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Racist Mural in Liberal Vermont

In the Autumn of 2017, local Burlington, VT activist and agit-provocateur Albert Petrarca scrawled the words *Off the Wall* across a mural in the city's shopping district. The mural is painted on a wall leading to one of the nearby parking garages and is supposed to represent the history of Vermont. Like so many other "historical" representations across the United States, that history seems to be made up of primarily white men. Petrarca's graffiti provoked a series of reactions in the region—some threatening violence against Petrarca and others calling for a discussion. The mural ultimately became an issue in the recently completed mayoral/city council elections and remains a topic of discussion in the Council.

To begin with, the mural is not even a very interesting painting. The human figures are quite two-dimensional but not quite cartoonish or even abstract. Instead, they represent the lack of thought that seems to have gone into the entire mural. Some critics have rightly called it nothing more than a commercial billboard while pointing out that billboards are illegal in Vermont. Other critics—most notably Albert Petrarca, the man who brought it to the public's attention when he spray painted his message across the Church Street mural in late 2017—have detailed the cost each merchant represented had to pay. In other words, it is a commercial billboard. While the commercial aspect of the Church Street mural in Burlington, Vermont is repulsive enough, it is the explicit racism of the painting that has drawn the most criticism, and rightly so. The complete exclusion of the original Abenaki inhabitants of the territory

we call Vermont from the artwork is probably the most blatant example of that racism. However, the fact that non-white immigrants and African-American populations are also not acknowledged is equally cause for attention.

The arguments of the bureaucrats and politicians involved in finding a resolution to the white supremacist nature of the mural have been found wanting. At first, I was willing to give those folks a pass, thinking to myself that the failure to include non-white skinned Vermonters in the mural was more a matter of a shortsightedness typical of many US residents. You know the type: they don't think they are racist because their intentions are good and they never would intentionally harm any other person because of their skin tone or ethnic origins. At the same time, the systemic nature of the US's white supremacist ethos is so inbred, their attempts to address their racism consistently fails once it moves beyond the individual-to-individual level.

Anyhow, like I said, at first I was willing to give those folks a pass because I thought the awareness raised by Mr. Petrarca and the Off the Wall Coalition could become a watershed moment in addressing the racism underlying many Vermonters' understanding of their world. Then I discovered that the folks who approved the mural knew that the lack of representation in the piece might be a problem. Yet, they went ahead and allowed the painting to go up on that wall without any changes to its content. Then, once the racism of the mural was brought to the public's attention, the only solution those bureaucrats and politicians had to offer was to paint another mural somewhere else that included those "other" Vermonters. In other words, leave the white supremacist mural up and create a separate but equal mural for the "colored" folks.

Personally, I wonder if there was some kind of promise made to the merchants and individuals who paid for this mural that it would remain as it is for a certain length of time. If this is the case, then that would prove once again how deeply integrated into our economy and politics the sin of white supremacy truly is. After all, if money is the reason the mural looks the way it does and if money is the reason it remains the way it is, then it becomes clear that Bob Dylan was more than truthful when he sang "Money doesn't talk, it swears." This truth becomes even clearer when one understands exactly how much of the US economy was built via the mass murder of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans and their descendants.

The two-mural suggestion is not a solution. Indeed, from where I sit it looks like a pathetic compromise with the forces of white supremacy. While those proposing this so-called solution might not see their action as such, it is difficult for many of us to see it as

anything but. In a city that prides itself on welcoming refugees and immigrants (as it rightly should), the refusal to destroy the current mural and replace it with a painting that does justice to the Abenaki's history, the role of non-European immigrants and to African-Americans is contradictory at best, and insensitively racist at its worst.

(This essay first appeared in a slightly different form in the local arts and politics magazine [05401Plus](#))