

MST 645 Contemporary Issues in Public History
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Multiple Narratives of Thanksgiving

Being grateful for what we have does not always come naturally to us as we tend to take health, food, peace, safety for granted. Even more so in the twenty-first century when physical dangers have steadily declined, supposedly kept at bay by technological advances. Global repercussions of 2020 Covid pandemic has changed our perception of invincibility and in the Thanksgiving Days to come we are probably going to acknowledge what we have more than before. Yet, in the cultural and historical memory of the nation this holiday tends to be a little ambiguous. On the one hand it is a wholesome celebration of unity and plenty, on the other hand it tends to bring to the surface underlying tensions and anxieties we all experience when being around nearest and dearest and their judgments. In the American literary and film traditions Thanksgiving as a traditional theatrical device to portray family disfunction. Philip Roth eloquently calls the holiday a great ‘equalizer’:

“And it was never but once a year that they were brought together anyway, and that was on the neutral, dereligionized ground of Thanksgiving, when everybody gets to eat the same thing, nobody sneaking off to eat funny stuff—no kugel, no gefilte fish, no bitter herbs, just one colossal turkey for two hundred and fifty million people—one colossal turkey feeds all... A moratorium on all the grievances and resentments, [...] for everyone in America who is suspicious of everyone else. It is the American pastoral par excellence and it lasts twenty-four hours.”¹

Metaphorically speaking Roth picks up on a dysfunctional nature of the celebration, an ambiguity and dichotomy between its narrative and meaning. Changes that the notion of giving thanks as a societal ritual associated with one particular day went through reflects changes that took place in this country over the last three hundred years. It also reflects main American myths and repressed realities. Every family has secrets and dysfunctional family of America as a nation has several of its own. To see outline of these secrets more clearly let’s consider three different narratives surrounding Thanksgiving, in the end deciding if there is any way to truly reconcile them. Main ambiguity surrounding the holiday is how narration by the newly arrived and soon dominant Anglo-Saxons supplanted the actual truth of the genocide of Native Americans they have initiated.

First narrative of Thanksgiving is a traditional one of course and children grow up with it because it is uncomplicated and peaceful. As we know based on the facts and meticulously held records by the Plymouth colonists in November 1621 there was a three-day gathering when Native Americans hunted wild fowl and other local delicacies and brought them to colonists. Invitation came from William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth Colony to Massasoit, the Grand Sachem of the Wampanoag Federation to join the Pilgrims in order to celebrate a favorable harvest. Massasoit

¹ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, (1998), p.403.

brought 90 warriors in addition to brining venison, lobster, wild fowl, clams, oysters, eel, corn, squash and maple syrup.²

This story needs a few comments, all having to do with the nomenclature. To start with, colonists were members of the English Separatists Church who during the reign of King James I decided to run away to America in order to establish a purer society based on strict principles of faith and religiosity.³ To them Native Americans remained the ultimate others, heathen who either needed to be christened, otherwise their souls were condemned to go to hell. The colonists from Britain are also called ‘separatists’ as well as “Pilgrims,” although the second term was not used widely until 1840s when it was popularized by Daniel Webster, representing Massachusetts and New Hampshire to the U.S. Congress and U.S. Secretary of State in 1840-1843, on his way to becoming Secretary of State.⁴ The reason why Webster capitalized on looking at the early history of the country and rewriting “the past into a set of factually simple and poetically splendid tales resembling myth more than documentary history”⁵ was the social disruptions and civil later erupting in the Civil War. So, Webster looked at a ‘simpler’ time, time of harmony and peace as an inspiring example. One important note here is how much the term changes the meaning of the story. A pious Pilgrim versus English Separatist versus a colonist who it settling on a piece of land that never belonged to him.

