

# *Food*

**I N T H E**



**A R E A D E R**



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**THE INVENTION OF THANKSGIVING:  
A RITUAL OF AMERICAN NATIONALITY**

JANET SISKIND

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Though traditions are invented and nations imagined, Thanksgiving is a day on which all persons who consider themselves Americans celebrate or avoid a ritual family feast, centered around a stuffed turkey. For many it is a four-day holiday, a precious long weekend. Football games are scheduled and televised throughout the nation; an elaborately constructed, now-traditional Macy's parade may be viewed. There are special services, which some attend, and turkeys and other foods are given by churches and other charitable organizations to the poor. Servicemen overseas are fed the traditional Thanksgiving dinner at great public expense. There are those who counterculturally contest the mythic representations of this day; there are those who firmly decide *not* to go home or *not* to eat turkey, but it is impossible to be an American and be unaware of Thanksgiving. If "American culture is whatever one cannot escape in the United States" (Varenne, 1986: 6), then Thanksgiving is inescapably part of American culture.

Thanksgiving and July 4th are the two most important, purely American, holidays, celebrated only and by all those who consider themselves American citizens. July 4th is an occasion for politicians, backyard barbecues and marching bands. It usually provides a welcome three-day summer weekend, but it is no longer, as it was once, a serious ritual event. Thanksgiving far more subtly expresses and reaffirms values and assumptions about cultural and social unity, about identity and history, about inclusion and exclusion. Thanksgiving is highly structured and emotion laden, with its celebration of family, home and nation. Though for some people Thanksgiving is a secular celebration, for most it is also religious (in the common anthropological sense of making reference to the supernatural), as a prayer is said before the meal and/or people attend a church service, which includes a special Thanksgiving sermon.

"Modern celebration of Thanksgiving Day is a ritual affirmation of what Americans believe was the Pilgrim experience, the particularly American experi-

ence of confronting, settling, adapting to, and civilizing the New World” (Robertson, 1980: 15). For the great majority of Americans, of course, their relation to these Pilgrims is neither biological nor cultural, neither ethnic nor religious. Thanksgiving is a time to establish, affirm and believe that this is their culture history. In Anthony Wallace’s sense that the goal of ritual is a transformation of state to some desired end (Wallace, 1966), participation in this ritual transforms a collection of immigrants into Americans by connecting them to a cultural history stretching back to the “founding” of the country. The tradition of America, that immigrants will be incorporated—or, at least, their children will be—as true members of the society is accomplished, and the belief that we are “a nation of immigrants” is confirmed and validated.

In every household that considers itself American or desires to be considered American, Thanksgiving brings family members back home, physically and emotionally, ritually transforming attenuated ties of kinship into a strong bond. The Thanksgiving feast charges the set of meanings incorporated in being or becoming an American with the emotional intensity and significance of family. At the same time, Thanksgiving invests the value of family ties with an aura of religion and patriotism.

Turkey is the central symbol of Thanksgiving. In schools throughout the country children make pictures of live turkeys, with brilliant feathers; pictures of turkeys appear on magazines, in store windows. On Thanksgiving Day, the turkey makes a gala entrance, served on a platter, roasted, stuffed, quite dead. Robertson suggests that “Turkey is consumed at Thanksgiving feasts because it was native to America, and because it is a symbol of the bounteous richness of the wilderness. . . .” (Robertson, 1980: 15). It symbolizes precisely what Robertson suggests and even more. The stuffed turkey represents the Native Americans, sacrificed and consumed in order to bring civilization to the New World.<sup>1</sup> It is a model of and a model for the “other”, and in this national communion its ingestion connects proper Americans to their spiritual ancestors, the Pilgrims.

The myth that validates the Thanksgiving ritual is taught in schools throughout November. Robertson tells the story as follows:

The Pilgrims, persecuted in England and unhappy in Holland, took the ship *Mayflower* and sailed ultimately to a place they called Plymouth, near Cape Cod. They met with harsh times and starvation through the winter, while they struggled to build log cabins to live in and hunted to get food. In the spring, the Indians taught them how to plant corn (maize) and fertilize it with fish, and how to plant other Indian foods. When the harvest was in, the Pilgrims had a feast of thanksgiving to which the Indians came. At the feast they ate the corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins which they had learned to grow from the Indians, and they ate wild turkeys and other game the Indians had taught them to hunt. And they gave thanks to God for the new land, for their new life in it, and for all the bountiful things He had given to them. (1980: 15)

This myth, known to all Americans, resonates against the other deeply held cultural images of violence between Whites and Indians: pioneers and Indians, cowboys and Indians.

