

Poison is Poison

Folklorist/Parent Seeks Curricular Antidotes to the Myth of the First Thanksgiving

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“Poison is poison, and ingrained oppressive cultural attitudes are at least as hard to antidote, once implanted, as are imbibed cleaning fluids” (Dorris 1978: 78).

Many food rituals, especially those that are repeated annually, involve the recounting of a sort of master narrative that is designed to be etiological. The American holiday of Thanksgiving contains one such origin myth. ¹ The story of the “First Thanksgiving” tells about the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians celebrating their friendship by sharing the harvest feast in 1621. The myth is pervasive throughout culture, manifesting in written, oral, visual, and cinematic forms. Although the myth is based on fiction, legend, and public relations rhetoric, rather than historical fact, a plethora of institutions actively perpetuate it, including textbook authors, teachers, children’s literature authors, television/filmmakers, advertising specialists, greeting card designers, website producers, and parents. In counterpoint to an interpretation that “imagines the nation as a fixed, monolithic, and self-enclosed geographic and cultural whole” (Kaplan 1998:583), in this essay I look—from the perspective of a parent and folklorist—at several specific cases in which American cultural representations of Thanksgiving reinforce stereotypes that can do real damage. ²

In 2005, at a public school in the middle of Missouri, my son’s kindergarten class learned about the voyage of the Mayflower and the Thanksgiving feast of the Pilgrims. While volunteering in the classroom shortly before the holiday, I noticed children making “war cries” and “tomahawk chops” while cutting out paper teepees. Later that day, my son brought home from school the following memo:

Unit A Feast. Please remember that Unit A will celebrate Thanksgiving with a feast Monday morning, November 21. Your child may bring a treat to share with the class. Try to think of something to share that may have been at the first Thanksgiving. Fruits, vegetables, bread, or nuts would be good choices. Please send in food ready to share. [...] Please come help us set up, serve, and/or clean up if you are able. Bring your cameras. The students will be wearing costumes we have made at school [emphasis added].

The story of the First Thanksgiving as a folklore process is traditional because it exhibits “continuities and consistencies through time and space” (Georges and Jones 1995:1). More than a quarter of a century ago, I myself learned the story of the First Thanksgiving in an elementary school in South Dakota. I, too, learned it with Pilgrim and Indian costumes, hand-shaped turkeys, and theatrical reenactments. According to historian Elizabeth Pleck, schoolteachers began teaching this myth - with its costumed reenactments - during America’s Progressive Era (1890-1920), as “an exercise in cultural power, providing children with a dominant set of symbols,” in hopes of assimilating the waves of

immigrants that threatened white America. School children were seen, in this light, “as cultural conduits, bringing home ideas about celebration, national history, and cultural symbols learned at school” (Pleck 1999:779-80). The myth of the First Thanksgiving - essentially unchanged from its original form - is still being taught as history in the public schools today, despite the preponderance of evidence to the contrary (Siskind [1992] 2002:48). Although an “ideology of stability” surrounds the holiday, actually, the rituals associated with Thanksgiving have been actively negotiated over time (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:23). What obligation does a folklorist—armed with the truth about the invention of the Thanksgiving myth—have to respond to this sort of situation today?

The American Folklore Society’s professional code of ethics states: “Because folklorists study issues and processes that affect general human welfare, they are faced with unusual complexities and ethical dilemmas. It is a major responsibility of folklorists to anticipate these and to plan to resolve them in such a way as to do least damage to those with whom they work and to their scholarly community” (“AFS Statement on Ethics” 1988). This code, of course, is open to some interpretation and was clearly written with ethnographic informants in mind, not my son’s school. In my capacity as folklorist, I am bound by this code of ethics; however, does it still apply to me in my capacity as concerned parent? Surely other folklorists have grappled with this sort of situation before. Determined to do the “right thing,” I leapt into action. Assuming the extant curriculum was the result of a lack of accurate information, I gathered historical accounts, along with age-appropriate lesson plans that present accurate historical evidence as well as alternative points of view (see Larson 1979 and 1986; Ramsey 1979; Seale, Slapin, and Silverman [1995] 1998). I presumed that, if I merely provided clear documentation, along with an array of easy alternatives respectful of different perspectives, the teachers would surely want—or feel compelled—to change the way they approach the holiday.

