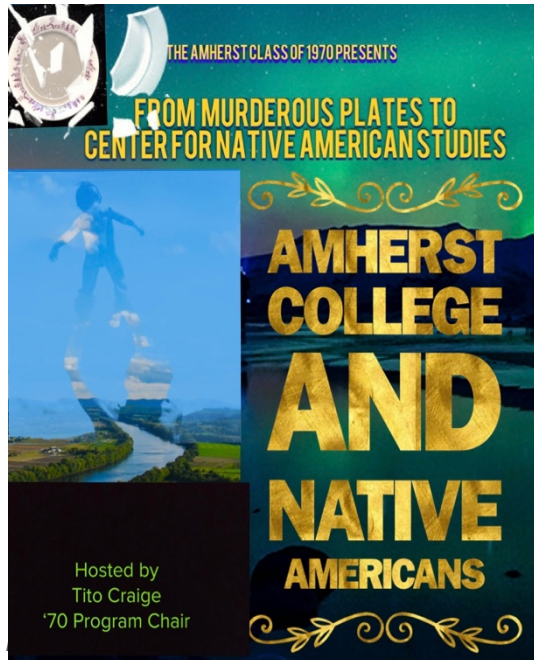


FROM MURDEROUS PLATES TO CENTER FOR NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

NATIVE AMERICANS AND AMHERST COLLEGE

Tito Craige

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Poster for Class of '70 reunion by the author

Last October, members of the Amherst College Class of 1970 met Native American students in Frost Library and a Political Science office. Since Bob Bernstein, Dave Hunt, Steve Seward and I had graduated almost fifty years earlier, we were curious about the changes on campus and, especially, in the lives of Native American students. They told us they identified first and foremost as members of tribal communities rooted in the land. They described their homes, classes, professors, research papers, dreams for the future and new friends. Then a student looked directly at each of us and said, “To be honest, we students are really glad to meet alumni from the Class of 1970. We consider you to be elders.”

At first, I misunderstood and thought the student had said, “We consider you to be older.”

“Yes,” I responded, “we certainly are older, grayer and balder. We are pretty old.”

Not missing a beat, another student patiently interrupted: “Sorry, we didn’t say “*older*.” We said ‘*elder*’ because we believe you are elders. That means you are people we respect. You protested the Vietnam War. You had long careers and dedicated yourselves to improving the world. You are elders because you asked us about our lives. Almost no one else ever does that. You are elders because you told us about your Navajo classmate, David Redhorse. All of this means we are kin.”

I was astonished by their bluntness and warmth. How could they see right through us? Tears flowed down my cheeks. I realized that they were telling us that protest, honesty and longevity are qualities they expect out of older members of a great family. All four of us felt honored and emotionally overcome.

The interchange started me on a quest to know more about the land, Native Americans and tribal communities. Now, months later, I have visions of the Massachusetts hills and see the

graceful line at the ridge of Mt. Norwottuck, a mountain named for a Native community that lived in the area for thousands of years and that can be seen from the College.

The students' comments led me to a few tentative answers.

First, Jeffery Amherst. Thanks to UMass Emeritus Professor Peter d'Errico, we can read Amherst's actual words written with his quill pen. In this excerpt, Amherst is making recommendations to his superiors about how to destroy Native communities: "You will Do well to try to inoculate the Indians by means of Blankets, as well as to try Every other method that can serve to Extirpate this Execrable Race. I should be very glad your Scheme for Hunting them Down by Dogs could take Effect..." (see d'Errico)

No doubt about it: Jeffery Amherst advocated genocide. He called for the spread of a lethal virus, something that, in this era of COVID, would be considered an act of terrorism. Let us publicly condemn these words and dissociate from them. Let us counter with heartfelt support for Native Americans.

If not now, when?

Second, the plates. In 1941, Amherst president Stanley King ordered china for the newly constructed Valentine Dining Hall. Thanks to Amherst Archivist Michael Kelly, we know President King's thoughts on the "chasing Indian" design: "I recall the fun (my wife and I) had in selecting a design for our china. We asked Jones, McDuffie & Stratton, of Boston, to prepare a design featuring Lord Jeffery and the French and Indians. We were delighted with the

result. Our china made a conversation piece, and we knew that the students would frequently have their dates as guests for lunch and dinner." (see King)

For 33 years, three times daily, students stared at the plates. During a lunch in 1969, when I was bussing tables in Valentine, I finally noticed the gruesome images. Having spent two years protesting the war on Vietnamese people, I saw the same story on each piece of china. Sword raised, Jeffery Amherst is chasing five Native men through a forest. Wasn't this the same as sending B-52s over Vietnamese villages and bombing them? Was it any different from shooting unarmed students at Kent State?



Amherst College china plate
border design:
mounted Englishman with sword
chasing Indians on foot
Ad on eBay for Amherst plate

Impulsively, I grabbed a stack of dirty plates, walked to the dish room and tossed them into the garbage disposal's giant mouth. There was a deafening roar, splinters ricocheted off the walls and the plates were gone. I felt relieved.

In his memoir, Horace Porter '72 recalled an incident in Valentine Hall when a group of "...white radical (visitors) erupted in a spontaneous frenzy of protest, smashing their plates on the dining room floor while shouting, 'Break the fascist dishes!' We were caught off guard by their spectacular indignation. Somebody yelled back, 'you have a lot of nerve acting out after eating free lunches!'" (see Porter).