At Thanksgiving, everyone knows that across the nation members of every other household are simultaneously feasting on stuffed turkey, sweet potatoes, pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce.<sup>2</sup> The experience is part of feeling oneself a member of the nation, of the imagined community, taking part in a 400-year tradition. However, in its present form, Thanksgiving dates back only to the end of the 19th century. In Hobsbawm’s phrase, it is an “invented tradition”, one “which seeks to

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inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1983a: 1).

The purpose of this article is to look more closely at the elements that are currently brought together in a ritual and myth of origins—giving thanks, family feast, the symbolism of the turkey and the meaning of the Pilgrims—to empower a nationalist identity. The sources and historic moments that are considered here are only partial (a total deconstruction would involve a library of history, literature, art and social science) and are those that most closely relate to Thanksgiving Day itself.

### ★ NO, VIRGINIA, THERE WAS NO FIRST THANKSGIVING

The Pilgrims of Plymouth, like the Puritans in other Massachusetts and Connecticut settlements, religiously observed only the Sabbath, days of fasting or humiliation, and days of thanksgiving. These days of fasting or thanksgiving, like the Sabbath, were serious occasions for long sermons, prayer and abstinence from work and play. They were announced, originally, by the leader of the congregation. When events were seen to signify the displeasure of the deity, a day of fasting would be announced; or, if events signified his beneficence, a day of thanksgiving would be proclaimed (Baker, 1989;<sup>3</sup> Love, 1895). Such days were observed frequently throughout the year. On days of thanksgiving, a meal may have been taken the evening before or between or after sermons, but the preparation and consumption of a meal was not an important ritual activity.

The celebrated historic feast in Plymouth clearly does not fit as a day of thanksgiving. It has been construed as a harvest festival, descended from an English custom of the Harvest Home (Hatch, 1978: 1053), a politically motivated feast to maintain the colony's alliance with the Wampanoag Indians (Humins, 1987: 61), but it also closely resembles the Algonkians' feasts,<sup>4</sup> at which people from many places came to take part in ceremonies related to the yearly cycle of corn. They danced, hunted for venison, and played games (Butler, 1948: 26). These ceremonies were “performed usually but once or twice a year...their usual time is about *Michaelmass*, when their corn is first ripe...” (Denton, 1670, quoted by Butler, 1948: 25). *Michaelmass* occurs at the end of September and the date of the Plymouth feast has been placed between 23 September and 11 November (Love, 1895: 75 footnote).

The connection between these three days of feasting in Plymouth in the fall of 1621 and our celebration of Thanksgiving is purely, but significantly, mythological. There are other contenders for the honor of holding the “First Thanksgiving”, such as 9 August 1607, by colonists traveling to Popham Colony in Maine, and 4 December 1619, by settlers of a small plantation, the Berkeley Hundred, Virginia (Hatch, 1978: 1053–4). But the search for the site of the very first Thanksgiving is part of the origin myth itself. Why, between 1880 and 1900, the Pilgrims became the authentic American ancestors, Plymouth became the chosen site of our national origin myth, and Thanksgiving its expression and celebration is one of the questions explored below.

### ★ A CHOSEN PEOPLE

While there is no direct continuity between the feast at Plymouth in 1621 and our November Thanksgiving feast, there are rhetorical and ideological continuities to Puritan beliefs of their destiny and mission as a chosen people. An extensive litera-



ture documents the Puritan identification of themselves with the biblical Israelites, and, as Leach has pointed out, the Israelites themselves needed mythical justification that they were indeed “the divinely ordained owners of the whole promised land...” when in empirical fact “the land in question has a very mixed population...” from which they religiously excluded themselves (Leach, 1969: 53–4). In a similar fashion the New England settlers sought help from the Native Americans, took their land and fields, but regarded *them* as heathen savages or devils. “And the thanks were, of course, given to God...” (Robertson, 1980: 16). Puritan belief interpreted the plague and epidemics that killed off “90% to 96% of the inhabitants [Native Americans] of southern New England” as proof of God’s good intentions (Loewen, 1991: 13).

Roger Williams’s is one of the few alternate texts to survive. He argued against Puritans’ belief and effort to identify themselves as a chosen group of Saints, England as Babylon, and America as the New Canaan (Bercovitch, 1978: 43). Williams had also proposed that Native Americans were people who could be dealt with, not devils, not merely pawns in the hands of the Puritan’s deity. He was, of course, exiled.

