real.

Likewise, cropper worship and recreation on the highways suggested spontaneity or the forward movement of time. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* noted that following a prayer service attended by both black and white croppers, “Hymns and old songs of the South were to be heard about the campfires *far into the night* with accompaniments of guitars, banjos and, occasionally, a violin. At a camp of several hundred [...] a snowy-haired Negro with a harmonica varied such melodies as “Swanee River” with gay dance tunes that set young bucks to jigging.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*’s depiction of the camps was not without hope: “all was not tragic, for at supper time some camps presented scenes reminiscent of old plantation days. Strummed guitars furnished an accompaniment for singing.”<sup>48</sup> Even though journalists were spectators, these articles’ narrative mode diminishes reporters’ presence on the roads. The reports characterize protesters as seeking to entertain themselves, perhaps raise their spirits or confirm

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<sup>47</sup> Emphasis added, “Evicted Campers on Roads Await Food from State,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 11 January 1939: 1.

<sup>48</sup> “Denied Farms, Sharecroppers Sleep on Roads,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* 11 January 1939.

their faith. Despite the problematic nature of the reportage's racialized overtones, the articles denote that croppers' singing and dancing was perceived as authentic cultural display.

Additionally, croppers' performance of life did not stop with nightfall or play at convenient times for spectators. It was not bracketed from real time like theatre, or other live exhibit entertainments, nor did it play over and again for a preset duration.

Museum studies scholars have expressed concern over the power dynamics in the exhibition of cultures. For instance, Ivan Karp notes: "The alleged innate neutrality of museums and exhibitions [. . .] is the very quality that enables them to become instruments of power."<sup>49</sup> Sharecroppers' roadside living positioned the display's content as neutral/authentic/real and the display itself as caused by those with power over their lives. The protest appropriated the power dynamics of live exhibition by making them visible. Similarly, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett elaborates the ethical concerns in "zoological and theatrical" exhibitions of human beings:

The issue is the power to open up to sight differentially, to show with respect to others what one would not reveal about oneself – one's body, person, and life. [. . .] Live exhibits tend to make people into artifacts because the ethnographic gaze objectifies. [...]

To make people going about their ordinary business objects of visual interest and available to total scrutiny is dehumanizing.<sup>50</sup>

The Bootheel demonstration suggested landowners' dehumanization of sharecroppers by appearing to be both unmediated and forced. To show the injustice of their lives, demonstrators offered up their "ordinary business" for scrutiny. Photographs of demonstrators engaged in

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<sup>49</sup> Ivan Karp, "Culture and Representation," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) 14.

<sup>50</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 55.

quodidian activity in the open, such as that of “C.T. Thomas having a meal while camping by the roadside,”<sup>51</sup> illustrate protesters’ purposeful display of the private [see fig. 5.3]. Sitting cross-legged on a pile of sacks, Thomas looks directly at the camera as he bites a piece of food off of a fork. He doesn’t have a plate and he appears to be pulling the food from a metal bucket resembling a paint can. Thomas *performs* his life conditions for the camera; he is homeless, impoverished, and subsists on what is readily available. By acknowledging the photographer’s presence through eye contact, Thomas asks for acknowledgement of his plight.



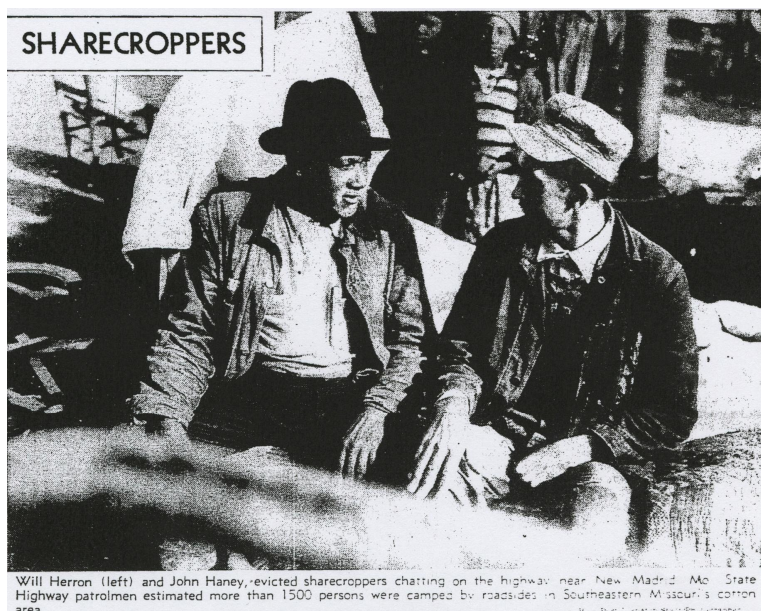
**Figure 5.3. C.T. Thomas.**

Source: “Sharecropper,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Everyday Magazine* 11 January 1939.

On the other hand, photographs featuring croppers seemingly unaware or indifferent to journalists substantiated sharecroppers’ claims of forced display; they lacked privacy because they lacked private space [see fig. 5.4]. The demonstration embodied croppers’ lack of self-determination through the thorough exposure of all aspects of their lives. Public sleeping, eating,

<sup>51</sup> “Sharecropper,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Everyday Magazine* 11 January 1939.

and prayer were not simply indicative of homelessness. Spectators' knowledge of the economically-compelled choice to display laid bare the dehumanization of the individual in the transformation from private subject to exhibited/public object. Croppers' need to expose their *bodies, persons, and lives* to public view suggested that they consciously suffered the humiliation of public suffering in search of economic and social inclusion.



**Figure 5.4. Sharecroppers conversing.**

Source: “Evicted Missouri Sharecroppers,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 11 January 1939.

Such activity complicates Michael Kirby’s “non-acting” designation. “Non-acting” occurs when a performer does “*not do* anything to reinforce the information or identification” and “is merely himself and is not imbedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place and time.”<sup>52</sup> Bootheel demonstrators purported that they were being *merely themselves*. However, protesters’ volitional display suggests that the living they were *doing* fully embedded them in the matrices that represented them to the public as evicted croppers. Nevertheless, actions such as C.T. Thomas’ do not fully fit Kirby’s category of

<sup>52</sup> Michael Kirby, “On Acting and Not-Acting,” *The Drama Review* 16.1 (1972): 6.

“acting” in which one’s “own emotions and beliefs” are “‘pushed’ for the sake of the spectators” or “selected and projected.”<sup>53</sup> Thomas and the other croppers may have chosen to show only certain elements of their lives, but what was shown was not legible as heightened or “pushed.” Thus, if protesters were in fact acting, it was imperceptible in their performance or in the matrices in which they were embedded. Croppers’ highway exhibition certainly “used” and “projected” their despair, but because (or in spite) of this, many witnesses – from citizens to federal officials – perceived the croppers’ suffering as authentic.

### **Shifting: Rooted at the Site of Mobility**

Kirby designates an intermediate situation on the “non-acting – acting” scale termed “received acting:” “when the matrices [character, setting, costume and other “referential elements” used to assess a situation] are strong, persistent and reinforce each other, we see an actor, no matter how ordinary the behavior.”<sup>54</sup> This is the interpellation of pretense by an audience. In the case of the highway demonstration, however, the matrices worked together to suggest the reality of croppers’ suffering. The apparent lack of shelter in harsh January conditions and the presence of entire families, often inappropriately dressed for the weather, reinforced the protesters’ claims that they were evicted croppers suffering the effects of unjust treatment. Yet the stereotype of shiftlessness, a factor that substantiated croppers as “surplus,” enabled delegitimation of the protest based on the quality of the croppers’ character. Croppers’ actions on the roadways disrupted the discourse of shiftlessness, but could not dismantle “the reiterated practice of *racializing* [and class-creating] interpellations.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kirby 7.

<sup>54</sup> Kirby 5.

<sup>55</sup> Butler 18.

Croppers' "shifting," the cultural practice of moving from one farm to another, had been viewed as an indication of poor character. "In the minds of Southern planters, shifting was intimately related to croppers' 'shiftlessness,' an all-purpose term used to refer to indolence and moral laxity."<sup>56</sup> In practice, landlord and tenant agreements lasted one year, and both croppers and landlords often sought out new arrangements in the hopes of securing a more profitable deal. Typically tenants would receive eviction notices (usually verbal) after the harvest or at the beginning of winter, and be expected to vacate the farm by 10 January. (The eviction officially began on 1 January, but tenants were given 10 days grace.) This gave landlords time to find new tenants and tenants time to find new farms. However, landlords also claimed that sharecroppers would avoid furnish debt by clandestinely shifting to a new farm. On the one hand, shifting might be recognized as a "tactic," by which croppers "already caught in the net of 'discipline'" gained opportunity for a better situation on another farm.<sup>57</sup> Shifting, however, also typifies the "tactic" in the sense that "whatever it wins, it does not keep," as the terms of the new tenancy would likely be economically unjust.<sup>58</sup> Landowners used the shifting tradition as proof of shiftlessness and justification for poor treatment of croppers.

Even government and private groups that assisted farm laborers showed bias based on the perception of shiftlessness. The Special Committee on Farm Tenancy reported that the constant movement of farm families (in 1935, approximately 34.2% of the nearly 2.9 million tenant farmers nationwide had lived on their current farm for only one year) was detrimental to

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<sup>56</sup> Jones, *The Dispossessed* 106.

<sup>57</sup> De Certeau xv.

<sup>58</sup> De Certeau xix.

community formation, education, and housing.<sup>59</sup> The committee found that farm laborers “suffer[ed] from mental as well as economic insecurity.”<sup>60</sup> The Congregational and Christian Churches of New York City similarly described shifting as a “rural ill” that “hinders wholesome community contacts.”<sup>61</sup> A description of the positive impact of the La Forge project characterized shifting as a kind of “mental insecurity” that substantiated landowners’ bias against their mobile farm laborers. The report blamed inadequate shelter, which compounded croppers’ susceptibility to disease, on the fact that “no tenant takes the best care of a place when he knows he will be somewhere else the next year.”<sup>62</sup> In fact, landlords rarely improved deteriorated shacks in which their tenants lived. Additionally, adults’ and children’s poor literacy skills, a result of unstable school attendance, exacerbated power differentials. Often tenants’ inability to read lease agreements perpetuated laborers’ exploitation. However, “bad citizenship, because no family can educate its children properly, or find a solid place for itself in the community, when it is continually on the move” was emphasized in the FSA study.<sup>63</sup> The FBI report on the demonstration showed Missouri citizens’ prejudice against the croppers. It included statements by an otherwise unidentified “some” that “the emergence of the so-called night club, with its bar, gambling devices, dance floor and other diversions, is also related to the impermanence of

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<sup>59</sup> “Farm Tenancy,” p.7; LOC.

<sup>60</sup> “Farm Tenancy,” p.7; LOC.

<sup>61</sup> Town and Country Department, Church Extension Division Board of Home Missions, Congregational and Christian Churches New York, NY, “Farm Tenancy – A Social Problem,” 13 November 1939, attached to letter from Rev. Thomas Alfred Tripp to Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture; Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>62</sup> “La Forge,” p.2; SMP; PR, 1935-1940; RG 96; NACP.

