

Plowed Under: Food Policy Protests and Performance in New Deal America

By Ann Folino White

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. Pp. 239. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Paperbound, \$30.00.)

In *Plowed Under*, Ann Folino White examines protests and demonstrations surrounding the agricultural programs of the New Deal in order to explore presentations of citizenship. Intended to address the oversupply of farm products, the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) unleashed outcries from consumers horrified by the prospect of crops plowed under and infant pigs slaughtered in a time of hunger. But as White shows, the act's sharper complaints came from farmers protesting its terms, housewives facing higher meat prices, and sharecroppers evicted by landlords seeking to collect the full crop subsidy.

In this innovative interdisciplinary study, White uses theater performance scholarship to explore the performative aspect of citizenship and political action. Although political protests are sometimes dismissed as false displays, or "theatre," White argues that theatrical elements were a key factor in the effectiveness and social impact of the New Deal agricultural protests. The performance of citizenship, White argues, intersected with race and gender and was informed by the agrarian tradition of masculinity through food production. White pays a good deal of attention to the fact that these agricultural protests and performances played on

the symbolism of food. Since food is eminently "good to think with," the subject matter put rhetorical force behind participants' claims to political, economic, and social power.

Five case studies illuminate the variety of AAA "performances," including the USDA exhibits at the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress exposition, in which the federal government trumpeted American abundance and sold the idea of rationalized federal control of agriculture. The exhibits combined reverence for producers with an emphasis on scientific progress into a vision of agriculture as a nationalist project. In a chapter on a consumer meat boycott in Hamtramck, Michigan, White compellingly turns performance analysis to the subject of public domesticity. Here, she argues that "housewife" was an inherently unstable role that could both enable and repress women's political action: women had to enter the public sphere to get meat for their husbands, but could not engage in public spectacle or violence. Tellingly, the Polish American women who engaged in public boycotts were dismissed as "fake" because they were too stylishly dressed to be "real" immigrant housewives—calling attention to the performative nature of female, political, and American identities.

White's methodology also contributes a persuasive description of the Missouri sharecroppers' demonstrations that saw protesters camped out on the side of public highways to stage the hunger and homelessness they faced when landlords evicted them to avoid sharing AAA subsidies. Modes of performance structured the public reaction to the event: sympathetic whites reported it through a lens of minstrelsy (describing protesters as patient, faithful, and singing old gospel songs), while opponents decried the "fakeness" of the protest (not all the participants had been recently evicted) in order to undermine the legitimacy of the critique.

The last chapter, an examination of the Federal Theatre Project's 1936 play, *Triple A: Plowed Under*, feels rather anticlimactic since sections of

the play were already introduced to head each previous chapter, to good effect. White concludes with a discussion of debates surrounding the 2013 farm bill, pointing to ways in which disagreements over the rights of producers and consumers still shape our ideas about citizenship.

Plowed Under will prove useful for scholars of agriculture, public policy, political culture, and the New Deal, and it presents an invaluable perspective for any historian of the twentieth century.

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American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity

By Christian G. Appy

(New York: Viking Adult, 2015. Pp. xi, 335. Notes, index. \$28.95.)

Despite having ended forty years ago, the American war in Vietnam remains a political, social, and cultural force in the United States. Books, university courses, and movies about the war draw surprisingly large audiences, dwarfing popular interest in wars that have lasted as long (the U. S. war in Afghanistan, for instance) or had similarly destructive consequences (such as the U. S. war in Korea).

Yet Christian Appy claims that we still need "a clearer understanding of that war's impact on our national identity" (p. xiii). The huge body of literature on the U. S. war in Vietnam contains many works exploring both how American values prompted arrogance, violence, and ineptitude in fighting this war, and how the war has shaped many aspects of U. S. foreign policy, attitudes towards veterans, and