I met first with my son’s teacher, and later with the principal, outlining my concerns and offering examples of the alternative curriculum I had collected. The principal smiled politely and nodded continuously until I finished my impassioned plea. She then said something vague and noncommittal about the teachers “valuing their traditions” and choosing the “best educational activities” for our students. With tears welling up in my eyes, I begged of her “At the very least, don’t make the children dress up as Pilgrims and Indians. It’s so offensive.” Continuing to smile, the principal gently escorted me out of her office. A few days later, I received a letter from my son’s teacher, taped onto the folder of curriculum they returned to me. The letter explained that the Unit A teachers had reviewed the situation and wanted to be sensitive to my concerns. They showed me a list of activities planned and offered to remove my son from any activities that made me feel uncomfortable. ³ Pulling my son out of the classroom, however, was not the point. I wasn’t trying to shield my son; I wanted a paradigm shift, so that none of these students would be taught a racist myth as actual history. In my enthusiasm to spread the truth, however, I ran up against the power of tradition that, in this case, operates like a brick wall. The next day, my son stepped off the bus wearing an “Indian vest” - a brown paper bag torn for fringe and decorated with markers. When I inquired, he stuck a feather into his hair and said (in a

voice meant to convey intellectual inferiority), “I-am-a-na-tive-a-mer-i-can.” This was an elaboration of the role he had played earlier when his class made costumes to reenact the First Thanksgiving myth.

Is there a way out of this quagmire for people concerned about the postcolonial ethics of Thanksgiving and representation of American Indians? One chapter of my dissertation tackles this question, considering case studies in which people challenge Thanksgiving ideology (Roth 2010). This essay reflects on one of those case studies - the valiant, if naïve and ineffectual, efforts of a folklorist/parent to create fissures in the dominant Thanksgiving ideology.

I said little the following November, other than grumbling to friends and colleagues, who were accustomed to my diatribes, and instead poured myself into my dissertation research, figuring I would save the world later. I had assumed too hastily that my advocacy effort had been a complete waste of time. To my surprise, several small, but significant, revisions were made to the Thanksgiving memo.

Feast 2006. We will celebrate Thanksgiving with a feast on the afternoon of Tuesday, November 21st. We ask that students bring a healthy snack to share. We especially welcome snacks such as: cut fruits or vegetables, popcorn, raisins, corn bread or cheese. We will need volunteers to help us set up, serve, and clean up. We will begin setting up at 1:00 and plan to begin the feast at 1:15. If you are able to volunteer, please send a note to your child’s homeroom teacher.

At first glance, the memos look more or less the same, but upon closer inspection, I see several changes worth mentioning. For one thing, the words “First Thanksgiving” were removed from the 2005 memo, along with any reference to costumes or cameras, leaving me to wonder if my (perhaps awkward) intervention may have prompted the 2006 version. I wanted to believe that perhaps this signaled a shift, albeit a miniscule one, in the discourse surrounding Thanksgiving. For another, the celebration event went from being open to all parents to requiring a note to volunteer. Is it just parental paranoia, or could this have been intended to keep a meddling folklorist at bay? When I volunteered that year (after submitting the necessary note), I was disheartened to find that the only obvious change had, in fact, been the memo; the rest of the celebration was unchanged. As the kids filed into the auditorium, wearing Pilgrim and Indian costumes, teachers and parents gushed over how cute they looked. As painful as it was to see my son dressed as a grocery bag Indian two years in a row, I have to admit that, as a parent watching the event, it was also cute. It was hard not to smile and, indeed, all of the other parents were smiling and taking photographs. This is an example of how colonialism and racism can wear an innocent face, and hide the sad and ugly truth. Far from honoring American Indians, these activities add insult to injury by encouraging children to “play Indian” in order to celebrate the colonization of the Americas (see Dorris 1978; Ramsey 1979; Loewen 1991; Harvey et al. 1995; Reese 2006).