In 1973, during the presidency of John William Ward, the china finally disappeared from Valentine, although there was no explicit announcement or apology. As an activist president, Ward might have felt that the images were insulting to the values to which the College adheres. Or maybe, after protesting the war, he saw the faces of Natives as well as Vietnamese on the china. Some say plates were sent to the landfill and others say they are stashed on campus. In any case, now, in 2020, it is time to acknowledge the design and publicly reject it.

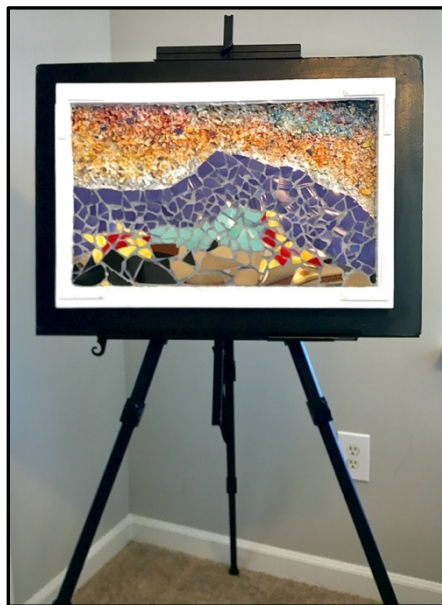
If not now, when?

Since graduating fifty years ago, I have thought about my Navajo classmate, David Redhorse. He was from New Mexico and has never attended a reunion. Did anyone in my class stand up for him by protesting the murderous images on the plates? I thought about Niemoller's quote: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out..."

I wonder what might constitute a truth and reconciliation project about the plates and Native Americans. One day last year, Bob Bernstein alerted me that there were 137 pieces of the china for sale on eBay. After days of offers and counteroffers, I bought all them. Classmate Scott McGee delivered them from a farm in rural Vermont, but soon I realized I had no idea what to do with my collection. I called Dave Hunt, a neurosurgeon from Hoboken, and he advocated breaking them in a sweat lodge. Bob Bernstein, a hedge fund manager and painter, said I should smash them. Class President Burt Woolf urged me to seek advice from more classmates. I called Steve Seward, a strategist for non-profits, and he suggested that I donate place settings to the

College Archives, so I gave a set to Frost Library. Other classmates told me to sell the plates on eBay so as to raise money for Native scholarships. There was no consensus, and, after donating two sets to the College, I still have piles of them.

On a North Carolina sidewalk last winter, I crushed one of the plates with a Stanley hammer. I was overjoyed to realize that the tiny pieces no longer displayed a noxious design. By the next day, I knew I had to create a mosaic with the shards, something that would honor the Norwottuck people. I crushed plates of many colors and created a mosaic to link our class to indigenous people. The result is a 2'x3' panel called *Mt. Norwottuck*. The whitish dust from the Amherst plate is in the sky behind the ridge. I imagine the murderous images are floating away, and the proud mountain remains.



Mt. Norwottuck, including dust from Amherst plates, by the author

A few months later, I decided to give the mosaic to the American Studies Department and Amherst College. I am also pleased that our alumni class chose the mosaic to be on the cover of our 50th Reunion book. To me, the mosaic symbolizes our class's commitment to respect, honor and support Native American students. We are on board for a lifelong collaboration.

In the months since meeting the students, I am learning about a new paradigm beautifully enunciated by Lisa Brooks (Abenaki), Chairperson of the American Studies Department. She wrote me that, "I had an amazing class this fall semester called Indigenous American Epics. It was an extraordinary group of Native and non-Native students engaging deeply in...long-form Indigenous narratives..." In a message that shows the difference graduates can make, Dr. Brooks said, "This is such an important time, and I am so glad to know that alumni... are part of the transformation." I also have been learning from Dr. Kiara Vigil (Dakota/Apache), Assistant Professor in the American Studies Department, who uses writings by Native activists, authors and performers.

In the months ahead, Hunt, Bernstein and I will bash a few more plates and put the dust and some wildflower seeds into Manila envelopes. We hope to distribute these when we are finally able to have a face-to-face reunion. Porcelain clay came from Mother Earth. Let's put it back.

Notes:

Peter d'Errico. http://people.umass.edu/derrico/amherst/lord_jeff.html

Stanley King. *The Consecrated Eminence: The Story of the Campus and Buildings of Amherst College*, Forgotten Books. 1952, 260.

Horace A. Porter. *The Making of a Black Scholar: From Georgia to the Ivy League*. University of Iowa Press, 2003, 59.

Author:

Tito Craige founded the Farmworker School, a literacy program for migrant laborers in North Carolina. It enrolled 400 Haitians and Latin Americans in 40 labor camps. Using the methods of Paulo Freire, the staff taught literacy skills so workers could advocate for their correct wages. Craige established a mobile classroom, a radio show and a Haitian choir. In the 1990s, Craige investigated extra-judicial killings in the Philippines and wrote *The Iceberg and the Cross* about the murder of a priest. In North Carolina, he founded the Immigration Counseling Service and,

presently, teaches Civics at Durham Technical Community College. He is the 50th Reunion Program Chair for the Class of 1970.