<sup>63</sup> “La Forge,” p.2; SMP; PR, 1935-1940; RG 96; NACP.



residents.”<sup>64</sup> The establishment of disreputable venues plus the fact that croppers’ mobility “discourage[d] membership in the church” indicated a lack of moral fortitude thought to be borne of shifting or vice versa.<sup>65</sup> Despite this prejudice, as Roll demonstrates, deep community ties and community establishments like “juke joints” and churches made possible the protest’s realization and actually sustained it. Importantly, this support remained unseen or behind the scene.<sup>66</sup>

Detractors deployed the negative character associations of shifting to try to discredit the croppers. The *Sikeston Herald* stated that croppers “pretend[ed] to the world at large that they had been cruelly driven from their homes” and that by naming the floodway to which authorities removed croppers “Homeless Junction” they were “keeping with the genius they have shown [...] in bidding for the sympathy of those not conversant with the facts.”<sup>67</sup> *The Enterprise-Courier* ran an article on its front page titled “Evicted Sharecroppers ?????” designed to refute the “great volume of publicity [in which] [...] it was taken for granted that the roadside campers were each and all evicted; that they were without shelter, without food, without almost all of the necessities of life.”<sup>68</sup> By questioning croppers’ character, detractors could contest the legitimacy of the protest without having to challenge the authenticity of protesters’ suffering and hunger.

Ironically, the assumed shiftlessness of croppers, which would logically confirm that they were croppers, often facilitated denial of their status. Governor Lloyd Stark sent a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Wallace that encapsulates the rhetoric by which officials and

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<sup>64</sup> FBI Report, p.12; UC.

<sup>65</sup> FBI Report, p. 28; UC.

<sup>66</sup> Roll 306-7.

<sup>67</sup> “Roadside Campers Removed by Highway Patrol to Former Homes,” *Sikeston Herald* 19 January 1939: 1.

<sup>68</sup> “Evicted Croppers ???,” *The Enterprise-Courier* 12 January 1939: 1.

landowners sought to render the demonstration illegitimate. Substantiating his statements with reports given to him by Robert K. Ryland, State Director for the National Emergency Council, and Colonel B.M. Casteel, State Highway Patrol Superintendent, Stark wrote:

It is certain that the grossly exaggerated and unfavorable national publicity received by the Missourians who live in this area has created the erroneous impression that this demonstration was staged by share-croppers supposedly evicted by land owners, and, in truth it was an organized demonstration of cotton pickers, transients, day-laborers – a large portion (probably 60%) from other states, and a considerable number of town negroes. I am reliably informed that most of them had been promised federal aid and an individual farm of their own.<sup>69</sup>

Claiming that the protesters were foreign to Missouri allowed landowners to deny abuse of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, rendered evictions impossible, and freed the state government from responsibility for these individuals. Here, croppers' miserable conditions are not denied. Rather their *character* becomes the subject of doubt and justification for it.

In an article featuring the subheading “Some are Newcomers,” the *Southeast Missourian*'s negative coverage of the demonstration utilized scare quotes around “evicted” to cast doubt on the validity of protesters' claims.<sup>70</sup> Outsider status was readily conflated with agitator. In a *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* editorial titled “Sharecropper Eviction Hoax,” the writer moves swiftly from suggesting public misrepresentation of the protesters as “homeless casuals, bereft of shelter and livelihood because the government's crop control program had influenced

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<sup>69</sup> Lloyd C. Stark, Missouri Governor to Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, 16 January 1939; Tenancy, 1939; Gen. Correspondence Sec. Ag., 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>70</sup> ““Croppers Make Camp on Highway: ‘Evicted’ Families Stage Demonstration Planned by Preacher,” *Southeast Missourian* 10 January 1939: 1.

landowners to kick them out” to “the sorry parade of farm laborers seems unquestionably to have been planned and carried out by a group of ambitious union promoters who mustered their following by promises of extravagant largess from the government.”<sup>71</sup> Accusations against the sharecroppers’ authenticity lacked a definitive causal order; it could begin with the fabrication of evictions, with protesters’ misrepresentation of their status, their foreignness, agitators, or croppers’ desire for handouts. Belief in the stereotype of shiftlessness enabled such slippage. For instance, croppers’ laziness meant they desired government “handouts” like La Forge. La Forge’s experiment with cooperative farming and racial integration was seen as essentially communistic. Accusations of communism could easily incite fear of manipulative agitators leading croppers to the highways, especially because racism’s and classism’s performativity constituted croppers as vulnerable to persuasion and intellectually incapable of organization. Various permutations could exist because allegations interchangeably served as evidence and automatically corroborated other allegations.

The genius of this strategy is that accusations were superficially true. The FBI report and FSA interviews, however, showed landowners’, not protesters’, manipulation of facts. Owen Whitfield was a member and leader in the STFU. However, the FSA investigator discovered that many of the protesters did not know about the union: “Southern Tenant Farmers Union activities may have had some part in organizing the protest, although the persons interviewed in many cases were apparently unacquainted with the organization.”<sup>72</sup> It seems that protesters may have

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<sup>71</sup> “Sharecropper Eviction Hoax,” editorial, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 18 January 1939.

<sup>72</sup> Report attached to memo from Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, to Frank Murphy, Attorney General, 24 January 1939 (Report and memo from Wallace to Murphy); Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP. Original report from Aubrey Williams, National Youth Administration Administrator to President Roosevelt, 19 January 1939 (Williams Report); Tenant Farming, 1933-1944; President’s Official File 1650 (POF 1650), Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY (FDR).

denied affiliation with and knowledge of the STFU-CIO; Roll's research shows that at one point 6,000 farm laborers (1937) were members of the union.<sup>73</sup> Some protesters were currently day laborers or transients, but this was due to landlords' proclivity to evict tenants and croppers and hire them back as day laborers. Additionally, as of the early 1930s, the southeast counties effected by the protest had grown between 20% and 50% in population, which seemingly verified that many of farm laborers were not native Missourians.<sup>74</sup> Again, as Roll shows, some individuals took to highways in support of croppers, but the FSA found that the bulk of the protesters had been living in Missouri "in recent years" and were (at one point) sharecroppers; the FBI reported similar findings.<sup>75</sup>

Evictions rarely left a paper trail, and in fact the annual changeover of laborers was used to rebut the validity of the bona fide evictions. Detractors cited protesters' transient status, legal evictions based on croppers' incompetence, lack of proof or total falsehood, and purposeful misunderstanding of custom as evidence against the claim of unlawful evictions. The *New York Times* quoted Superintendent Casteel as stating that the protesters were migrant workers from surrounding states "who were out of a job 'as usual at the close of the picking season.'"<sup>76</sup> In this statement, croppers' "surplus" renders their suffering inconsequential. The *Southeast Missourian* reported Mississippi County AAA Committeeman L.B. McPheeters's finding that

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<sup>73</sup> Roll 257.

<sup>74</sup> Farm Security Administration, "Southeast Missouri: A Laboratory for the Cotton South," 30 December 1940; reel 17; SRF, 1193-1197; Lot 12024; FSA-OWI, 1935-1946; LOC.

<sup>75</sup> Roll 306-7; Report and memo from Wallace to Murphy; Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP; and FBI Report, p.32; UC.

<sup>76</sup> "Move to End Trek by Sharecroppers," *New York Times* 14 January 1939: L20.

only one family out of the ninety-nine he interviewed actually had an eviction notice.<sup>77</sup> *The Enterprise-Courier* cited two highway troopers who found only one family out of sixty-five to seventy had an eviction notice. An editorial, “Sharecropper Eviction Hoax,” used the shifting tradition as proof of the outright falsehood of evictions:

While some eviction notices were sent out, there had been no general intention or effort to force tenants from farms. [...] It has long been customary in this locality to distribute eviction notices at the end of each year, so unsatisfactory workers can be eliminated later. Such a practice does not mean a majority of tenants receiving such notices will be evicted.<sup>78</sup>

The STFU admitted in a press release that perhaps some croppers could have stayed on the land, but by “threat of eviction [landowners could] further intimidate those who stayed into greater docility.”<sup>79</sup> The FBI investigation failed to find a clear-cut answer to this allegation: “the great majority of the participants interviewed had received either oral or written instructions to vacate [ . . . ]. However, a great number of these likewise had subsequently effected trades either with their present landlords or some other land lord [sic].”<sup>80</sup> The FSA report exposed the advantage landlords took of sharecroppers. While noting that it was “not literally true” that eviction notices had been served, “[i]n substance, however, the charge is true.”<sup>81</sup> It stated that though only one notice was actually filed, investigators found several other written notices “couched in legal

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<sup>77</sup> “Landowners Ask Probe: Check Shows Campers not Sharecroppers,” *Southeast Missourian* 13 January 1939: 1.

<sup>78</sup> “Sharecropper Eviction Hoax,” editorial, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 18 January 1939.

<sup>79</sup> H.L. Mitchell, press release, 14 January 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

<sup>80</sup> FBI Report, p.30; UC.

<sup>81</sup> Report and memo from Wallace to Murphy; Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

language” and discovered that many croppers were told that owners were going to use day labor, that the house was wanted for a bigger family, or simply that the owner didn’t want the cropper next year – all constituting oral notice to vacate the land.<sup>82</sup>

Of course, the effects of “misrepresentation” were landowners’ central concern. The *Sikeston Herald* reported that the only good thing to come out of the demonstration was the “wave of patriotism and cooperation” shown by citizens “riled up” over the “unjust” criticism southeast Missouri received.<sup>83</sup> Even more than the blight on Missouri landowners’ reputations, these citizens seemed to fear interference by the New Deal government in “local” matters. Some asserted that the FSA’s declaration of an emergency situation, which expedited relief requests by conducting client interviews but not investigations, brought (more) undesirables into the area, thus intimating federal culpability for worsening the “surplus” problem in Missouri. In an interview that Bancroft Wells conducted with Bootheel attorneys and landowners, J.M. Haw stated that croppers would rather receive relief than work and O.W. Joslyn asserted that recipients would misuse FSA funds to buy “trinkets.”<sup>84</sup> County businessmen and landowners cited the federal government’s “paternal’ attitude toward sharecroppers” as creating a state of dependency, driving down land values, killing private farming, and “destroying the morale of sharecropper, day laborer, and landowner.”<sup>85</sup> Federal aid stimulated by croppers’ performance of suffering was viewed as threatening a total decline of cotton culture.

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<sup>82</sup> Report and memo from Wallace to Murphy; Tenancy, 1939; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

<sup>83</sup> “Roadside Campers Removed by Highway Patrol to Former Homes,” *Sikeston Herald* 19 January 1939: 1.

<sup>84</sup> “Flood of Checks Ordered Stopped Pending Probe by Federal Agents,” *The Enterprise-Courier* 9 February 1939: 1.

<sup>85</sup> “Brakes Applied to FSA Emergency Relief Grants,” *Sikeston Herald* 9 February 1939: 1.