Hidden beneath the veneer of paper costumes, the myth of the First Thanksgiving perpetuates falsehoods and a self-serving version of American history. With a few notable exceptions, the mainstream media, along with government and businesses, persistently present Thanksgiving’s benefits

from the point of view of the European settlers/invaders. Since 1970, activists have sought a paradigm shift when approaching the holiday, hoping to challenge popular misconceptions (see Dorris 1979; Seale et al. 1998; Villaneuva 2004).⁴ Although historical evidence actually does not support the feel-good message of friendliness and sharing that is inherent in the myth of the First Thanksgiving, not enough progress has been made to expand social awareness and historical accuracy. Many schools do not acknowledge the ethics of Thanksgiving, preferring instead to cling to the myth of the First Thanksgiving that has been conveniently perpetuated for over 150 years. The exceptions, which attempt to critique Thanksgiving ideology, are often characterized by the mainstream as radical.

Although I do not have access to nation-wide school curricula, from what I can tell, there seems to be a range of Thanksgiving curricula in use today—from mildly innocuous to objectionable. For example, Janet Siskind writes about two schools in New Jersey. One was a parochial school, in which the teacher had researched the foods allegedly eaten at the so called “First Thanksgiving” and taught such spelling words as: turkey, sweet potatoes, squash, pumpkin pie. She taught about the Indians helping the Pilgrims, and acknowledged “the later battles as being due to the resistance of Indians to their lands being seized.” The school itself was decorated with turkeys, “each feather bearing a prayer.” The other school was not decorated with turkeys. Instead, “the teacher played Native American music and knew a great deal about Eastern groups. In an impromptu assembly, she showed slides of living Native Americans and asked the children to remember their ‘Indian forefathers’” (Siskind 1992 [2002]: 57; see also Reese 2006).

If the history of the early Thanksgivings continues to be taught in schools, then it should be taught from more than one perspective, and the painful truths that historians have brought to the fore about relations between Wampanoag and Pilgrims being marred by distrust and betrayal should be candidly addressed. Curriculum could focus on the fact that, before the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth century, there were once an estimated ten million American Indians thriving on the lands north of Mexico. If the small band of Pilgrims losing a third of their members (57 out of 102 people) during the first winter is noteworthy, as the authors of many history text books seem to believe, what of the nine million American Indians who died from the plague brought by Europeans? Students could be asked to consider the point of view of the nine million, for whom the myth of Thanksgiving likely has mournful associations. One elementary school in Columbia, Missouri, took this approach. After reading Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (1980), Eryca Neville (a graduate student at the University of Missouri at the time) and her sister Jonette Ford (a fifth-grade teacher at West Boulevard Elementary school) decided to do something drastically different. Neville had been examining general education requirements and reflects: “I respectfully submit that they [students] aren’t taught history. They are taught propaganda. And it is reinforced at the higher education level” (Neville 2010). Hoping to challenge this biased view of history, the sisters joined forces. Neville’s college-level social studies methods class started working with Ford’s fifth-grade social studies class in order to curate the exhibit “American History Through Indian Eyes” in 2005. The fifth graders studied civil rights history, with the college students spending half of their time assisting the fifth graders with their research projects. One area of the exhibit involved the myth of the First Thanksgiving. The collaboration was so successful

that the two teachers have continued to use this classroom museum model. Both college and fifth-grade students reported feeling betrayed upon learning of the history to which they had never before been exposed. These West Boulevard Elementary exhibits sought to provoke cognitive dissonance, for example, by including a wanted poster of Christopher Columbus that called him a thief and rapist.⁵ The end of the exhibit was called, "We Are Still Here," countering the stereotype of the disappearing Indian. The exhibit garnered a lot of positive publicity, and was well attended by students, teachers, parents, and community members. While similar exhibits have occurred at this school since, this approach to curriculum does not appear to have spread to other schools within the Columbia Public School system.