“Through... rhetorical ambiguities the clergy explained the meaning of the American wilderness. What seemed merely another worldly enterprise, financed by English entrepreneurs, was in reality a mission for ‘the General Restoration of Mankind from the Curse of the Fall...’” (Bercovitch, 1978: 43). The calling of a congregation to fast or thanksgiving was part of this world view, which perceived all events as due to the intervention of the Lord on the part of his chosen people.

The major source for studying when, where, by whom and on what occasions days of thanksgiving were announced is a carefully documented work, *Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England*, written by the Reverend William De Loss Love, Jr of Hartford, Connecticut, and published in 1895.<sup>5</sup> Love constructed a “Calendar”, which records every documented announcement of a fast or thanksgiving in the New England and Middle Colonies (later states) from 1620 to 1815 by town, colony, state or nation. A recent source, *Thanksgiving: An American Holiday, An American History* by Diane Appelbaum, less scholarly but nonetheless informative, takes the story up to the present.

The leaders of Puritan congregations in the New England colonies found frequent occasions to call for days of fasts to placate the Lord, who had sent droughts, starvation or Indian attacks, and days of thanksgivings to give proper thanks for a lucky harvest, the defeat of an enemy, a critical rainfall.

The authority to announce days of fast or thanksgiving was originally a church leader’s prerogative, but at Plymouth Colony civil authority exercised this power as early as 1623 (Love, 1895: 85). In 1636 a law was passed “concerning the appointment of fasts and thanksgivings” which stated “That it be in the power of the

Governor & Assit to comand solemn dates of humiliacon by fasting &c, and also for thankesgiving as occasion shall be offered” (Plymouth Colony Records, xi.18, quoted by Love, 1895: 87). This authority, however, was contested. Despite the 1636 law, the first documented day of thanksgiving to be celebrated throughout the New England colonies was announced in 1637 by the entire church leadership of the New England colonies to celebrate the defeat of the Pequot Indians.

According to Trumbull: “This happy event gave joy to the colonies. A day of public thanksgiving was appointed, and in all the churches of New England devout and animated praises were



addressed to Him who giveth his people the victory” (Trumbull, 1797: i.93, quoted by Love, 1895: 135).

In 1676, the ministers were in disagreement with the secular leadership, the governor and magistrates of Massachusetts. There had been encouraging progress in the war against King Philip, leader of the Wampaneog people and their allies, who were making a last desperate attempt to save their lands and their people from the genocidal forces of the settlers. The secular leadership of Massachusetts wanted to declare a day of thanksgiving; the religious leadership wanted a day of fasting. The secular council of Massachusetts won, and a colony-wide day of celebration was announced (1895: 200).

The contest between religious and secular leaderships concerned many issues—control over people, taxes and tithes—and in addition it was a struggle for the control of the “dominant culture” (Bercovitch, 1978: xiii), the Puritan “rhetoric and vision [which] facilitated the process of colonial growth. And . . . effectually formed a powerful vehicle of middle-class ideology: a ritual of progress through consensus, a system of sacred-secular symbols for a laissez-faire creed . . .” (27–8). This is the true continuity of American culture with its Puritan ancestry. The transfer from religious leader to secular of the authority to announce fasts and thanksgivings included a transfer and transformation of Puritan rhetoric to the scarcely more secular rhetoric of American political discourse and American civil religion (Bercovitch, 1978). In appropriating the power to call the people to give thanks or pray for forgiveness the secular government appropriated the Puritan rhetoric for its own.

It is possible to see from Love’s Calendar that at Plymouth Colony the actual announcements alternated between church and secular authority well into the 18th century. By 1735, however, with the exception of Massachusetts Bay where the clergy was powerful, all proclamations of fasts and thanksgivings were made by the civil authorities. By 1775, the secular authorities had won even in Massachusetts. After this date, notwithstanding an occasional proclamation by a cleric in Pennsylvania, New York or New Jersey, overwhelmingly this power was exercised by the secular authorities.

At the time of the Revolution, the authority to appoint days of fasting and thanksgiving became an issue in the debate over the powers of the Federal Government and the States. In the autumn of 1777 “came the surrender of Burgoyne, in consequence of which the first Continental thanksgiving day was appointed, December 18, 1777” (1895: 400). In 1778 Congress appointed “a spring fast, April 22, and an autumn Thanksgiving, December 30”, and though several states anticipated these dates, they kept the national date too (1895: 344). Under Washington, the Congress continued to proclaim fast and thanksgiving days for the nation, but state governments also continued independently to set a day aside each year for celebrating a thanksgiving connected to harvest time.