Protesters' continuous display of endurance of painful conditions also prompted examination of shiftlessness as a discourse. Josephine Johnson's report on the "conversations" she overheard while visiting the protesters' roadside camps made public how landowners conflated shifting with "shiftlessness" in their disciplining of sharecropper bodies:

The Planter stood above them on the edge of the ditch and looked down at their faces. 'Now what worries me,' he said, 'is some of you folks get sick and die out here in the cold. Why, suppose you all got sick – then what're we gonna do in cotton plantin' time when we need you again? You got no right to do this!'

'Ain't no place to go. Can't go back.'

'Well, I guess no planter'd want some of you on his place! [...] Shiftless – moving out just to get a nickel more somewhere else!' [. . .]

'I ask my boss, and he said, 'I can't use you no mo,' he said –'

'Lissen, nigger,' the Planter said, 'this is a white man talkin'. And don't you forget it.'

'Yes suh.'<sup>86</sup>

The landowner overtly constructed these individuals as existing only for the benefit of the cotton industry, degraded them as being without rights, and ultimately silenced the croppers through the threat of racial hierarchy. The language he uses is indicative of the discourses reproducing the power imbalance which facilitated operations of the cotton industry. Croppers' appearance on the highways embodied this and reportage like Johnson's critiqued such mechanisms. The performance of rootedness and community challenged the discourse of shiftlessness that constructed croppers as needing discipline.

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<sup>86</sup> Josephine Johnson, "Among the Evicted Sharecroppers," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 15 January 1939.

The choice of Missouri's two major highways – symbols of mobility – as the site of the protest demonstrated croppers' desire for roots and their social exclusion [see fig. 5.5]. Sharecroppers' placelessness enabled denial of responsibility for their welfare. Ernest Lindley, writing on the "Missouri Farm Tenant Problem" for the *Des Moines Register*, concluded that "a great many sharecroppers move from place to place, anyway, so that no one in particular has a moral responsibility for seeing that they are cared for."<sup>87</sup> Rather than loading their trucks and moving east into Kentucky on Highway 60, south to Arkansas on Highway 61, or even north into the urban center of St. Louis, the demonstrators used their trucks as sleeping quarters and shelter from the cold. They stayed put, not only in Missouri, but also in the very counties where they had labored. They integrated themselves into the Missouri landscape, suggesting their belongingness to the community.



**Figure 5.5. Sharecroppers on roadside. Source: Digital ID: fsa 8a10460; Rothstein photos; AMP; LOC.**

Sociologist John Lofland noted the relationship between protest occupation and its site, stating that in gathering at a place "protesters lay an *ownership* claim to the exact territory they

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<sup>87</sup> Ernest Lindley, "Missouri Farm Tenant Problem," *Des Moines Register* 19 January 1939: 6.



have elected to seize.”<sup>88</sup> Roadsides, however, are nebulous public spaces. They lack a definitive purpose; they are uninhabitable, exposed, designed for brief periods of rest on the way to elsewhere. They represent a wholly undesirable site for ownership. By staging their lives on Missouri highways, the sharecroppers demonstrated displacement. Claiming the roadside as their only home showed how placelessness was the result of others’ wills, not their own. This becomes clear in Whitfield’s statement: “We must obey the law, get out when the notices say, and make no trouble.”<sup>89</sup> Though in the act of protest the croppers may have taken the roadside for their own, the site’s inappropriateness indicated croppers’ lack of power:

The place of the tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances.<sup>90</sup>

Roadsides’ public-ness totally exposed the croppers as lacking any suitable place of their own from which to alter their life conditions. Likewise, by overtaking merely the side of the road, rather than the road itself, protesters failed to interrupt daily operations in Missouri. (Even “symbolic” protest actions often occupy otherwise employed public space.) Unlike “non-cooperative” protest actions, which entail a “refusal to provide the actions necessary for a social arrangement to continue,”<sup>91</sup> demonstrators did not interrupt the operations of the cotton industry. Instead, croppers waited on the roadside in hopes of attaining a viable place for themselves

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<sup>88</sup> Lofland 266.

<sup>89</sup> “Landowners Ask Probe: Check Shows Campers not Sharecroppers,” *The Enterprise Courier* 13 January 1939: 1.

<sup>90</sup> De Certeau xix.

<sup>91</sup> Lofland 264.

within cotton culture. Additionally, protesters did not impede the mobility of others.

Passersby could stop, but the demonstration could not compel citizens to act because it did not materially alter daily existence. Again, this placement mimics *in situ* museum display in its clear separation of audience from the subjects on display. Like the “panoptic approach” of an *in situ* display, roadside display offered spectators “the chance [ . . . ] to penetrate the interior recesses, to violate [sharecroppers’] intimacy.”<sup>92</sup> Roadside occupation called for citizens to “bear witness.” “A person who bears witness to an injustice takes responsibility for that awareness. That person may then choose to do something or stand by, but he may not turn away in ignorance.”<sup>93</sup> By remaining in Missouri, protesters appealed for inclusion; by displaying themselves *off to the side*, they admitted a powerlessness to demand it.

Reports of the protest being organized in a church belied landowners’ claims of farm laborers’ degeneracy. Even before the demonstration was underway, during the protest, and following its conclusion, details of the 7 January protest meeting were repeatedly recounted. The accounts are dramatic, entailing elements of the Reverend Whitfield’s sermon in which he compared the sharecroppers’ move to the Israelites’ flight under Moses’ leadership.<sup>94</sup> Such religious overtones attested to the croppers’ fervor, righteousness, and morality. Sam Armstrong’s original account quotes Whitfield’s sermon in which he calls the Pharaoh’s men “ridin’ bosses” and tells the sharecroppers that they too must make an “exodus.”<sup>95</sup> Ben Morris

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<sup>92</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 55

<sup>93</sup> Steve Durland examines this idea in relation to Greenpeace actions in “Witness: The Guerilla Theatre of Greenpeace,” *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 68.

<sup>94</sup> Cedric Belfrage, “Cotton-Patch Moses,” *Harper’s Magazine* 197.1182 (November 1948): 94.

<sup>95</sup> Sam Armstrong, “Sharecroppers, Ordered Evicted, To Camp on Road,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 8 January 1939: 1.

Ridpath wrote a sympathetic article for *The Christian Century* describing Whitfield's part in orchestrating the event:

When the wholesale verbal evictions began last November, and the sharecroppers were thrown into confusion, Mr. Whitfield called a meeting [...] One of the sharecroppers rose to speak and shouted: 'Rather than stay in my shack and starve to death with my family, I'll take them out on the highway and walk until we drop in our tracks.' The idea was spontaneous. 'Let's go out on the highway,' suggested Mr. Whitfield. 'If we are going to starve, let's starve out there where people can see us!' A chorus of 'ayes' and 'amens' resounded through the room and the exodus to the highway encampment followed.<sup>96</sup>

Christian faith and the croppers' hunger appear in this, and nearly every other, account.

Situating the protest's origination within a church dissociated the sharecroppers from disreputable venues and contradicted their assumed moral laxity. It was not true that just this meeting catalyzed African American and white farm workers into 13 camps along thirty-eight miles of US 60 and seventy miles of US 61,<sup>97</sup> but the legend that it took only one church meeting and a rousing sermon widely circulated. Moreover, with acknowledgement that the croppers were "starv[ing] [. . .] where people [could] see" came the moral implications for those who bore witness to their hunger. Philosopher Elizabeth Telfer describes those implications:

I suggest that many people feel not only compassion (mingled with distress, disgust and a number of other emotions) but also a strong sense that there is something morally wrong.

It involves the thought that something could have been or still can be done about the

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<sup>96</sup> Ben Morris Ridpath, "The Case of the Missouri Sharecroppers," *The Christian Century* LVI.5 (1 February 1939): 147.

<sup>97</sup> Herbert Little, National Youth Administration Representative, report dictated over the telephone, 16 January 1939 (Little report); Tenant Farming, 1933-1944, POF 1650, FDR; see Roll for explanation of the months of grassroots organizing that occurred throughout the summer and fall of 1938, 284-5.

situation, and that this action is not a discretionary one but an obligation which some person or persons have failed or are failing to meet.<sup>98</sup>

The conditions endured by sharecroppers' bodies displayed the effects of injustice, and such a display asked for acknowledgement. Moreover, protesters' sharing of supplies, shelter and their pooling of food resources contained the potential to indict landowners and morally implicate witnesses because the croppers apparently had next to nothing but shared it without hesitation. Reports of travelers stopping to offer money and supplies and state highway patrolmen's assertions that traffic hazards were part of the reason for the removal of croppers from roadways because "visitors and tourists were stopping to observe the demonstration"<sup>99</sup> suggests that some spectators may have felt morally obliged to act. Others, who learned about the demonstration through newsreel, newspaper, and radio coverage, sent letters to the federal government inquiring about the situation in Missouri.<sup>100</sup> It may have seemed clear to those who fulfilled their moral obligation by donating to the STFU or petitioning Washington that landowners had failed and that the federal government was responsible to the croppers. These committed spectators may have chosen to *theatricalize* the event rather than empathize with the croppers. Mr. and Mrs. David Horowitz of Philadelphia sent a letter to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration

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<sup>98</sup> Telfer 7.

<sup>99</sup> "Snow Increases Distress Among Sharecroppers," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 13 January 1939: A3. Arthur Rothstein in his letter to Roy Stryker also comments that "While they were along the roads people brought them food and clothing," 16 January 1939; Correspondence Photocopies (Group III) Rothstein/Stryker 1939; Roy Emerson Stryker Papers, 1932-1964; Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.; FBI Report, p. 44; UC.

<sup>100</sup> J.D. LeCron, Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture, to J.G. Eddy, Research Director, R.F.D. #5, Lancaster, PA, 27 January 1939; J.D. LeCron, Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture, to Miss Eliza Green, Gamma Omega Chapter, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, St. Louis, MO, 2 February 1939; Tenancy, 1939; ; General Correspondence, 1906-70; RG 16; NACP.

asking, “What has been done for evicted sharecroppers in Missouri?”<sup>101</sup> In the act of querying the federal government, the Horowitz’s demonstrate active engagement with the demonstration and invoke the federal government’s obligations to the croppers as US citizens; “[they] bring [their] whole experience to bear on what is seen without insisting on sameness as the criterion of worth.”<sup>102</sup> They identify imbalance in the distribution of benefits for and protections of citizens.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* made much of protesters’ display of faith and admirable nature. A photographic exposé devoted entirely to the croppers showed black and white families gathered in prayer. The narrative accompanying the supplicant families read:

Patient, devout, and inured to poverty and hardship. The homeless croppers carried out their demonstration without making trouble. Their leaders, mostly preachers, exhorted them to obey the law and compared their plight with the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt to the Land of Canaan.<sup>103</sup>

That each camp had a leader who served as spokesman and policed the group suggested that the sharecroppers were highly organized. Moreover, the demonstrated capacity of racial unity exhibited by the African American and white croppers’ mutual suffering and mutual support transgressed cultural norms. Sharecropper and demonstrator Alex Cooper recalled that landowners and police “were completely baffled by the sheer number and how orderly it was

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<sup>101</sup> Record slip of correspondence Mr. and Mrs. David A. Horowitz to Department of Justice, Philadelphia, PA, 14 March 1939; 1938-1941 Class Numbers (Interfield): 95-01-20 (5/14/41) to 95-64-0 (11/16/39); record Slips, 1910-1967; General Records of the Department of Justice Central Files and Related Records, 1790-1989, RG 60; NACP.

