

GETTING BOMBED AT DARTMOUTH (April 2013)

Spring is the season for mayhem. While Boston has been rocked by two actual bombs, Dartmouth College has been reeling from the impact of rhetorical ones.

On Friday, April 19, with all of Boston under lockdown while police closed in on the surviving marathon bomber suspect, Dartmouth welcomed prospective members of next fall's entering class — “prospies” — with a program called Dimensions: an official welcome to the Class of 2017, a rousing salute to the class itself and all the “diverse experiences” that Dartmouth will offer them. But around 10:30 that night, just as Boston was celebrating the capture of the suspect, the opening of a show staged for the prospies was hijacked by a small band of student activists shouting that “Dartmouth has a problem” — a problem with homophobia, racism, sexism, the grossly inadequate reporting of sexual assault and, for good measure, the evils of capitalism.

The vocal bomb thus detonated by the activists soon provoked a volley of online firecrackers. Starting in the wee hours of the day after the protest, a Dartmouth message site called bored@baker featured anonymous comments such as “wish I had a shotgun, would have blown those hippies away” and “it's women like these who deserve to get raped.”

In response, Dean of the College Charlotte Johnson publicly deplored the harassment of the protesters, insisting that “threats and intimidation — even if made anonymously or online — ... (are) never justified.” More dramatically, the Dartmouth administration staged its own version of the Boston lockdown by cancelling classes on April 24 so that all members of the Dartmouth community could gather to discuss its “commitment to debate that promotes ... the value of diverse opinions.”

But two days later, Steve Mandel, chairman of Dartmouth's board of trustees, issued a campus-wide email that seemed to find the shouts of the protesters just as objectionable as the words of their detractors. “Neither the disregard for the Dimensions Welcome Show nor the online threats that followed,” he wrote “represent what we stand for as a community.” Both cases, then, may be subject to “disciplinary action.”

But let's view this episode in the light of two large murals. At least part of what Dartmouth stands for as a community has long been represented by one of them: a sequence of frescoes that drew howls of dismay from Dartmouth alumni when they were first unveiled in 1934. Though it has just been designated a national historic landmark, José Clemente Orozco's *Epic of American Civilization* (<https://www.dartmouth.edu/digitalorozco/app/>) — painted in what is now called the Orozco Room of Dartmouth's Baker Library — gores the ox of traditional American pieties with a trenchancy that makes the shouts of the Dimensions protesters sound like the cooing of doves.

Besides showing how Christianity helped to destroy the indigenous populations of the Americas rather than "saving" them, as Dartmouth's founder Eleazer Wheelock set out to do in 1768, Orozco's mural savages American capitalism. In one of its panels, a Zapata-like revolutionary proudly defies the rapacity of Yankee capitalists bent over like rooting pigs — greedily clutching vast bags of coins with cannons and beribboned generals stacked up around them. It is hard to imagine a fiercer attack on the unholy alliance of money and guns that has shaped so much of the history of U.S. involvement in Latin America. And it is almost as hard to imagine why Orozco himself was not promptly disciplined for assaulting the values of the Dartmouth community — or at least of the many alumni who wanted the murals whitewashed away.

To his great credit, Dartmouth's President Ernest Martin Hopkins refused to hide them, and to this day they remain to exemplify one face of the college. Fearless of debate and dissent, it not only tolerates but features a searing critique of the very values on which the college was founded and on which America traditionally stands.

But three years after Orozco completed his project, the college commissioned a Saturday Evening Post illustrator named Walter Beach Humphrey (Dartmouth class of 1914) to produce a very different set of murals in a dining room that came to be known as the Hovey Grill (Moved off campus in September 2018, they are now unavailable even online.) Painted to illustrate a drinking song written by Richard Hovey (class of 1885), they salute Dartmouth's founder for allegedly trading 500 gallons of rum for a tract of Native American land and thus introducing its occupants to the joys of college life. The mural depicts Wheelock pouring a golden stream of rum from a large silver bowl for a partying crowd of would-be native Americans. They include several bare-breasted young women (one of whom is trying to read a book upside down), a feather-crowned "brave" whose pale bare muscular chest sports a fresh green Dartmouth D, and — shaking

Wheelock's hand — “the Sachem of the Wah-hoo-wahs,” a tribe concocted from the now-banned Dartmouth “Indian yell.”

This is the other face of Dartmouth: lusty, hard-drinking, strenuously heterosexual, and all too eager to turn native American peoples into a metaphor for a far-from-vanished breed: the animalistic, hypersexed, beer-guzzling version of the Dartmouth male. In other words, the Hovey murals represent Eleazer Wheelock showing native Americans — the aboriginal prospies — how to get bombed.

In the late seventies, Dartmouth belatedly realized that given its original mission to educate native Americans, it ought to treat them with respect and also, not incidentally, treat women — all women — as something more than sexual playmates for Dartmouth men. As a result, the Hovey murals were eventually hidden behind solid doors, though they can still be found online at the website of the Hood Museum. What can never be fully suppressed, however, is the carefree racism and sexism they displayed — both of which resurfaced, in variant strains, right after the protests made at the Dimensions show.

Dartmouth, in other words, is a place of two murals, one wide open and the other hidden. But to understand its own history, the Dartmouth community must reckon with both.

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