Fears of continuing social or economic revolution, resentment of unequal wealth and power, these fueled the arguments after the Revolution over Federalism and anti-Federalism, separation of Church and State, and from John Adams’s time until 1815, no days of thanksgiving were set. President James Madison set a day of thanksgiving for 13 April 1815, to celebrate the peace with Britain, but claimed in a letter written several years later that it had only been a recommendation (in Stokes, 1950: 491).

From the post-revolutionary period to the Civil War the rhetoric of chosenness and national mission appears to have been expressed in July 4th oratory celebrat-



ing the Revolution and the triumph of the Republic as furthering God's plan (Bercovitch, 1978: 140–52). The states celebrated Thanksgiving during this period, and it developed into an autumn family celebration, as discussed below. The struggle and trauma of the Civil War again brought an appeal to the deity for direct guidance and support of the nation, and Lincoln proclaimed several days of thanksgiving for Northern victories during the Civil War period.

These proclamations followed the tradition of religiously giving thanks to the deity (Sandburg, 1939, vol. 2: 359, 446; vol. 3: 46, 229), and fully exploited sacred rhetoric, combining the mission of the nation with the uniqueness of its relation to God. He set 6 August 1863 “as a day of national thanksgiving”, inviting “the people of the United States to assemble on that occasion in their customary place of worship, and, in the forms approved by their own consciences, render the homage due to the Divine Majesty for the wonderful things he has done in the nation's behalf...” (15 July 1863, quoted in Sandburg, 1939, vol. 2: 359). In both 1863 and 1864 (along with other days) a day of thanksgiving was proclaimed for the last Thursday in November. President Johnson and succeeding presidents followed Lincoln's precedent and continued to set the last Thursday in November as an annual Thanksgiving, thus fully appropriating the ritual for the nation over the individual states and laying the groundwork for its further development as a political-religious ritual of nationality.

As Steinberg pointed out in an article published on Thanksgiving Day, 1981: when the Union is troubled or questioned, announcements of Thanksgiving are a political response. In addition to Washington's and Lincoln's proclamations, Steinberg cites Herbert Hoover's during the Great Depression of the 1930s and Ronald Reagan's in the 1980s (Steinberg, 1981).

#### **★ FEASTS AND HOMECOMINGS—EARLY AND MID-19TH CENTURY**

By the time of Lincoln's announcements, a late autumn thanksgiving, complete with feast, had become customary, though reference to neither Pilgrims nor origin myth was in evidence. Although originally both fasts and thanksgivings were occasions for long sermons and abstinence from work and play, as early as 22 December 1636, in Scituate, Massachusetts, part of the Plymouth Colony, there was a celebration which combined a day of thanksgiving with a congregation-wide feast. “This is the earliest example in the Plymouth Colony of feasting in connection with a thanksgiving day...” (Love, 1895: 88). There may, of course, have been earlier occasions, but they are not documented. This combination of feasting with an announcement of a thanksgiving (still not *the* Thanksgiving) was repeated at Scituate on 12 October 1637 and again on 11 December 1639. As Love makes clear, “This does not prove that the day had assumed an annual character, but it shows an important feature of the development towards that, namely, the thanksgiving feast” (p. 89). Even in Boston, part of the strict Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, there is evidence of a feast after the religious services for thanksgiving at the time of the pan-colony thanksgiving of 1636 (p. 135).

Feasting as a form of celebration had been part of an earlier English tradition associated both with harvest festivals and thanksgiving days (Love, 1895: 50, 76–7), suppressed but apparently not exterminated by the Puritan strictures.<sup>6</sup> The re-emergence of a feasting tradition may have been eased by the fact that, while strict



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avoidance of holy days and other Anglican idolatry had sharply set apart Puritan reformers in England, the early colony faced no competition to its faith, and rules could be relaxed. The announcements of thanksgivings, therefore, became calls to feast as well as to prayer, and as thanksgiving tended to be limited to a single occasion in the fall the feast was ritualized.

The household became the site of ritual performance in contrast to the earliest thanksgivings which were community-wide or congregational in character. The gradually emerging tradition in New England was one which emphasized the family household rather than the community. Reverend Love, the champion of Thanksgiving, approved this change and demonstrates its significance:

As the household became the self-sustaining unit of their life, it was better that the family should feast together, rather than that the richer should invite the poorer, or that they should divide into three companies as Lothrop's church did. (1895: 421)

While charity to the poor has remained a concern of churches, the community model of shared obligations, relations of dependency and respect was replaced by a model of separate, equivalent family units. A homogeneous imaginary community was constructed out of these household building blocks in place of the real village and congregation, with its known divisions of class and wealth. Colony, state or nation became the site of social identity as secular authorities created a moment during which each household knew that all other households were celebrating in the same way at the same time. Thanksgiving celebrates and obfuscates the destruction of community, constructing the family and nation as the only bastions against a Hobbesian world, and making the appearance of proper family relations, as demonstrated by full observance of the feast, the requirement and proof of national identity.