<sup>102</sup> Davis, “Theatricality” 154.

<sup>103</sup> “Evicted Missouri Sharecroppers,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 15 January 1939.

done and the effect it had was just quite confusing, just like an owl in the chicken house.”<sup>104</sup>

Racial bias in Missouri and recent violence against farm laborer movements suggests that this extralegal gathering of croppers would have been worrisome to citizens convinced of croppers’ shiftlessness.<sup>105</sup> Newspapers’ repeated commentary on the lack of disturbances and violence evidences this, while simultaneously highlighting the display’s peacefulness.

After police removed croppers from the highways to so-called “concentration camps” in churches, clubs, and at Bird’s Point-New Madrid floodway (i.e. “Homeless Junction”), detractors attempted to capitalize on the fear generated by racial bias against African Americans. Police had segregated the croppers and dumped them at separate locations. Though now adhering to cultural codes, the camp at “Homeless Junction” held large numbers of African Americans just outside a predominantly white area. Local newspapers fixated on the guns confiscated by authorities at this, the largest camp of croppers. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, wholly antagonistic to the protest, carried the most alarming headline: “500 at Camp Had Arsenal.” This article explained that reports of threats within “Homeless Junction” caused Sheriff A.F. Stanley to seize shotguns, pistols, and rifles “as a precaution against possible outbreak of violence.”<sup>106</sup> An article appearing in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* countered the alarm instigated by other reports. It pointed to the absolute antipathy of landowners and police forces to the

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<sup>104</sup> My transcription of an interview featured in *Oh Freedom After While*, Candace O’Connor and Steven John Ross, A Production of Webster University and the University of Memphis: California Newsreel, 1999.

<sup>105</sup> As shown in the documentary on the protest, *Oh Freedom After While*, and in Louis Cantor’s history of the event, *A Prologue to the Protest Movement*, there was a precedent of violence against such integrated movements. In fact, during the highway protest Owen Whitfield fled to St. Louis because of threats on his life. Interviewed in *Oh Freedom After While*, Whitfield’s daughter Barbara Whitfield Fleming recalled seeing a “Wanted” poster that featured a picture of a lynched man, a picture of her father, and a \$500 reward.

<sup>106</sup> “500 at Camp Had Arsenal,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 17 January 1939: 1. The *New York Times* carried an abbreviated version of this associated press report under the slightly less distressing headline “Sharecropper Guns Seized in Missouri,” 17 January 1939: 12.

croppers' situation: "Professing fear of violence, Sheriff A. F. Stanley and his deputies took firearms from the refugees. The 48 weapons included small-bore rifles and shotguns, which sharecroppers rely on for rabbit dinners during lean winter months [. . .]. There had been no violence."<sup>107</sup> Roll shows that protesters did resist dispersal from the highways and protected one roadside camp through the night of 14 January by creating "a defensive perimeter" of armed men.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, the only violence reported by federal investigators was Missouri authorities' use of force during the removal of croppers from the highways. According to Herbert Little, who was invited by Stanley to observe the removal, African American men obeyed officers' orders to move to the other side of the highway while they searched the makeshift shelters for guns. Without provocation, one protester was struck in the face by one of the "armed citizens" assisting Stanley.<sup>109</sup> In the interview conducted with Robert Haynes (protester), as well as in the National Youth Administration (NYA) summary report sent from the President to Secretary Wallace and Will Alexander it is stated that two men assaulted Haynes; one hit him with a cane, the other with a pistol.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, the floodway camp was patrolled by deputies because of a report that "Negro sharecroppers had virtually taken charge of a white school and had frightened the teacher and her pupils away."<sup>111</sup> Aubrey Williams, however, reported to the President "a consciousness of compulsion for the demonstrators to

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<sup>107</sup> "Sheriff Disarms Sharecroppers Near New Madrid," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 17 January 1939.

<sup>108</sup> Roll 310.

<sup>109</sup> Herbert Little, National Youth Administration Representative, Eyewitness account of dispersal of roadside camps of farmers by Sheriff in New Madrid County near Sikeston Missouri, 15 January 1939 to Aubrey Williams, National Youth Administration Administrator, 16 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944, POF 1650, FDR.

<sup>110</sup> Williams Report; "Missouri Share-croppers" report attached to memorandum for the Secretary of Agriculture 21 January 1939 (MO sharecroppers); and Case No. 45, 17 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944, POF 1650, FDR.

<sup>111</sup> "Sharecropper Campers Forced to Move Again," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 19 January 1939.

remain at the two concentration camps, away from the highways.” His report also detailed Highway police Captain Sheppard’s statement that a northern NYA interviewer “might not understand what was necessary in ‘handling niggers.’”<sup>112</sup> Despite detractors’ attempts to incite race anxiety, the highway display impressed upon numerous citizens and federal officials croppers’ docility and the hardship they endured under landowners’ control.

Citizens and the FSA combined efforts to give croppers greater autonomy. The St. Louis Sharecropper Committee was established and they raised sufficient funds to purchase ninety acres of land in Harviell for the protesters. With the support of this committee, a group of students from Lincoln University, and FSA grants, nearly 100 families were settled on the land, which became known as “Cropperville.”<sup>113</sup> The FSA announced a five-point program for southeast Missouri, approved by the Landlord-Tenant Committee, that included leased land for cooperative farming, sanitation improvement, and a farm laborer rehabilitation program that provided loans for housing and land.<sup>114</sup> The FSA also created the Group Workers’ Homes Project, in which the FSA secured land and built homes for roughly 502 farm laborer families (including 175 African American families).<sup>115</sup>

### **Families in Pain: Image of the Ideal in Crisis**

The types of bodies on the highways seem to have been a primary factor in transforming croppers from “surplus” to human beings disregarded by those with power and obligation.

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<sup>112</sup> Williams Report; MO sharecroppers; and Case No. 45, 17 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944; POF 1650; FDR.

<sup>113</sup> Cantor 91-4; *Oh Freedom After While*.

<sup>114</sup> P.G. Beck, FSA Regional Director Region III to J.R. Butler, President Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, 16 January 1940, reel 14; STFU; NU.

<sup>115</sup> Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land: Migrants and Migratory Labor in the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942) 291-5.



Women's and children's presence helped to emphasize an image of families in crisis instead of agrarian revolt. Though an estimated 90-95% of the protesters were African American, photographs of white women, children, and families were featured as frequently as those of African Americans. In his study of FSA photography, Nicholas Natanson identifies problems with the Associate Press's disproportionate and disparate photographic treatment of demonstrators based on race. He notes AP photographers' "intimate" close-ups of whites and distant shots of African Americans. Natanson concludes that the photography "made extremely unconventional sharecropper activity more palatable, at the expense of the all-important black angle."<sup>116</sup> Though there appears to be an imbalance in photographs of whites and blacks, I would nuance his final assessment. I disagree that the "black angle" was lost. News articles nearly always note that the majority of the croppers were African American, even in news stories on consecutive days. And while Natanson argues that long-shots transformed African Americans into "heaps of furniture," these pictures lend themselves equally to consideration of the unjust treatment of croppers. Their bodies are markedly distinct from household items; this makes the juxtaposition of furniture heaps to people living outdoors a testament of cruelty. In fact, his analysis of AP photos in the *Chicago Daily News*, in which he compares close-ups with the wider shots, demonstrates that African American croppers appeared consistently in demonstration coverage. Finally, AP photos of white women and children, which had the capacity to visually construct the protest for much of the nation due to their extensive use by major publications, may have benefited all croppers because, as Butler notes, racial and gender performativity "require and deploy each other."<sup>117</sup> The media's repeated observation of white

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<sup>116</sup> Natanson 116 -7.

<sup>117</sup> Butler 18.

and black *families suffering* (not engaged in speeches, parades, or shows of force) and frequent reiteration of women and children in distress weakened the sense of threat that such a large gathering of (shiftless) people may have otherwise created [see fig. 5.6 and fig. 5.7].



**Figure 5.6. Mother and infant.** Source: Digital ID: fsa 8a10494; Rothstein photos; AMP; LOC.

Women's displayed domestic activity on the roadsides transformed them from sharecroppers who were participating in the struggle for improved labor and life conditions into mothers victimized by social conditions unfair to their husbands, *the* farm laborers. Represented in regional and national papers as "Croppers" or "Evicted Campers," newspaper articles gender these terms masculine.<sup>118</sup> For instance, in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* a front-page report under

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<sup>118</sup> In her history of African American women's labor, Jacqueline Jones presents women working within the material constraints of racist and sexist representations to ensure the survival of themselves, their families, and their communities. Discussing the organized actions of African American women during the Great Depression, she writes: "together with their families, Missouri 'Bootheel' women made national headlines when they camped out along a roadside in the winter of 1939" (204). Jones recognizes the Bootheel sharecropper women as protesters. Her language demonstrates these women's agency; never imagining them as insignificant players, she represents these women as political activists in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985). Belying Jones's assessment, the Bootheel women did not appear in the headlines.

the headline “Sharecroppers Evicted, Camp Along Highways” reads: “Crowds of evicted sharecroppers with their wives and children, carrying their only possessions, converged on highways of the Southeast Missouri cotton country today.”<sup>119</sup> Bootheel women were perceived in their maternal roles, not as protesters.<sup>120</sup> Though sharecropper women and their children, of course, worked the fields beside their male partners, women suffering on open roadsides obscured their roles as fellow laborers. In fact, the ideological imagining of Woman as Mother, particularly white women, suggests that it would otherwise have been difficult to convincingly represent these women. Richard Dyer explicates white womanhood through its paradigm of the Virgin Mary: “In women these [models of behavior] are of passivity, expectancy, receptivity, a kind of sacred readiness, motherhood as the supreme fulfillment of one’s nature, all of this constituting a given purity and state of grace.”<sup>121</sup> She is a docile object, one whose purity and passivity inhibits envisioning her as fit for labor. According to government-sponsored farmer education programs, it was not socially desirable that farm women were farm laborers. An FSA chart created by a Home Management Supervisor praises the many roles of the farm woman. Of the seventeen roles listed (including wife, mother, nurse, interior decorator, canner, etc.) only “Farm Hand” receives the parenthetical qualifier “Not encouraged.”<sup>122</sup> The media’s failure to recognize these women’s agricultural labor *per se*, though historically significant, was not at issue during the protest. This lack of acknowledgment enabled mischaracterization of the

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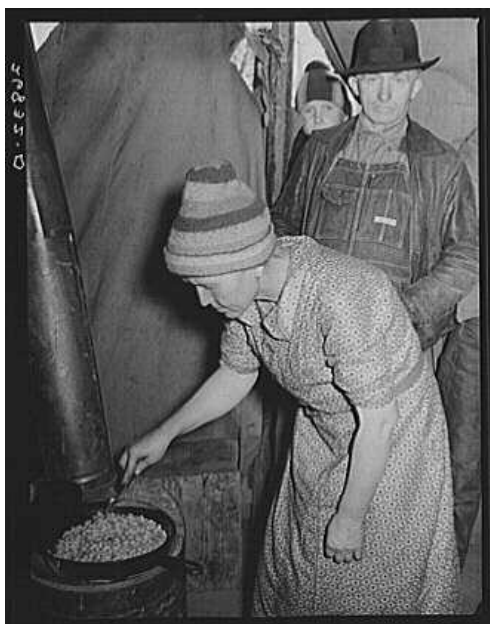
<sup>119</sup> “Sharecroppers Evicted, Camp Along Highways,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 10 January 1939: 1.