Based on the facts or rather on narrative, as told by the narrators who in the end dominated the landscape, in 1620 fifty out of hundred settlers died within the first year of landing of *Mayflower* in what now is known as Provincetown Harbor because of the harsh climate of the area as well as their inability to consistently grow food. In 1621 the fate of the settlers looked better after meeting Squanto, a Native American who was earlier sold into slavery, brought to England, later escaping back to his village, Patuxet, that he found destroyed by illness. Nonetheless Squanto became instrumental for the settlers’ survival as he taught them how to plant the *Three Sisters* (corn, bean, squash, and sunflowers) as based on the tribal knowledge of growing these crops together creating a unique and mutually beneficial bacterial ecosystem.⁶ Most importantly, however, because Squanto could speak English, he became an ambassador and a messenger between the settlers and the surrounding Wampanoag Confederacy. We can assume that Squanto was instrumental for bringing Massasoit, the Grand Sachem of the Wampanoag Federation to join the settlers at Plymouth for a favorable harvest celebration.⁷

Here it is important to note how giving thanks was a very integral and organic part of ritual for New England tribes and Native Americans in general. If there was any affirming symbology or correspondence between the traditions of Native Americans and Pilgrims that settled on their lands it was their mutual belief in higher powers, be they called God Almighty or address more abstract

² Dennis Zotigh, “Do American Indians Celebrate Thanksgiving,” Smithsonian National Museum of Native Americans; Bernard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600–1675*.

³ “Plymouth Colony,” History.com

⁴ Dennis Zotigh, “Do American Indians Celebrate Thanksgiving,” Smithsonian National Museum of Native Americans.

⁵ Paul D. Erikson, “Daniel Webster’s Myth of the Pilgrims,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol.57, p.44.

⁶ Christina Gish Hill, “Regrowing Indigenous Agriculture Could Nourish People, Culture and the Land,” *In These Times*, November 21, 2021.

⁷ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*.

forces of nature. And feeling and expressing gratitude was natural for both spiritual impulses. Iroquois tribe had a formal celebration of thanksgiving with a speaker selected to verse his or her thanks on behalf of the whole tribe and his or her gratitude included the Creator of the land as well as all creatures and forces in it including rivers, birds, medicinal grasses and herbs.⁸ Giving thanks for what is positive in human life has been a natural gesture in uncertain and dangerous times on both sides of the Atlantic as time was full of chaos, violence and diseases.

As any myth of origin, the traditional narrative of Thanksgiving is reductive and unifying in its simplicity. For example, although Plymouth is widely known as a first colony on the North American shores it is far less known that parallel to the strict and conservative Plymouth existed Merrymount, a far more liberal enclave of immigrants from Britain. Merrymount was established on the South Shore of Massachusetts by Devonshire-born libertine Thomas Morton (1579-1647) in his search for an alternative, utopian social structure. Morton's colony was anthesis of the Plymouth and eventually he was exiled from the Americas in 1627 by an armed regiment under Plymouth's military commander Myles Standish.⁹ William Bradford, author *Of Plymouth Plantation*, the major chronicle of the period, described Morton's settlers as "consorts, dancing and frisking together like so many fairies, or furies, rather and worse practices.... Of the mad Bacchanalians."¹⁰ Yet, there Native Americans peacefully coexisted and also married the settlers.

This alternative story of earlier days of the American colonists was and is largely and purposefully overlooked because it offered a different model of nation's development and also because it is far too liberal and was far too inclusive in 1700s and beyond. Pilgrims as righteous and strict, even prim are far more morally suitable to be the founders of America. As we know in 1691 Plymouth colony, Maine Colony, and Massachusetts Bay Colonies were united into the Province of Massachusetts Bay thus laying ground for the first electoral assemblies of the future U.S. And one of these grounds was upright moral values.¹¹ However, fifty-four years before that reunification, in 1637, a significant and tragic event took place. And this is the second narrative of Thanksgiving, never fully understood or voiced as such. However, this specific aspect needs to be reexamined.

Second narrative of Thanksgiving is far more problematic than the traditional one, because it picks up on the emotionally, historically, and psychologically heavy issue of the Native American genocide. On May 26, 1637 near the Mystic River in Connecticut approximately 400 to 700 Pequot women, children, and old men were killed and burned by the united armed forces of the Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut colonies and Narraganset and Mohegan allies. Allegedly this extermination was a retaliation against raids and kidnappings from the Pequot tribe.¹² Slaughtering the weak link of the Pequot tribe in a few decades after the original Thanksgiving celebration and the tribe's contribution to the survival of the Plymouth colony, is especially indicative of the moral underpinnings of the Thanksgiving narrative as we traditionally know it.

⁸ Indians, Insanity and American History Blog, "Many Thanks."