Love's Calendar shows a progression of increasing simultaneity of decision as to fast or thanksgiving. In the early years each town or church appeared to decide quite independently whether to fast or give thanks. By the 1770s, the announcements were made primarily colony-wide, and by looking at which kind of day was announced by each colony within a two-week period, it is possible to see that there was an increasing tendency for the still separate colonies to announce the same kind of observance, fast or thanksgiving. These observances were sometimes on the same date, sometimes within the same week or two (pp. 464–514). As the colonies, and later the states, continued to announce fasts and thanksgivings, increasingly there was a single fast in the spring and a single thanksgiving in the late fall.<sup>7</sup> By 1863, most of the states had been announcing an autumn thanksgiving celebration each year, although it was not necessarily the same day each year (Love, 1895: 407).

By the mid-19th century, Thanksgiving had become associated with homecoming (Baker, 1989). The simple virtues of the past were merged with the return home to the rural family farm and the rural extended family. Returning home for Thanksgiving was both a metaphor and a ritual performance of solidarity, renewing or validating family ties. In 1858, "it was reliably estimated that upwards of 10,000 people left New York City to spend the holiday in New England" (Appelbaum, 1984: 76).

Based on the study of more than a thousand of the most popular textbooks used in the 19th century, Ruth Elson noted that in the first half of the century "side by side with unstinted praise of industrial progress", there was an "idealization of an American society which was still predominantly rural" (Elson, 1964: 25). In the second half of the century "the cultivator of the soil is at the same time a cultivator of



virtue...”, and there was “a strong element of nostalgia, of looking back to a simpler, more rural, and more virtuous America” (1964: 27). These textbooks are filled with stories telling endless memories of childhood on the farm and equating the simpler past of the individual with the “simpler past of the society” (1964: 29).

Elson concludes that the world created in 19th-century schoolbooks was essentially a world of fantasy, and considering the thoroughgoing transformations of American life in the first half of the 19th century it is difficult not to agree. This was a period in which the rapid development and expansion of industrial capitalism was changing the environment, the laws, the relations of production, the population, etc. Factories and cities, capitalists and workers were replacing family farms and artisanal production. Slave resistance and the growing power of the northern manufacturing class was threatening the South. Abolitionist ministers preached sermons against slavery on the state-held Thanksgiving Day.

But for most Americans, Thanksgivings were a time for sentimental pilgrimages as tens of thousands of people returned to their rural homes within the period of a week or two. With the establishment of a national, annual day of Thanksgiving everyone knew that all over the country others were also traveling homeward, that in every decent home throughout the nation preparations were under way, and that on that special Thursday we were all sitting down to a large turkey feast. The annual national holiday appropriated for the State these apprehensions of community, familial solidarity and Christian prayer which had already entered the developing sense of nationality.

★ **NATIVE AMERICANS BECOME INDIANS/TURKEYS**

Served up on the Thanksgiving table, roasted well and nicely stuffed, the turkey became the focus of the feast in the early 19th century (Appelbaum, 1984: 267). As Robertson and others have suggested, this American bird symbolizes the bounty, the conquered wilderness, the imposition of civilization on the American continent. Yet before the 19th century, all these had been symbolized by a multitude of different foods; “the presence of three or four kinds of meat emphasized the status of this meal as a major feast, but a chicken pie signified that the feast was Thanksgiving dinner” (Appelbaum, 1984: 268).

Practical reasons undoubtedly can be found for turkeys becoming less expensive and more available at this time, but no such approach can explain the elaboration of attention to live turkeys destined for the table. Like the Aztec custom of decorating and feasting their human offerings to the gods before the day of sacrifice, the turkey in the farmyard was fed and admired. In the mid-19th century as today, pictures of live Tom Turkeys in full feather appeared at Thanksgiving time in magazines and decorations (Baker, 1989), prefiguring their ritual presentation as the Thanksgiving offering.