<sup>120</sup> Roll shows that women actively assumed leadership roles in STFU union locals, 245.

<sup>121</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York, 1997) 17.

<sup>122</sup> “A Project Home Management Supervisor Answers Any and All Calls to Aid the Project Farm Woman” attached to Farm Security Administration Southeast Missouri Project, New Madrid County La Forge, Missouri; SMP; PR, 1935-1940; RG 96; NACP.

Bootheel women as victims, rather than activists. Depiction of these women as mothers and housewives, and therefore as individuals deserving respect and protection, suggested the absolute injustice of cropper families' living conditions. Moreover, the inclusion of women and children on the highways feminized the protest itself, emphasizing the croppers' docility and vulnerability.



**Figure 5.7. Woman cooking.** Source: Digital ID: fsa 8b17350; Rothstein photos; AMP; LOC.

On 11 January 1939, both the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* carried stories about the roadside protest, citing “Men feeble with age, one woman so ill she had to be carried on a cot, and babies crying from fright and hunger added to the distressing picture.”<sup>123</sup>

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s initial report on the protest led with: “Mothers with babies in their arms and boys and girls without adequate clothing huddled about camp fires.”<sup>124</sup> News coverage foregrounded cropper vulnerability through the bodies of women and children. H.L. Mitchell's

<sup>123</sup> "Army of Sharecroppers Trek from Homes; Protest Missouri Landlords' Wage Plans," *New York Times* 11 January 1939: L6; "Denied Farms, Sharecroppers Sleep on Roads," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 11 January 1939: 1.

<sup>124</sup> "Tenant Farmers Protest Evictions," *Philadelphia Inquirer* 11 January 1939.

appeal to Eleanor Roosevelt to “use [her] influence” to obtain shelter for the families feminized the plight of the dislocated croppers: “There are a number of expectant mothers [and] many small children all in open weather.”<sup>125</sup> Likewise, in the 15 January 1939 issue of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch’s Everyday Magazine*, photographs of the protest show white women huddled around a stove, an African American woman surrounded by children as men kneel praying, and two large photographs of children: two white children under blankets look directly at the camera as if pleading and two African American children huddle together sleeping on the ground. Even though the women are pictured separately and the captions mark the race of the African American women, the suffering is given equal emphasis. This newspaper coverage highlights the nurturance and delicacy of the women, perhaps indicative of the felt inappropriateness of homeless and hungry white women and their children. In turn, this may have enabled perception of these conditions as unsuitable for all croppers.



**Figure 5.8. Sharecropper child. Source: Digital ID: fsa 8a10527; Rothstein photos; AMP; LOC.**

<sup>125</sup> H.L. Mitchell, Secretary Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, telegram to Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady, 22 January 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

Significantly, newsreel footage and press photographs demonstrate how the men were represented and positioned themselves as fathers [see fig. 5.9]. Constructing both black and white masculinity within a familial framework foregrounded the crisis that protesters faced rather than aggression or rebellion. In newsreel footage, an African American man is surrounded by a woman and three small children. His aims are unmistakable: “142 families on this highway, homeless people, and the only thing they want is shelter and food and a decent place to live.” In another interview, a white man sitting next to a teenage girl and a smaller girl says: “We can’t make an honest decent living at it and that’s the reason we out here on highway 61 right today.”<sup>126</sup> Featuring these men beside women and children constructed them as fathers and protectors. Their appearance on the highway is emphasized as the struggle to fulfill their role as men. It was not only a media construction; Ike Tripp told the NYA interviewer when at the concentration camp: “[I want] [a]ny kind of farm job where I can make an honest support for my family and won’t have to be moving so much.”<sup>127</sup> Unable to provide for their families, these men plead for restoration of the cultural right to be breadwinners. Positioned in this way the sharecroppers’ problems became readily linked with men’s problems nationwide; American men without work were also without dignity because they could not provide for their families.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> My transcription of newsreel footage featured in *Oh Freedom After While*.

<sup>127</sup> Case No. 72, 17 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944, POF 1650; FDR.

<sup>128</sup> Whitfield had been using the rhetoric of and advocating for a “family wage” for evicted farm laborers since 1937; see Roll 264.



**Figure 5.9. Father and child. Source: Digital ID: fsa 8a10495; Rothstein photos; AMP; LOC.**

While Whitfield worked with the Urban League in St. Louis to secure relief for croppers and the CIO affiliate United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) gathered donations, individuals across the nation from Chicago, Niles Center, and Winnetka, IL; Atlanta; Memphis; Boston; Washington D.C.; Berea, KY; Blacksburg, VA; and Forest Glen, MD; and from organizations such as the Church Emergency Relief Committee (NYC), Emergency Committee for Strikers' Relief (NYC), and Workmen's Circle (San Francisco) sent clothing, money, and food to the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union for distribution to demonstrators.<sup>129</sup> Henry Schwartz sent \$1.00 as he had only worked thirty-nine

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<sup>129</sup> Following the protest, Whitfield went to major cities throughout the US and met with President Roosevelt in an effort to gain support for the Bootheel demonstrators, see Gellman and Roll; B. Marsh to H.L. Mitchell, Secretary STFU, Washington D.C., 25 January 1939; J.R. Butler, President STFU to Lincoln Fairley, Forest Glen, Maryland, 24 January 1939; Gordon H. Ward to STFU, Blacksburg, VA, 23 January 1939; Harriet Young to H.L. Mitchell, Secretary STFU, regarding contribution from Alfred Baker Lewis of Boston, 13 January 1939; J.R. Butler, President STFU, to F.R. Betton regarding contribution from Kenneth E. Burnham, Berea, KY, 8 February 1939; Donald F. Fenn, Hampton Institute, to STFU, Hampton, VA, 8 February 1939, J.R. Butler, President STFU, to Mrs. H. Heyman, Atlanta, GA, 13 February 1939; J.R. Butler, President STFU to Mrs. Mary Lloyd, 13 February 1939; H.L. Mitchell, Secretary STFU, to Frank W. McCulloch, Chicago, IL, 23 February 1939; Glover, Church Emergency Relief Committee, to STFU, 26 January 1939; John Herling, Executive Secretary Emergency Committee for Strikers' Relief, to STFU, 25 January 1939; J.B. Nathan to H.L. Mitchell, Secretary STFU, San Francisco, CA, 23 January 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

days in the past four months and was “on borderline of vagrancy [himself].”<sup>130</sup> In all, the STFU received approximately \$2,000 in cash gifts and an estimated \$1,300 in clothing and grocery donations. From these contributions the STFU was able to give some assistance to 249 families (1,297 individuals) until 18 February 1939 when supplies and funds were exhausted.<sup>131</sup> Such acknowledgement on the part of the national citizenry indicates the protest’s success in demonstrating croppers’ economic and social disenfranchisement.

However, the protest did not result in sharecroppers’ social or economic inclusion or a revolution of cotton culture. *The Christian Advocate* cautioned its readers that “to condemn migrants as ‘lazy, shiftless families, seeking to evade the responsibilities of society and good citizenship’ is to overlook mighty factors operating in rural America.” The paper credited Bootheel sharecroppers with showing the nation that farm laborers were just like other (respectable) citizens, that “They have needs common to us all.”<sup>132</sup> Here, the tensions between racism’s and classism’s performativity and actions which make visible such constraints become apparent. This writer strives to convince readers of croppers’ common humanity despite their class and racial “otherness.” The reporter presumes that it is not enough that evidence exists to discredit shiftlessness’s validity, sameness remains the chief criterion of worth. Of course, the effort to prove the croppers’ proper Americanness demonstrates their exclusion.

### **Hunger and Doubt: Performance, Self-starvation, and the “Real” Thing**

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<sup>130</sup> Henry Schwartz, to [STFU] Brothers, n.d.; reel 10; STFU; NU.

<sup>131</sup> Letters sent to the STFU by demonstrators show problems with disbursement of the donations. Due to croppers’ lack of transportation and hostile officials the STFU could only provide support to demonstrators in the southern-most counties. Statement of Receipts and Disbursements Southeast Missouri Relief Fund from January 1, 1939 to February 18, 1939; and F.R. Betton, Report of Relief Distribution in Southeast Missouri January through February 18, 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

<sup>132</sup> W.F. Baxter, “Farmers En Route,” *The Christian Advocate* 22 June 1939: 592; Newspaper and Magazine Clippings 1939 January – 1939 June; reel 22; P & P Lot 12024; FSA-OWI, 1935-1946; LOC.



Michael Kirby defines “acting” in three ways. First, it is volitional: “something that is done by a performer rather than something that is done for or to him.” Second, it “can be said to exist in the smallest and simplest action that involves pretense.” According to Kirby, acting is also a matter of degree: “merely the ‘use’ and projection of [real] emotion [. . .] distinguishes acting from not-acting.”<sup>133</sup> In the final instance, it becomes apparent to an audience that “emotions are [being] ‘pushed.’”<sup>134</sup> The difference between projecting reality and engaging in pretend seems inconsequential on Kirby’s scale, for both qualify as acting. Yet detractors’ choice to characterize croppers’ projection as *exaggeration*, a portrayal which resonates with pretense, and to allege outright pretense suggests that categorizing the croppers’ display as a mere “projection” of reality would have substantiated rather than refuted croppers’ claims.

Outsiders’ support for the protest and disdain for plantation owners seem to have been motivating factors for detractors to discount the croppers’ hunger. Croppers received support not only from unions but also from highway travelers and citizens nationwide, while the Red Cross did nothing and croppers waited for federal agencies to provide relief, which many croppers did not receive until they were removed from the highways.<sup>135</sup> Landowners’ embarrassment is perceptible in the Mississippi County farmers’ resolutions introduced into the US House of Representatives and the Landowners of southeast Missouri’s resolutions introduced into the US Senate; both groups called for a federal investigation and denied responsibility for evictions. Representative Orville Zimmerman concluded his introduction of the Mississippi County resolutions concerned for Southeast Missouri’s reputation with these words:

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<sup>133</sup> Kirby 6, 7.

<sup>134</sup> Kirby 7.

<sup>135</sup> “Snow Increases Distress Among Croppers,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 13 January 1939: A3.