⁹ Bernard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675*

¹⁰ Bernard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 345

¹¹ Rebecca Beatrice Brooks, History of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, January 5, 2015.

¹² Bernard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675*

Following the massacre enslaved Pequot were sent to Bermuda and West Indies. Estimated 300,000 Indians died by violence in New England following the massacre and many more were forced to migrate. In 1975 the official number of Pequot people living in Connecticut was just 21.¹³

This second narrative of colonialism and genocide does not at all go well with the traditional picture of white people peacefully gathering around the fire with Native Americans, while gratefully accepting fowl and food hunted for them on the land white people later appropriated. So why exactly would Native Americans celebrate Thanksgiving as a holiday? Indeed, many tribes since have marked it as a day of mourning for all the fallen indigenous people. The United American Indians of New England meet annually at Plymouth Rock for a Day of Mourning since 1970. Here is what they say: “We, the Wampanoag, welcomed you, the white man, with open arms, little knowing that this was beginning of the end, that before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoag would no longer be a free people.”¹⁴

It would be cynical if it was not just sad that November is declared American Indian and Alaskan Native Heritage Month. In addition, the national holiday of shopping, Black Friday, is simultaneously designated as the National American Indian Heritage Day. Native Americans have largely disappeared from the national historical narrative with semi-liquidation of their tribes and appropriation of their lands. Local conflicts between Native Americans and the colonists culminated in 1675 King Phillip’s War that wiped out New England Native population and whoever was left alive was sold into slavery.¹⁵

What the main white narrative of Thanksgiving has conveniently forgotten is the fact of the genocide. “Although the consensus on such estimates has been tenuous, much of the related demographic debate over pre-contact and post-contact population statistics asserts per capita loss percentages unparalleled in human history”¹⁶ Taking lands away from Native Americans by President Andrew Jackson in 1830 through the Indian Removal Act that was yet another grave insult and injustice to the people who were here first and who welcomed and probably saved the newcomers. For Native American tribes the concept of balance and interdependence on each other and on the surrounding environment was a foundational concept.¹⁷ Hence expansion of the colonists that over time grew more and more into imperialism and almost total destruction of the tribes and their natural habitats and structures was an attitude and paradigm unfamiliar and shocking to the tribes. These grand ambitions and deadly warfare of settlers took Native Americans by surprise and brought an end to their civilization. A civilization that was unique and flourishing for thousands of years before any single arrival of a white man to the American shores. Forgetting

¹³ Dennis Zotigh, “Do American Indians Celebrate Thanksgiving,” Smithsonian National Museum of Native Americans.

¹⁴ Jessica Hill, “Not All Native Americans Celebrate Thanksgiving. Find Out Why,” Cape Cod Times November 19, 2020.

¹⁵ Rebecca Beatrice Brooks, *History of the Massachusetts Bay Colony*, January 5, 2015.

¹⁶ Ed. Samuel Totten, Robert R. Hitchcock, *Indigenous Peoples Genocide A Critical Bibliographic Review, Volume 8*, p. 17.

¹⁷ Bernard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600–1675*

this component of the Thanksgiving narrative is a deliberate act of ignorance, prejudice, and short-sightedness.

Third narrative of Thanksgiving traces its meandering history from a probably uneventful get-together in 1621 to a holiday of a national significance as proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln in 1863. As is well known and documented by mid-19th century the Union was deeply divided as Southern states feared that the North might abolish slavery, while the North feared that the slavery might move to the newly added territories.¹⁸ If this was to happen a balance of power configured between the existing states would have been disrupted giving a significant control to the North.

As aptly described by George Templeton Strong, a Northerner lawyer in 1860 "The bird of our country is a debilitated chicken, disguised in eagle feathers. We have never been a nation. We are only an aggregate of communities, ready to fall apart at the first serious shock. We are weak, divided, disgraced people, unable to maintain our national existence."¹⁹ A stronger national control was needed and bloodshed of the Civil War ensued in 1861-1865. 20 million people in the North fought with 9 million people in the South, 4 of those millions were slaves, whom their masters decided not to arm.²⁰