As these different examples show, school curricula have the power either to intensify colonial ideology, or to broaden children's awareness of the complexities of history and the diversity of human experience. Although alternative curricula are readily available, and schools could provide an antidote to the poisonous nature of the Thanksgiving myth, institutions like schools are homeostatic systems. Paradigm shifts, especially those impacting beloved traditions, do not occur without significant resistance, and the reaction to attempts to challenge curricular traditions can be intense. One parent, Michelle Raheja, learned this the hard way. Her situation demonstrates what is at stake in the negotiation over representation and the consequences of challenging a beloved tradition. In the fall of 2008, Raheja sent a private e-mail to her daughter's kindergarten teacher at Condit Elementary School, in Claremont, California, expressing concern over a forty-year-old non-continuous tradition with the neighboring Mountain View School, in which the children take turns dressing up as Pilgrims and Indians, meeting half-way for a Thanksgiving feast. "It's demeaning," Raheja (whose mother is a Seneca) wrote. "I'm sure you can appreciate the inappropriateness of asking children to dress up like slaves (and kind slave masters), or Jews (and friendly Nazis), or members of any other racial minority group who has struggled in our nation's history" (quoted in Mehta 2008). The issue made it to the Claremont School Board, which decided to continue the feast, but to disallow the costumes out of respect for Native American heritage. Few expected the backlash from other parents.

Many parents ignored the school board, sending their kids to school in costumes as a form of protest. "I think it's ridiculous," complained Kimberly Rogers, a pro-costume parent. "It's a longstanding tradition and the kids really enjoy it, so we're going overboard" (quoted in McMillan 2008). School officials did not remove the costumed kids. Additionally, parents on both sides of the issue protested outside Condit Elementary, with pro-costume parents accusing the school of capitulating to political correctness and the anti-costume parents accusing the school of perpetuating stereotypes. At the feast, one parent dressed as an Indian and "did a war dance" around Raheja's daughter, telling the girl to "go to hell" (Woods II 2008; see also Raheja 2011).

"What's offensive is there are harmful stereotypes that represent a harmful legacy of history that has been denied to indigenous people in this country. The true history of Thanksgiving is one of a massacre," said Klee Benally, who opposes the costumes (quoted in McMillan 2008). "I'm not saying that I necessarily agree with everything that happened was right. There are many things that happened,"

said one pro-costume parent. "But when those traditions are harmful to the community, why continue them?" Benally replied. "I don't understand why getting together to share a meal is harmful at all. This is why America is great, that we all can get together, different cultures, different ethnicities, we get together, and we share a meal together," said Kathy Brands, a pro-costume parent (quoted in McMillan 2008).

Nervous about the rising tension, school officials called the police to monitor the situation. Raheja received hundreds of e-mails and phone calls, many supportive, but many others filled with hateful epithets and racist jeers: "They go from being anxious about political correctness to calling me (an epithet). They don't know my daughter's name, but they've said hateful and disgusting things about my daughter" (quoted in Schmidt 2008). One caller hoped that Raheja's daughter would get beat up at school, while "another celebrated genocide of Native Americans" (Mehta 2008). On the blogosphere, the discourse took an even sharper, more vindictive and racist tone (see Raheja 2010: 221-32).⁶

Understandably, many educators are reticent to teach the whole truth to very young children. The colonization of the Americas was not a noble affair and, admittedly, confronting the myth of the First Thanksgiving takes the shine off of the venerated national holiday. Fortunately, one easy way to rid Thanksgiving of its colonial taint is by shifting curriculum away from "Pilgrims and Indians" altogether. If teachers want holiday curriculum to impart a feel-good message about friendship and sharing, they should avoid connecting Pilgrims and Indians to the holiday. Instead, curricula could be developed around values and traditions celebrated around the globe, such as agriculture, harvest, family togetherness, and gratitude. To me, as a foodways scholar, some of the most obvious alternatives to the First Thanksgiving myth lie in foodways activities, which can introduce the children to questions and experiences that render the motif of Pilgrims and Indians irrelevant. Some examples include:

Paper Plate Meal. Students describe the menu of their family's typical Thanksgiving meal (or another traditional family meal, if they don't celebrate the holiday), coloring the meal on a paper plate, and then writing and talking about it.