More than just a part of the wilderness that has been civilized, the Thanksgiving turkey powerfully symbolizes the Indians. It is a symbol of a symbol, since the concept of “Indian” is already a reduction of all the varied individuals and nations of Native America into a homogeneous “other”. The term reduces and conceals all those who lived in the past as well as those who live in the US now, defining them only in terms of the dominant culture.

There are several recent studies that have analyzed literature, philosophy, popular culture and government policy to trace how Native Americans were conceptu-

alized, perceived and treated as “Indians”—the differences among them expunged, the differences between them and Whites misperceived, exaggerated and distorted (see, for example: Berkhofer, 1978; Matz, 1988; Neuwirth, 1982; Stedman, 1982). The duality of the images constructed of the Indians is noted by each study, and there is a rough agreement on how these images shifted over time as the dominant culture succeeded in expropriating more of their lands and controlling more of their lives. In the 17th and 18th centuries the predominant imagery portrays Native Americans as savage heathens or noble savages. In the early and mid-19th century they are portrayed as either treacherous, therefore, bad or dead and, thereby, good. From the late 19th century through most of this century the contrast has been between degraded (bad) and vanished (good). The categories certainly overlap in time and meaning and history. In the East, where the Native Americans had been cleared from their lands by the mid-19th century, the possibility of nostalgically romanticizing the vanished or disappearing Indians was available earlier than in the West.

It is this construction of Indian that is stated symbolically in the Thanksgiving images of live and stuffed turkeys. An early example of this Indian imagery is particularly interesting as it gives some hints of how the meanings of Indian and turkey might have come to merge.

Two of the early thanksgivings celebrated victories over Native Americans. The first, in 1637, was the defeat of the Pequots; the second, in 1676, hailed success in the war against the Wampaneogs and their allies. As on the first occasion, the Indians were viewed as a trial sent by God to test his chosen people, and the victory was proof of his continuing covenant with his chosen people. In the 17th-century description of this event, the representation of Native Americans as heathen/noble savage is clearly stated and elaborated.

According to the records of Plymouth church, shortly after the proclamation of a day of thanksgiving for the defeat of the Wampaneog, their leader, King Philip, was captured and killed in Rhode Island. “Captain Church and his company went the next day...to Rhode Island, and on Tuesday started through the woods for Plymouth” (Love, 1895: 202). On that Thursday, as the congregation at Plymouth finished their thanksgiving, Captain Church’s company arrived carrying the head of King Philip (1895: 203). As the historian Increase Mather described it in 1676, thus “did God break the head of that Leviathan, and gave it to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness” (Mather, 1862 [1676]: 197).

Mather’s cannibalistic reference first transforms the Indian leader into the biblical monster sent to try Job, a non-human in contrast to “people”, and next into a serviceable foodstuff. The environs of Plymouth are referred to as “a wilderness”, a wilderness that the “people” are struggling to transform into a garden or civilization. On the other hand, the Indian leader was referred to as a King, in that sense a respected enemy, whose defeat demonstrates God’s favoring of his chosen people.

The broadside, which carried the announcement by the Massachusetts council of this Thanksgiving, begins:

The Holy God having by a long and Continued Series of his Afflictive despensations in and by the present Warr with the Heathen Natives of this Land, written and brought to pass bitter things against his own Covenant people in this wilderness, yet so that we evidently discern that in the midst of his judgements he hath remembered mercy.... (in Love, 1895: 200)

This broadside was decorated at the top with a woodcut of the seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The seal shows an Indian of uncertain gender, appar-



ently male, since “he” holds a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other, yet s/he is depicted with a suggestion of breasts. This androgynous Indian stands in a cleared landscape with three trees and is saying—the sentence is written on a streamer emerging from the Indian’s mouth like a balloon in a comic strip—“Come and help us”. The Indian’s “Macedonian cry” is a call to be saved, taken from the biblical account of St Paul’s missionary works: “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: there stood a man of Macedonia, beseeching him, and saying, ‘Come over into Macedonia, and help us’” (Acts 16:9).<sup>8</sup> The communication is one in which the vanquished become one with their conquerers, asking for help in becoming Christians and being civilized.

This broadside also combines two images of the Indian: On one hand, the Indian was constructed as an innocent, living in a garden-like environment, inviting conversion and civilizing; on the other, a dangerous ‘Heathen Native’. There are suggestive parallels between these images of the wild beast to be eaten and the androgynous (domesticated?) native in the garden, with the wild and domesticated native turkey of North America.