Mr. Speaker, we all know that a community and its people can be libeled by overzealous reporters who are looking for good stories for their papers. I know personally the high character and integrity of the men [plantation owners] who adopted the above resolutions, and I ask the Congress and the public to consider their statements before passing judgment upon our section of Missouri and its people.<sup>136</sup>

Of the fifteen allegations landowners asked the FBI to investigate, two concerned defamation: “that an erroneous impression had been given and grossly exaggerated and unfavorable publicity received by the residents of Southeastern Missouri to the effect that the demonstrators had been evicted, which was untrue” and “that the press was biased and printed grossly exaggerated and unfavorable articles concerning the demonstration.”<sup>137</sup>

Despite croppers’ apparent hardship, local papers and landowners alleged that hunger was acted. The *Southeast Missourian* used a picture taken by a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* photographer of sharecropper children laughing as proof that croppers feigned hunger:

This picture showing evicted sharecroppers along Highway 61 seems to bear out the reports of relief agencies that no requests have been made for food and supplies. There are a half dozen warehouses close at hand filled with food, it was reported, but until there are requests for it the agents will stand by. The group above seems to be having a picnic or an outing and other pictures of this kind have been featured in the metropolitan press which is making a sensational event of the sharecroppers’ demonstration.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Orville Zimmerman, Missouri Representative US Congress, Additional Facts about So-called Tenant and Sharecropper Uprising in Southeast Missouri, House of Representatives, 18 January 1939; reel 17; Supplementary Reference File 1207; Lot 12024, FSA-OWI; LOC.

<sup>137</sup> FBI Report, p.17-18; UC.

<sup>138</sup> “Sharecropper Camper Greet Future With Smiles,” *Southeast Missourian* 12 January 1939; “Evicted Sharecroppers,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 11 January 1939.

This caption posits that croppers were well-fed and reveling in their deception through use of the term “picnic” and intimation of wasted efforts by relief agencies. This picture offers evidence for detractors because the children fail to properly perform their hunger; though the signifiers of poverty may be recognizable (they are sitting on the side of the road under blankets in January), their joy [see fig. 5.10] does not “quite comply with the norms” or *conduct* of the pain of hunger.<sup>139</sup>



**Figure 5.10. Children laughing.** Source: “Evicted Sharecroppers,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 11 January 1939 and “Sharecroppers Camper Greet Future with Smiles,” *Southeast Missourian* 12 January 1939.

Highway troopers reported to the press that they observed families with many weeks of food supplies.<sup>140</sup> Wary of the impression given to motorists traveling on busy Highway 61, who “having cameras stop and take pictures of the odd sight – and will doubtless remember Sikeston as the place where the sharecroppers were ‘driven out’ and had to camp along the roadside,” the *Sikeston Herald* reported that a nearby grocery sold \$50 in food to croppers and that “One man alone bought \$17 worth of groceries – and paid in cash.”<sup>141</sup> That croppers would have such a

<sup>139</sup> Butler 2; I am grateful to Daniel Smith for this insight.

<sup>140</sup> “State Police Clear Roads of Squatters,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 15 January 1939: 1.

<sup>141</sup> “Farm Laborers Persuaded to Leave Homes by CIO Leaders,” *Sikeston Herald* 12 January 1939.

store of food or that amount of cash for groceries must have seemed highly improbable to federal officials because earlier government studies found that croppers' annual income and living conditions were grossly insufficient. Additionally, the interviews conducted by Herbert Little and staff of the National Youth Administration demonstrated that by 15 January 1939 when all croppers had been taken from the highways, most had no cash or only a few cents and only small amounts of food from the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, or miscellaneous foodstuffs such as flour and lard.<sup>142</sup>

Despite these findings, Bonnie Stepenoff's recent history of Thad Snow's life states that campers received sustenance from various groups (sometimes croppers still living on farms), who would drop off supplies in the night. Her explanation of cropper endurance is substantiated by a STFU press release in which it is stated that supplies were taken to protesters "under cover of darkness."<sup>143</sup> However, unlike the STFU's intimation of danger faced by supporters, Stepenoff suggests a discrepancy between appearance and actuality, championing croppers' mimesis of hunger and being without shelter: "Each night for nearly a week, a caravan of vehicles appeared and vanished, leaving supplies at the campsites. Croppers who had not been evicted brought provisions to their friends and relatives. For every family in public view, there was someone behind the scenes, supporting them physically and in spirit."<sup>144</sup> Likewise, Roll states: "Invisible to onlookers these local institutions [owners of "disreputable" venues like dance halls and "juke joints," who helped pilfer and distribute goods to croppers during the night

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<sup>142</sup> Case Nos. 1-102; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944; POF 1650; FDR.

<sup>143</sup> H.L. Mitchell, Secretary STFU, Press Release, 23 January 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

<sup>144</sup> Bonnie Stepenoff, *Thad Snow: A Life of Social Reform in the Missouri Bootheel* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003) 93.

and supplied shelter] sustained the campers.”<sup>145</sup> The imperceptible support received, which enabled croppers’ to remain on the roadside for days, raises the question of whether sharecropper “acted” in the manner claimed by anti-demonstration groups.

Additionally, detractors could suggest that hunger was acted, in part, because food was ostensibly available. These critics equate the pretense of hunger with self-inflicted hunger. Eight surplus commodity warehouses were set up at different locations in the effected areas. However, in order to receive foodstuffs, croppers had to travel to the warehouses and fill out applications in person. Some did use their trucks to travel to warehouses. Others asserted that they lacked any means of transportation, “but food [would] not be taken to them” and the croppers that could get to distribution centers would only receive enough for their family.<sup>146</sup> The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* featured a photograph of eight croppers huddled around O.E. Wright’s desk applying for surplus commodities. When representatives for the croppers complained that many could not travel to fill out applications, Wright stated that he had to follow regulations.<sup>147</sup> Roadside distribution of food by the government surely could have facilitated continuation of the protest, but refusal to engage in such distribution failed to dismantle it. It is not known whether some croppers simply stayed put because by leaving the highway their absence would diminish the protest, but bureaucratic demands and sometimes disdain for croppers sustained the highway occupation as a display of hunger and suffering.

Advocates for the demonstrators attempted to limit croppers’ total exposure by requesting tents from the Red Cross, Missouri National Guard, FSA, and the War Department. On 10

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<sup>145</sup> Roll 307.

<sup>146</sup> “Reds Linked with Sharecroppers,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 14 January 1939.

<sup>147</sup> “Seeking Aid,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 11 January 1939: D1.

January 1939, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that National Guard Adjutant General Lewis M. Means had received two such requests, but was unable to provide tents “without orders from the Secretary of War.”<sup>148</sup> STFU president J.R. Butler appealed directly to Secretary of War Harry H. Woodring and Governor Lloyd C. Stark.<sup>149</sup> The governor replied by stating that the state did not own any tents.<sup>150</sup> In a 13 January 1939 telephoned report, War Department Chief of Staff General Craig suggested that the department take the position that “intervention [...] would be illegal” and stated: “they [the demonstrators] have been offered relief in the form of shelter and clothing and food and everything else by three different sources but apparently they do not want to take it.”<sup>151</sup> Attached to this document is a confidential memorandum containing a telephone conversation from Chief of Staff 7<sup>th</sup> Corps Area Colonel Franklin and General Bishop to Colonel Bull in which they reported their confidence in the accuracy of Adjutant General Means’s and St. Louis Red Cross director Mr. Baxter’s assessment of the situation. The Adjutant General assured Franklin that “if the conditions justify” he will request tents. Means, in

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<sup>148</sup> “Sharecroppers Evicted, Camp Along Highways,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 10 January 1939: 1.

<sup>149</sup> J.R. Butler, President STFU to Harry H. Woodring, Secretary of War, and Lloyd C. Stark, Missouri Governor, 12 January 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

<sup>150</sup> Lloyd C. Stark, Missouri Governor, telegram to J.B. Butler, President STFU, 11 January 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

<sup>151</sup> General Craig, War Department Chief of Staff, memorandum to M. H. McIntyre, Secretary to the President, 13 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944; POF 1650; FDR. In late February, J.R. Butler sent letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Secretary Woodring again; he was appealing for tents to shelter displaced families who had not yet found farm arrangements. Butler informed the first lady that the STFU’s continued attempts to obtain authorization from the Secretary of War to distribute National Guard tents “met with failure because of false statements of Missouri officials that all people are adequately sheltered.” Written on the same day, Butler recounted to Woodring Missouri officials’ false statements, which he thought resulted in a reversal of Woodring’s order to release National Guard tents to the protesters. Butler was properly informed that certain Missouri officials had reported that adequate relief was being provided to the sharecroppers. However, it seems that Butler was misinformed regarding the War Department’s intention to assist the demonstrators, 20 February 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

a statement which he asked remain both confidential and off the record, also requested that the War department assume a “hands off policy.”<sup>152</sup>

The official statement of the Red Cross regarding the reason they did not respond to demonstrators’ needs varied from Mr. Baxter’s statements in the War department memo. In newspaper reports and various articles, the Red Cross states that it is not their policy to assist “man-made disasters” and that “the situation [is not] in our field.”<sup>153</sup> Colonel Franklin reported Mr. Baxter as stating: “It is not in any sense a Red Cross responsibility. Adequate shelter can and will be provided by the local communities or farm owners to any of these people who are willing to accept this. I do not feel that any useful purpose would be served by providing tentage to enable these people to remain on the highway.”<sup>154</sup> It is apparent that Baxter felt tents would only encourage continued protest. Ending the disturbance outweighed meeting sharecroppers’ immediate needs.

Arthur Rothstein, the FSA photographer assigned to document the protest, wrote to his superior and project director Roy Stryker about the lack of aid: “while they were along the road people brought them food and clothing, altho [sic] the Red Cross refused to do anything under

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<sup>152</sup> Adjutant General Means, Missouri National Guard, confidential memorandum to General Craig, War Department Chief of Staff, 13 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944; POF 1650; FDR.

<sup>153</sup> Mildred G. Freed, quoted Whitfield’s conversation with Red Cross officials, “Red Cross they said they cain’t [sic] help ‘cause this is a man-made disaster,” in “Ten Million Sharecroppers,” *The Crisis* 46.12 (December 1939): 367; “Evicted Campers on Roads Await Food from State,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 11 January 1939: 1. A *Daily Worker* article hinted at dubious nature of the Red Cross’s official position, “A state Red Cross director from St. Louis came down, sniffed over the situation, and declared that ‘A state of emergency does not exist,’” “Sharecropper Dies in Missouri Fight Against Evictions,” 14 January 1939: 2.

<sup>154</sup> Colonel Franklin, Chief of Staff 7<sup>th</sup> Corps Area, confidential memorandum to General Craig, War Department Chief of Staff, 13 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944; POF 1650; FDR.

threats of no contributions from the planters.”<sup>155</sup> Perhaps it was against Red Cross policy to provide shelter in “man-made” circumstances, but Rothstein’s concerns reveal that the problem with relieving the crisis was not that it was “man-made” *per se*, instead it was a matter of which men caused the crisis. Croppers asserted that they were merely showing their daily reality, not creating the conditions of their suffering. Landholders denied responsibility for creating homelessness and hunger. The Red Cross’s performative speech act deemed the demonstration to be a “show” put on by the shiftless, while simultaneously disavowing the social and economic conditions which caused the display.