Plow to Platter, Field to Fork. Students learn about food systems, tracing the route taken by each food item to their tables. Older students could watch such documentary films as *Harvest of Shame* (1960), *Food, Inc.* (2009), and *Fresh* (2009), to spur discussions about the problems facing different the food system and possible solutions to those problems.

Auto-ethnographies. Students conduct ethnographic studies of the Thanksgiving meal, taking detailed notes about the acquisition of food, food preparation, pre-meal activities, family stories, as well as the actual meal, dessert, and post-meal activities. Reviewing these notes, students begin to appreciate the role that ritual plays in their own lives. Older students could use their own family's meal to examine gender dynamics, the division of labor, and meal rituals. By sharing their reports with others, students are exposed to the diversity of traditions included in this holiday.

"Protecting children from racism," says Michael Dorris, "is every bit as important as insuring that they avoid playing with electrical sockets. Poison is poison, and ingrained oppressive cultural attitudes are at least as hard to antidote, once implanted, as are imbibed cleaning fluids" (1991:78). Above all, he adds, "no information about native people is truly preferable to a reiteration of the same old

stereotypes, particularly in the early grades” (1991:78). Rather than reproducing stereotypical images of “Pilgrims” and “Indians,” we need curricular alternatives. “The antidote to feel-good history is not feel-bad history,” reminds James Loewen, “but honest and inclusive history” (1991:82). Since the mainstream presentation of the holiday is so singularly biased toward the colonizer, “it is particularly important that the schools stress the other perspectives” (Ramsey 1979:54). As a parent and a folklorist, I feel a personal obligation to confront the transmission of negative stereotypes through narrative and ritual. In the case of a school curriculum that unwittingly promotes falsehoods, ethnocentrism, and negative stereotypes, folklorists have an ethical obligation to put their considerable skills to work, offering information that might counteract the Eurocentric version of the history our children learn. Even modest advocacy attempts can have a ripple effect. As folklorists, we can provide an antidote through a curriculum that broadens children’s awareness of the complexities of history and the diversity of human experience.

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Notes

1. Beyond debating the reasons why I refer to the story for the First Thanksgiving as myth and not, for example, as legend or actual history is the subject of another article. Interested parties may refer to sources that address the history (e.g., Loewen 1991; Siskind [1992] 2002; Pleck 1999; Roth 2010).
2. This essay is excerpted from the conclusion of my dissertation, *Talking Turkey: Visual Media and the Unraveling of Thanksgiving*, which addresses three case studies in which individuals attempt to challenge representations of the master narrative and the prevailing Thanksgiving ideology (Roth 2010).
3. Other things they were learning that day included less objectionable topics, such as the Mayflower's journey, Native Americans tribes in Missouri, hunting and harvesting, and a Native American game.
4. For example, in 1970, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrim landing/invasion of Wampanoag land, a speech by Wampsutta (Frank B.) James was suppressed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In response, supporters organized the first Day of Mourning event (see James 1970; Villanueva 2004).
5. The section that received some of the strongest pushback was the exhibit that critiqued Indian stereotypes, which included the popular children's books *Little House on the Prairie* (Wilder 1932-1943) and *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks 1980), which are part of fourth grade curriculum in the Columbia Public Schools. "Somebody stole the materials from the exhibit because they did not want it to be taught!" Neville says.

Besides the anti-Indian rhetoric embedded within some of these comments, Raheja was most startled by the fact that the e-mail she wrote to her daughter's teacher was circulated without her permission to other parents and to the media, along with her name: "What it does is it effectively silences any parent in the future who has legitimate concerns with the school because who would want to be the target of this much hate over something that was actually so small?" she says, adding that the matter "could have easily been taken care of within the confines of the school" (quoted in Mehta 2008). Raheja's experience is a reminder of the power of tradition and its ability to suppress challenges to it. I watched nervously as similarly vitriolic comments rolled in response to a front-page story, "Americans Hang on to Thanksgiving Myths," appeared in the *Columbia Tribune* on Thanksgiving Day (see Silvey 2010).