Originally domesticated by the Aztecs, the turkey was brought to Europe and first described as part of a Christmas dinner in 1585 (Zeuner, 1963: 459). The early settlers found wild turkeys and, following the Indians’ example, shot them for the table. The culinary expert Brillat-Savarin hunted wild turkeys near Hartford, Connecticut, in the late 17th century, noting that: “The flesh of the wild turkey is darker and with a stronger flavor than that of the domestic bird” (1949/1971, footnote 85). In the 17th century, town-dwellers unable to shoot them paid a shilling for them, and turkeys were still plentiful in 1889 (Root and de Rochemont, 1976: 70). Domesticated turkeys were gelded for docility and to increase the production of meat (Baker, 1989).

The co-occurrence of wild and domesticated birds makes a perfect metaphor for Native Americans. Like the turkey, Indians were either wild or domesticated. Although feared, wild Indians were more admirable in a sense, or flavorful, more “game”, an enemy to be respected, if also to be killed. A Native American converted to Christianity and “civilization” was a domesticated Indian, like the supplicating, androgynous Indian on the seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a validation of the Pilgrims’ mission.<sup>9</sup> As a true “native of America” the turkey, wild and domesticated, could easily become a symbol for those other natives, constructed not as Americans but as Indians—others.

### ***The Stuffed Turkey***

By the mid-19th century, when the stuffed turkey began to take its place on annual Thanksgiving tables, the meaning of “the Indian” had changed considerably. Throughout the East and South, Native Americans had been cleared from the land, and there was no question as to the future fate of those still holding on in the West. Coexistence was unthinkable. Native Americans would vanish, either by massacre or by removal to some wasteland no one, at the time, wanted. In dime novels, billboards and museums (Matz, 1988), Indians are portrayed as treacherous and savage. This is the period of “the only good Indian is a dead Indian,” and all the better when stuffed.

This period coincides with the time of the great home-comings, of dramatizing the rural farm. It is a time when harvest still had meaning if, for some, only nostalgi-

cally. Roger Abrahams (1982) provides some interesting insights into the meaning of seasonal festivals and into some of the symbolic statement of the stuffed turkey.

He points out that in contrast to rituals which celebrate life transitions, in which the energies of the participants are already raised by the situations that call them forth, seasonal rituals must provide that energy. They must emphasize and express a dramatic contrast between everyday life and the festival. Ordinary objects are made festive by “stylizing them, blowing them up, distending or miniaturizing them” (1982: 168). He lists all the symbolic images “in which the power of the most typical kinds of things may be condensed and then exploded” (1982: 175) and points out that it is the “lowly firecracker, the balloon, the wrapped present, the cornucopia, the piñata, the stuffed turkey, and Santa’s stuffed bag [which are] the most powerful and pervasive images of our holidays” (1982: 175–6). For Abrahams, “these embody the essence of holiday wholeness on the one hand, then the breaking, cutting, exploding that allow everyone to share the now-freed energies and resources” (p. 176).

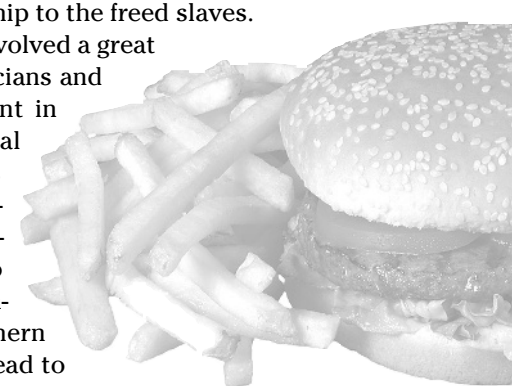
Considering the stuffed turkey itself, he states, “Thus, we witness the continuing importance of ‘the Bird’, the stuffed turkey at Thanksgiving or Christmas, a symbolic object which is capable of being presented whole and then cut to pieces, then shared and consumed by the family...” (1982: 176). This coupling of Thanksgiving and Christmas underlines the tremendous importance of the turkey at Thanksgiving, as a symbol not only of all that Abrahams suggests, but of its additional meanings as well. Turkeys are the central symbol of Thanksgiving, at Christmas they are merely part of the feast.

### ★ A NATIONAL THANKSGIVING

The southern states in the years following the Civil War did not accept a Thanksgiving Day which celebrated the reunification of the nation. This was partly due to the fact that northern ministers had used Thanksgiving as an occasion to preach abolition from their pulpits, but more significantly, the South was not ready to accept a national or northern cultural domination which not only abolished slavery but, under Reconstruction, gave full rights of citizenship to the freed slaves.