In October 1863 after his victory at Gettysburg Lincoln used an idea of the holiday to create a unifying tradition for a deeply divided nation. Lincoln followed urges of a magazine editor and a passionate nationalist Sarah Josepha Hale,²¹ but he was also continuing in line with the Founding Fathers. George Washington as well as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams all occasionally celebrated Thanksgiving.²²

Sara Josepha Hale's motivation in advocating for Thanksgiving is especially interesting. It is best expressed in her editorial for the influential *Godey's Ladies Book*, a most widely read magazine in 19th century America.²³ In 1837 Hale wrote:

"It might, without inconvenience, be observed on the same day of November, say the last Thursday in the month, throughout all New England; and also in our sister states, who have engrafted it upon their social system. It would then have a national character, which would, eventually, induce all the states to join in the commemoration of "Ingathering," which it celebrates. It is a festival which will never become obsolete, for it cherishes the best affections of the heart – the social and domestic ties. It calls together the dispersed members of the family circle, and brings plenty, joy and gladness to the dwellings of the poor and lowly."²⁴

¹⁸ Ken Burns, *The Civil War: a film by Ken Burns*.1990.

¹⁹ Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas (eds.), *The Diary of George Templeton Strong* (4 vols, New York, 1952), III, p.103.

²⁰ Ken Burns, *The Civil War: a film by Ken Burns*.1990.

²¹ Isaak Stanley-Becker, "We Celebrate Thanksgiving because of this poignant proclamation of Abraham Lincoln," Washington Post, November 20, 2018.

²² James R.Harrigan, "The Lesser Known History of Thanksgiving in America," Foundation for Economic Education, November 23,2017.

²³ Erin Blakemore, "The Woman's Magazine That Tried to Stop the Civil War," JStore Daily.

²⁴ The Thanksgiving Editorials of Sarah Josepha Hale From The Pages of Godey's Lady's Book. Pilgrim Hall Museum. (n.d.).

And although it took about thirty years in the end, she succeeded in persuading President Lincoln. In her strong vision Thanksgiving had to be a uniform holiday on par with Independence Day. Because “it makes us feel from the icy North to the sunny South that we are one family, each a member of a great and free Nation, not merely the unit of a remote locality, is worthy of being cherished.”²⁵

This quote brings us full circle to the first quote used in this essay by Philip Roth namely a metaphor of America as a family and Thanksgiving turkey as the great equalizer. Without adding any more historical information and citations that of course could be introduced or added let’s now try to analyze how are we to reconcile the three narratives with reality we are living today.

The first narrative builds on the traditional story of a harmonious meal in Plymouth, largely invented in 1840s by Daniel Webster using ‘a simpler time’ as a way to unify the country as it was visibly falling apart in response to economic pressures and voiced concerns over human dignity and questionability of slavery as a morally acceptable instrument for producing crops. So, in its premise Sara Josepha Hale’s painstaking and highly driven approach of introducing Thanksgiving as a uniting national holiday was also building on this illusory and simple story introduced earlier by another white man. I tried hard to find any mention of Hale’s views on the massacre of Native American’s that took place in 1637, but it needs deeper archival work. Yet, I think it is fairly obvious from her quotes above that for her the fact that the New England colonizers actually appropriated lands that did not belong to them and largely exterminated the indigenous civilization that lived in more or less peaceful and sustainable harmony with each other was not something that registered with highly educated and influential women of her class and time.

Why was that? Why is that even today we as a society ignore the second narrative traced in this essay. A whole civilization was wiped out, a civilization that knew how to balance its needs with needs of nature. We ignore this narrative because we are in power, because we are still here and this is a story we do not want to acknowledge. It is better to keep it repressed and maybe discussed on college and university campuses, but not in the public policy forums. Because if we discussed it openly as a society, we would need changes if we want to at least seem as an equitable society. Social and cultural changes brought over by Black Lives Matters last year demand us to reframe our position as a dominant culture and at least acknowledge our mistakes and debts. Let’s hope that on one Thanksgiving Day this will happen for Native Americans too. We just need to find someone as driven and as passionate as Sara Josepha Hale and as persuasive as Daniel Webster who will be able to highlight the true narrative of this complex story.

²⁵ The Thanksgiving Editorials of Sarah Josepha Hale From The Pages of Godey’s Lady’s Book. Pilgrim Hall Museum. (n.d.).

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