Ironically, Baxter’s desire to dissuade croppers from continuing their protest by refusing assistance, the National Guard’s absence of help, and the War Department’s failure to step in further exposed the croppers and facilitated their greater visibility, while emphasizing their powerlessness through their bodily vulnerability. The lack of tents enabled national headlines like those in the *New York Times* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which implied croppers’ determination and righteousness, as in: “Rain, Snow Defied by Sharecroppers” and “Ragged Sharecroppers Keep Protest Vigil in Raging Snowstorm.”<sup>156</sup> Croppers’ literal exposure to the elements made images of vulnerability readily interpretable. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published photographs of the demonstration daily. Three photos published on 13 January 1939 attest to how labor was humanized by croppers’ degradation. “Out in Cold” titled the photo of white toddler Verna Lee Daniels [see fig. 5.12], who stands with a spoon in her mouth holding a near empty plate in a dirty one-piece outfit without mittens, coat, or hat for warmth. Underneath

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<sup>155</sup> Arthur Rothstein, FSA photographer, to Roy Stryker, Director FSA Photography, 16 January 1939; Correspondence Photocopies (Group III) Rothstein/Stryker 1939; Roy Emerson Stryker Papers, 1934-1964; Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

<sup>156</sup> “Rain, Snow Defied by Sharecroppers,” *New York Times* 12 January 1939: 5; “Ragged Sharecroppers Keep Protest Vigil in Raging Snowstorm,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* 13 January 1939.



her picture, the title “Sharecroppers Face Weather” encapsulated two photographs, one of an African American family “huddled beside their tin stove in a makeshift tent for protection” and the other of a white family fortunate enough to have the shelter of an actual tent.<sup>157</sup> Images like these were featured in cinema newsreels and littered the national and Missouri presses, as well as African American papers like the *Cleveland Call and Post*, *Amsterdam News*, and the *Chicago Defender*.

Though they did not explicitly deny croppers’ rights to food, detractors questioned the advisability of providing aid to the protesters. Landowners publicly discouraged the federal government and charitable agencies from giving aid.<sup>158</sup> As Louis Cantor’s history of the protest details, assistance given by the STFU, St. Louis Industrial Union Council, Greater St. Louis Lodge of Colored Elks, CIO, students from Eden Theological Seminary, and others to the campers while out on the highways met with resistance from state officials and police. Supporters recount assertions by Missouri authorities that assistance only encouraged the disturbance.<sup>159</sup> Despite arrests, detainment, or harassment by patrols, groups managed to distribute food among the croppers.<sup>160</sup> Claiming that aid unwittingly promoted the protest’s continuation suggested that protesters did not suffer hunger and yet that the hunger suffered was self-inflicted.

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<sup>157</sup> “Sharecroppers Face Weather,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Everyday Magazine* 13 January 1939.

<sup>158</sup> “Snow Increases distress Among Croppers,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 13 January 1939: A3.

<sup>159</sup> Cantor 77-83.

<sup>160</sup> Cantor 77-83; Included in the STFU’s request for an investigation of civil liberties violations is the complaint that individuals “have been escorted across state lines by Missouri Police when they attempted to aid members of this organization [STFU] secure [sic] relief. Attempts have also been made to prevent distribution of food and clothing contributed by members of other labor unions,” H.L. Mitchell, Secretary STFU, to Frank Murphy, Attorney General, 16 January 1939; reel 10; STFU; NU.

Sharecroppers were not staging a hunger strike; rather they were staging their hunger. A hunger striker's self-inflicted hunger is real hunger; it entails physical consequences. It is also symbolic, intended to manifest an abstraction somatically. Maude Ellman writes: "Self-starvation is above all a performance."<sup>161</sup> It is very much like "acting," by Michael Kirby's standards. It involves *doing* and "on stage" awareness that creates a real, but contrived and temporary situation.<sup>162</sup> While a hunger striker's hunger is not pretended, the cause of the hunger is artificial; it is not due to a lack of access to food. A hunger striker will end her abstinence, her hunger, once her demands are met. In the case of the Bootheel, the Red Cross's contention that the crisis was "man-made" and landowners' insistence that federal and charitable aid would only encourage the protest's continuation attempted to construct croppers' hunger as temporary, soluble and therefore acting. Here, impermanence is used to evidence simulation. Elaine Scarry states that hunger is a "state of consciousness other than pain" that only advances toward pain when satiety is impossible.<sup>163</sup> It follows that the hungry must provide proof that food is not available or feeding is not possible. Landowners charged the FBI with investigating that "those moving to the highway were not without shelter and food and that some, in fact, were well supplied with provisions."<sup>164</sup> However, croppers never denied that they had some food; instead they asserted its inadequacy.

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<sup>161</sup> Maude Ellman, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 17.

<sup>162</sup> Kirby 6.

<sup>163</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 166.

<sup>164</sup> FBI Report, p.17-18; UC.

While on the roadways, croppers ate. That the croppers were seen eating, together with what they ate (or didn't eat) established the authenticity of their hunger. Excluding some sensational headlines and stories printed by the communist publication *The Daily Worker*, which repeatedly suggest starvation's imminence,<sup>165</sup> news coverage described food supplies' inadequacy, meals' meagerness (both in terms of portions and nutritional value) and foodstuffs' depletion. The *New York Times* reported: "families still with provisions were dividing them with those whose supplies had been exhausted."<sup>166</sup> An AP photo of J.C. Smith and an unidentified man showed them handling a live "eating" chicken brought to the highway camp to "solve the food problem for a short time"<sup>167</sup> [see fig. 5.11]. According to such reports, croppers were eating, but hungry. Significantly, the rhetoric deployed evokes slow starvation of daily, historic deficiency. Malnourishment is a measured claim lacking the sensational tone associated with hyperbole, drama, or acting. Here, the displayed level of distress contributes to the complaint's validity.

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<sup>165</sup> For instance, the subheading for the article "1,700 Homeless Sharecroppers in Missouri Ask Aid," reads "Evicted Negro and White Tenants are Facing Starvation in Temporary Camp Along Highway Right of Way," *The Daily Worker* 10 January 1939: 1.

<sup>166</sup> "Sharecropper Horde Hit by Storm," *New York Times* 13 January 1939.

<sup>167</sup> "'We Eat,'" *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 12 January 1939.



**Figure 5.11. Croppers with a chicken.** Source: "We Eat," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 12 January 1939.

In such coverage, the hungry body was a malnourished body, not a body wholly without food. An Associated Press report featured in the *New York Times* detailed the diet of croppers on the roadside: "Some of the more provident brought cooking chickens with them, but fat pork, bread, and coffee was the fare for the majority of refugees." Alarm over such a paltry diet was implicit, as was the fact that "Milk for infants was a pressing problem."<sup>168</sup> The *Chicago Daily Tribune* also made mention of the lack of available milk for infants.<sup>169</sup> Likewise, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, questioning when promised supplies from state Social Security and AAA offices would arrive, reiterated the lack of milk for infants and the waning supply of bread, fat pork, and coffee in two consecutive days of reporting.<sup>170</sup> Following the croppers' removal from the highway, President Roosevelt requested that the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation

<sup>168</sup> "Rain, Snow Defied by Sharecroppers," *New York Times* 12 January 1939.

<sup>169</sup> "Fear of Disease Haunts Camp of Sharecroppers," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 12 January 1939: 2.

<sup>170</sup> "Evicted Farmers Short of Food in Road Camps," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 12 January 1939; "Evicted campers on Roads Await Food From State," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 11 January 1939: 1.

(FSCC) send supplies, “especially milk, eggs, butter, citrus fruits, meats and cereals.”<sup>171</sup> In one memo to the White House, Will Alexander reported that “Surplus commodities had been shipped to the region so that there is no lack of food available to meet immediate need” and that the only complaints regarding subsistence distribution came from “certain citizens in the area who think no relief should be given these families by the Federal Government.”<sup>172</sup> Notice of milk’s absence and the pitiful foodstuffs available on the highway demonstrates the outrage generated over croppers’ state; it also implies a sense of cropper equality or at least the equality of their needs, an inkling that some spectators may have perceived the human right to eat as a fundamental and universal right.



**Figure 5.12. Verna Lee Daniels. Source: “Out in the Cold,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 13 January 1939.**

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<sup>171</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, President, to Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, 19 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944; POF 1650, FDR.

<sup>172</sup> Dr. Will Alexander, FSA Administrator, to Mr. Henry Kannee, The White House, 19 January 1939, attached to memorandum from Will Alexander to Secretary Wallace; Tenancy, 1939; Gen. Correspondence Sec. Ag., 1906-70; RG16; NACP.

Jane Ardley defines a hunger strike as “purely moral coercion.”<sup>173</sup> It shames the offender by suggesting that the injustice is so intolerable that it robs the striker of life. A hunger striker makes a metaphor of the starving body. A hunger striker’s “man-made” hunger is essential to professing the existence of “man-made” injustice. This was not an option for the sharecroppers. In the Bootheel protest, sharecroppers positioned hunger as the action’s impetus, an aspect of croppers’ complaint. By “starv[ing] out where people could see” the roadside demonstration did attempt to morally coerce landowners, citizens, and the federal government, but instead of claiming that justice was worth their lives, the croppers’ hungry bodies suggested that their lives depended on justice. In doing so, croppers asked the public to judge the value of their lives. This professes utter powerlessness.

Ellman affirms that self-starvation represents the striker’s powerlessness because it actually degrades the body: “[F]ar from sabotaging the idea of order, [self-starvation] legitimates the very powers that it holds ransom. Because its secret is to overpower the oppressor with the spectacle of disempowerment, a hunger strike is an ingenious way of *playing* hierarchical relations rather than abnegating their authority.”<sup>174</sup> Ultimately, hunger strikers engage in the pretense of powerlessness. Kieran McEvoy’s description of the Irish Blanketmen’s 1981 action discloses hunger strikers’ agency: “control over one’s own body becomes a crucial locus of resistance.”<sup>175</sup> Hunger strikers may lack political power, but they maintain ultimate control over their persons. Conversely, Bootheel sharecroppers embodied economic

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<sup>173</sup> Jane Ardley, *The Tibetan Independence Movement: Political, Religious, and Gandhian Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 56.

<sup>174</sup> Ellman 21.

<sup>175</sup> Kieran McEvoy, *Paramilitary Imprisonment in Northern Ireland: Resistance, Management and Release* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 83.

exploitation; they positioned their hunger as directly linked to the injustice they suffered.

The sharecroppers' seemingly passive display presented the *effects* of decades of docility, in the Foucauldian sense. The social conditions of cotton culture effectively “disciplined” the bodies of sharecroppers “in economic terms of utility” while it “diminishe[d]” their bodies “in political terms of obedience.”<sup>176</sup> Croppers demonstrated that they lived at the leisure of farm owners, entirely dependent upon them for a meager existence. Their bodies had been socially and economically disciplined to exist as *bodies in pain* – overworked, underfed, lacking protection from weather and disease.

Following the protest, Governor Lloyd Stark created a Landlord-Tenant Committee and appointed Whitfield as a sharecropper representative to the state committee. County committees were established and included both a white and an African American cropper representative in all counties except Pemiscot.<sup>177</sup> Governor Stark also persuaded landowners to hold off on 1940 evictions through February as the committee worked for solutions. Though not a revolution of cotton culture, these tangible outcomes constitute progress. Some croppers professed a desire for government patronage, but most croppers only sought to keep their status as croppers. Out of the eighty-six protester interviews available in the archives only seven demonstrators explicitly mention their hope to work on a government project.<sup>178</sup> The majority of sharecroppers express only a desire to continue farming, not to change their patrons or their status.

