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Decolonizing the History of Thanksgiving

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It's Thanksgiving once again: that day, every year, when we are all gluttonous to celebrate the fact that 'Pilgrims and Indians' had a harmonious meal — at least that is how it has been framed historically.

Let's be honest. On the last Thursday of November, every year, we celebrate the beginning of an European invasion that ends with the death or relocation of millions of native people. While many have tried to redefine the meaning of Thanksgiving into a time wherein we cultivate a sense of gratitude, the undeniable truth is that the blood of native people stains the genesis of the holiday.

The colonial origins of Thanksgiving – or what many natives often refer to as Thankskilling or Thankstaking – is not something to celebrate. While we cannot pinpoint one specific or original “Thanksgiving” celebration, President Abraham Lincoln made it a national holiday in 1863 and conceived it as a national day of thanksgiving. “Pilgrims and Indians” weren't included in the tradition until 1890. The national mythos surrounding this holiday does not take into consideration the long and violent history of contact between European settlers (in this case English pilgrims – puritans) and indigenous populations that already inhabited the land. It is in these forgotten histories that we see the history of this holiday for what it truly is: English pilgrims, unprepared to survive on the land and unfamiliar with the vegetation, waterways, and others food sources, stranded on Turtle Island who survive those early winters and ultimately engage in a brutal campaign of colonialism and genocidal activity.

It is important that we think clearly and honestly about how the beatified pilgrims saw the natives. Five time Plymouth County Governor William Bradford said the natives were “savage people, who are cruel, barbarous, and most treacherous.” Clearly not the people you would like to feast with, yet our national narrative surrounding this holiday celebrates the first Thanksgiving as a moment of harmonious bridge building. This is clearly not the case. Especially when we learn about the Pequot Massacre of 1637. This is just one in a multitude of genocidal tactics employed against the indigenous peoples of this land since white Europeans arrived in 1492. Of this event, Governor Bradford said,

Those that escaped the fire were slain with the sword; some hewed to pieces, others run through with their rapiers, so that they were quickly dispatched and very few escaped. It was conceived they thus destroyed about 400 at this time. It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire...horrible was the stink and scent thereof, but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the prayers thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them.

The occupiers *celebrated* the genocide — and thanked God for the victory. Immediately following the Pequot Massacre of 1637, the occupiers worked diligently to whitewash history. The name of the tribe was erased from the map. The Pequot River became the Thames, and the geographic space the Pequot inhabited became known as New London. It is as if they never existed.

The whitewashing and erasure of indigenous histories is not unique to this holiday, but it is, perhaps, one of the most ironic instances of indigenous mass murder in service of white European colonial expansion. The idea that we celebrate the notion that indigenous peoples and

the white European occupiers who literally sought their extinction were able to put their differences to the side long enough to sit down and feast upon food, in relative peace and harmony, is deeply problematic. Even more so is the idea that it was the white European occupiers who had to teach and demonstrate “civility” to these “barbarous savages.” With the Pequot massacre in mind, it is clear which group in the Thanksgiving picture were the real “barbarous savages” and who were the ones practicing civility.

The language and the rhetoric surrounding the holiday erase the true history of settler-colonialism. The Pequot Massacre is just one mere instance in the long history of evil acts that began with the white European occupation of Turtle Island. This is also not the first time we have seen the descendants of the occupiers attempt to create a new civic identity by whitewashing history and silencing indigenous voices while erasing indigenous bodies. We see this unfolding in Oklahoma (Okla-humma, Choctaw for “Red People”), where non-native occupiers see no shame in calling themselves “Sooners” (those who stole land prior to the Oklahoma Land Runs — a territory that was, by treaty, set aside specifically and solely for tribal communities “so long as the rivers run and the sun shines...”).

However, indigenous peoples and our co-conspirators cannot stand idly by as those who continue to employ colonial and, ultimately, genocidal tactics against our communities, rewrite, and revise history to justify both their actions and the actions of their ancestors. We must thoughtfully and intentionally intervene because while “Boomer Sooner,” “R*nsk*ns,” and “Thanksgiving” may seem inconsequential to some, the historical context that gave rise to these terms and celebrations contribute to real life consequences that still impact native people in this country.

Native women are the group most likely to be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes, with low estimates suggesting 1-in-3 in her lifetime. Upwards of 80% or more of these cases are perpetrated by non-native males. There are 2,000 reports of missing and murdered Indigenous Women from Turtle Island, and suicide in native communities far surpasses the national average for every age group. Natives have the shortest lifespan of any group living in the United States, and this rate is even lower for those living on reservations. Historical or intergenerational trauma is literally embedded in native DNA, and many of our parents and grandparents were stolen from their families and forced into boarding schools that had the expressed mission to “civilize the savage” and “kill the Indian but save the man.”

Physical torture, sexual assault, murder, public shaming, and stealing the culture of native children accomplished this. Psychological studies have demonstrated that native mascots negatively affect the psyche and wellbeing of native youth and many of these children have a difficult time making it through K-12, never mind college. Further, native people are virtually helpless when a non-native perpetrates a crime on native land. The victims have no jurisdiction over non-natives and the only way they could ever achieve justice is if the already overloaded federal government decides the case is worth pursuing. The silencing of native voices not only happened historically, but also continues today.

Whitewashing history, revising history, and developing rhetoric that celebrates the creation of a new civic identity for European occupiers—these all contribute to the oppression of indigenous peoples and tribal communities. The stories like those told about the Indians and Pilgrims at

Thanksgiving ingrain a false sense of truth into the mind of the general public. These stories tell the populace that “everything is okay,” and, in fact, the “Indians owe a lot to the Pilgrims.” A closer examination and orientation with actual history, however, will negate these ideas and will enable the public to see how and, more importantly, *why* these stories – Columbus, Thanksgiving, Boomer Sooner – are told the way they are. These stories are extensions of colonialism and are in fact genocidal tactics. By erasing and replacing the true stories with those of “Thanksgiving,” the occupier continues to remain complicit in genocide.

So enjoy that turkey...but remember that you are doing so in a land that was stolen. Honor the dead by remembering their stories and their sacrifice.