The protest's efficacy derived from communication of the suffering body. Though this body is the model of uncertainty, the matrices in which croppers embedded themselves

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<sup>176</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) 138.

<sup>177</sup> Owen Whitfield to F.R. Betton, Cotton Plant AK, n.d.; reel 14; STFU; NU.

<sup>178</sup> Case No. 51, 17 January 1939; Tenant Farming, 1933-1944; POF 1650; FDR.

diminished doubt. This was a tactic shown to the nation. The individuals on the highways performed themselves as croppers, those at the mercy of the (good or ill) will of others, not as activists. Their capacity to challenge power relations necessitated a performance which in both form and content represented docility. Exhibition of their daily humiliation embodied obedience – the croppers left the farms as they were told. The roadsides they occupied demonstrated croppers' social limbo, a state of neglect, a cultural homelessness. The bodies of women, children, and men expressed a paradigm of American humanity: the family. "Family" enabled transcendence of racial and regional divides. Men's powerlessness to stop the suffering of their wives and children justified the protest as an action of desperation motivated by love for their families, not greed or laziness – refuting the cries of shiftlessness. Together, these elements offered a performance of what humanity looks like when it has no place to go and no one claims responsibility.



## Chapter 6: Paradoxes

Today many theatrical performances in the US utilize food objects and consumption to demonstrate the performative nature of identities and reveal social, racial, and gender hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, these are not food rights performances; access to food is not at issue. Nevertheless, anti-hunger and human rights activists and scholars stress that exclusions and boundaries based on socio-cultural identities are at the root of food insecurity's persistence in the land of plenty. Each of the case studies analyzed in this dissertation struggle at this intersection, showing the historic nature of this on-going debate. New Deal food rights performances were constrained by and operated through performative "Americanness," exhibiting its constitutive exclusions, but each performance also linked economic and social inequities to (in)access. Food served as these performances' touchstone, the "authenticating convention"; spectators' first-hand, commonsense, bodily knowledge about the foods used (or the absence of necessary foods) made the ultimate effects of exclusion undeniable and brought consumer-producer-government interdependence to the fore.

This exploration of drama, protest actions, and international exhibition reveals the utility of theatre studies for writing social history. Analyses demonstrating disparate groups' reliance on similar theatrical techniques draw together constituencies that have been historicized separately in rural/agricultural, urban/industrial, or political studies of the Great Depression. By tracing the "paradox's" recurrence across the country, throughout the New Deal period, and in disparate venues, this study illuminates the perceived and actual interconnections of US citizens and the

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<sup>1</sup> Representative dramas include: *The Cook* by Eduardo Machado, *Chocolate in Heat* by Betty Shamieh, *Omnium Gatherum* by Theresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros, *An Afghan Woman* by Bina Sharif, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* by Suzan-Lori Parks, and *A Model Apartment* by Donald Margulies. Representative performance artists include: Miwa Koizumi, Karen Finley, Julie Upmeyer, and the late Allan Kaprow.

conflict between these groups in the struggle to sustain their families and ways of life.

Analysis of food use in each performance clarifies tacit consumer and producer entitlements in US culture; this enhances understanding of citizens' perceptions of the federal government's and fellow citizens' obligations. Considered side by side, these performances complicate clear-cut notions of property rights as they apply to food commodities, while, nevertheless, highlighting the limits of humanitarian claims in a capitalist democracy, even in the midst of widespread food insecurity.

The Milk Pool protest reveals the ethics of consumption; dumping milk in the streets provoked Wisconsinites to weigh their immediate biological needs against the costs of continued production for dairy farmers. USDA exhibits at the World's Fair showed consumers that a good quality of life was possible, though reliant on restoring purchasing power to both consumers and farmers; exhibits created the experience of plenty as produced by producers,' consumers,' and the federal government's cooperation. The Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool also produced an experience of futurity and plenty as made possible by the farmer working in cooperation with the government and the consumer. However, the farmers involved in the protest evoked the dystopia of plenty's end through active disturbance of the food system, while the USDA exhibit used the stability of museum-style exhibition to create an image of restored plenty.

*Triple-A Plowed Under* represented the limitations of federal regulation and suffering due to self-interest; the play made the struggles and well-being of both consumers and producers inextricable. It juxtaposed representations of want and plenty effecting both rural and urban constituencies, and charged these constituencies and the government with finding viable solutions to ensure the livelihood security of all Americans. The Bootheel sharecroppers' demonstration displayed the endpoint of exclusion; the absence of adequate food indicated that

hunger was the result of livelihood insecurity caused by federal programs and abuse of those programs. The use of food and its marked absence in these performances presented citizens with significant choices about the US food system and made the material effects of these choices apparent through spectators' physical investment. By offering choices, and sometimes generating spectator experience of different outcomes, the performances implicated their audiences as active agents capable of making interventions.

Application of performance theory to the Milk Pool and Bootheel protests illustrates how spectators' physical presence at the sites of protest deeply influence an action's unfolding. These analyses revise sociological conceptions of protest which suggest that spectators use tactics to adjudicate an activist group's moral character. The Milk Pool strike and Bootheel demonstration sustain this idea while elucidating protesters' and authorities' adjustment of tactics in light of spectatorship and public reception. Evidence of protester–authority–spectator interaction in these cases also complicates Susan Leigh Foster's choreography model for protest analysis, in which she positions protesters' bodies as *the* compelling force stimulating spectators' and authorities' ideological performances. These cases build upon Foster's and sociological paradigms, suggesting a triangulation of agents (protesters – authorities – spectators) who negotiate ideological positions even as they enact them.

The arc of food symbolics produced by this combination of case studies informs theories of food anthropology. The manner in which milk and meat resonate across chapters exemplifies anthropological claims regarding particular foods' abilities to structure self-perception and groups' control of food as a means of gaining or retaining power. Case studies' deployment of the American idea of plenty, however, expands the applicability of this theory from specific food items to show that food security, too, can be *ritualized*. In the New Deal era, “plenty” – quality,

quantity, and access for all – functioned in a manner similar to indispensable food objects; it offered a visceral way through which citizens perceived their own Americanness as women and men (nurturers and providers). Plenty as the ideal and normative material state of daily life was a means by which the federal government attempted to prove and citizens’ gauged the New Deal administration’s legitimacy.

Related to this point, the inverse proportion of human actors’ to food objects’ use highlighted by the case studies elucidates how performances stimulated spectators’ corporeal experience of food rights claims. The USDA exhibits and the Bootheel demonstration occupy the nether ends of this scale. A direct relationship between spectator and food object produced spectators’ experience of plenty at the World’s Fair. A seemingly unmediated encounter with Bootheel sharecroppers’ bodies stimulated spectators’ visceral perception of want. Both performances were respectively designed to create instantaneous impressions of plenty or want; rational argumentation simply buttressed the displays. The generic intersection of these performances as exhibits, and by extension, the positioning of food and human beings as quotidian artifacts suggests that performances’ creation of this particular mode of spectating may be fundamental to spectators’ sensorial recognition of the states of plenty and want.

Alternately, the Milk Pool protest and *Triple-A Plowed Under* produced arguments about the food system through emphasis on human actors’ manipulation of food objects. Immediate identification of power dynamics and their effects occurred through performers’ or characters’ social statuses vis-à-vis food. In these instances, spectators’ familiarity with foods generated physical investment in the outcomes of the represented conflicts. These performances confound Andrew Sofer’s theorization that “the prop [...] – those denotations and connotations for which it stands – is a *temporal contract* established between the actor and spectator for the duration of

performance.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, food as a *ritualized* object – both symbol and the thing itself – defies such ephemerality, thus conditioning the meaning of the performance itself and professing performances’ material effects.

Finally, *Triple-A Plowed Under’s* contrast with real incidents of hunger and food destruction raises questions about how dramatic representation functions as part of a societal “performance complex.” Kirk Fuoss asserts that cultural performances teach social actors how to behave: one performance functions as a rehearsal for the next. In what ways did *Triple-A’s* re-presentation of national events – mimesis’s provocation of symbolic readings of real phenomena – teach spectators to perceive subsequent farmers’ food destruction, consumers’ protests, acts of Congress, or displays of hunger as inextricable? *Triple-A’s* demonstration of the links between producers, consumers, and the federal government contained the potential to prompt spectators to *theatricalize* food rights performances that occurred in the public sphere.

Though the physical aspects of the “paradox of want amid plenty” persist, they are not conspicuous. US agricultural surpluses are exported (often “dumped” on developing nations), and, by and large, the individuals who suffer food insecurity belong to socially marginalized groups (Black and Hispanic households showed “substantially higher [rates of food insecurity] than the national average,” and in Cook County IL, 88% of households suffering hunger are non-white households).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in fall 2006, the USDA decided to employ new nomenclature in measurements of US citizens’ food access; “very low food security” has replaced “food

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<sup>2</sup> Sofer 14.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, “Household Food Security in the United States, 2005,” Economic Research Report No. (ERR-29), November 2006, 19 February 2007 <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR29/ERR29b.pdf>>; “The National Hunger Study: Chicago Profile,” September 2006, 27 November 2006, <[http://www.chicagosfoodbank.org/site/DocServer/HungerStudy\\_9.06.pdf?docID=301](http://www.chicagosfoodbank.org/site/DocServer/HungerStudy_9.06.pdf?docID=301)>.

insecurity with hunger.”<sup>4</sup> Anti-hunger groups oppose the change and the “scientific” logic used to render hunger as an immeasurable physical state. A *Times Union* editorial titled, “Going Without,” illustrates advocates’ continued reliance upon the rhetoric of the “paradox of want amid plenty” in attempts to make the US government accountable to disregarded populations: “We have the unsettling feeling [...] that perhaps the government is trying to minimize [hunger] by fiddling with how it describes an absolutely appalling reflection of life in the most affluent country of all. What the Agriculture Department finds to be a more scientifically palatable description for people without enough to eat might be deemed to be more politically palatable as well.”<sup>5</sup> In the *Washington Post*, President of Bread for the World David Beckmann stated that “The proposal to remove the word ‘hunger’ from our official reports is a huge disservice to the millions of Americans who struggle daily to feed themselves and their families.”<sup>6</sup> Anti-hunger groups are concerned that the USDA’s new labels create a crisis of representation because the bulk of the nation is food secure. This dissertation’s exploration of food and its marked absence as an integral element in food rights performances suggests that citizens and the federal government have the capacity to engender a sense of mutual responsibility for food security, even if “hunger” no longer exists.

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<sup>4</sup> “Food Security in the United States: Hunger and Food Security,” USDA Economic Research Service, 5 December 2006 <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/labels.htm>>.

<sup>5</sup> “Going Without,” editorial, *Times Union* 21 November 2006, 6 December 2006 <<http://timesunion.com/AspStories/storyprint.asp?StoryID=537341>>.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Williamson, “Some Americans Lack Food, but USDA Won’t Call Them Hungry,” *Washington Post*, 15 November 2006, 5 December 2006 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/15/AR2006111501621.htm>>.

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