Reconstruction was shortlived, and its destruction involved a great deal of political and economic dealing between the politicians and the elites of North and South. This was a turning-point in national history, when the re-establishment of national unity was based on the exclusion of African Americans from full membership in it. Northern support and investment, for example, re-established southern cotton plantations, and northern agreement allowed the freed slaves to be segregated back into the cotton fields to supply northern textile mills and thus maintain its industries.<sup>10</sup> Northern factories refused to hire the freed slaves and looked instead to Europe for an immigrant workforce. The apparent cultural hegemony of the North<sup>11</sup> cloaked a collusion that restored power to the South, a power bickered over, but shared between the new industrial and the old plantation-owning elites.

Thanksgiving Day had become a firmly established and extremely significant annual national holiday, and the South joined the feast when Reconstruction ended.



In Alabama, Governor Houston proclaimed 23 December 1875 Thanksgiving “to honor the replacement of a reconstruction constitution by a new document that restricted black participation in state government” (Appelbaum, 1984: 164). Louisiana announced a special thanksgiving in 1877, when an all-white government was restored, and Georgia also celebrated thanksgiving upon the return of white supremacy (Appelbaum, 1984: 164). The stage was set for the development of the full-blown national ritual, combining the religious overtones of the Puritan rhetoric with the family-centered autumn feast.

★ **ENTER THE PILGRIMS**

Towards the end of the 19th century, the Pilgrims and the story of the “First Thanksgiving” become integral parts of the myth surrounding the observance of the Thanksgiving ritual (Baker, 1989; Loewen, 1991: 15). This picture of harmony between Pilgrims and Indians was not possible until the Indians had been completely vanquished, their lands appropriated, their futures thought to be annihilated. In the period immediately following the Civil War, the pictures of Indians and Pilgrims were violent images—a wounded Pilgrim or an armed sneaking Indian (Baker, 1989). When the Indian Wars began to fade from memory, everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before Indians vanished as a culture or a people and they could safely be incorporated as a symbol not only of sacrifice, but as part of the image of that lost Eden, in which Pilgrim and Indian, like lion and lamb, harmoniously joined together.

Before the 1850s, the only attention paid to the Pilgrims had been in the period leading up to the Revolutionary war. The old English symbols were to be discarded and new ones were needed. The Mayflower Compact was vested with great importance, and a large rock was taken from Plymouth harbor, which, breaking in half upon removal, was taken to signify to all the “breaking away” from the mother country (Myers, 1972: 298; Baker, 1989). A Pilgrim holiday, Forefathers’ Day, was celebrated by an elite group of New England men. As New Englanders migrated West in the pre-Civil War period, they formed New England societies and continued an annual celebration of Forefathers’ Day until 1812 (Myers, 1972: 295–301).<sup>12</sup> It had a brief resurgence in the 1830s, again in the 1880s and 1890s, and is still celebrated in Plymouth itself (Baker, 1989), but in general it is little known and of little significance.

Until the late 19th century, the Pilgrims had been seen as austere, distant figures, but fictionalized versions of their lives and times humanized them (Baker, 1989), and “books about life in colonial times enjoyed tremendous popularity” (Appelbaum, 1984: 218). “Plimouth Plantation”, completed in 1650, had been printed in 1856. It was reprinted three times between 1895 and 1912 (Adams et al., 1968). With the addition of the Pilgrims and the First Thanksgiving, the holiday became a full-fledged ritual re-enactment of an origin myth of the nation.

Hobsbawm has pointed out that after the Civil War the United States faced a somewhat unique set of problems in establishing a sense of national identity.

The basic political problem of the U.S.A., once secession had been eliminated, was how to assimilate a heterogeneous mass—towards the end of our period, an almost unmanageable influx—of people who were Americans not by birth but by immigration. Americans had to be made. (1983b: 279)

## *The Invention of Thanksgiving*

Hobsbawm continues this passage with the statement that Americans were produced by means of rituals, which were designed for this purpose.<sup>13</sup>

The invented traditions of the U.S.A. in this period were primarily designed to achieve this object . . . the immigrants were encouraged to accept rituals commemorating the history of the nation—the Revolution and its founding fathers (the 4th of July) and the Protestant Anglo-Saxon tradition (Thanksgiving Day)—as indeed they did, since these now became . . . holidays and occasions for public and private festivity. (1983b: 279–80)

Other national rituals, Columbus Day and the pledge of allegiance in the schools, were also invented in this period to teach and control these immigrants, so threatening to American values, so essential to American industries. The explosion of interest in colonial history at this time was due to the “fear of immigrants and the cultural changes they might foment” (Appelbaum, 1984: 218). The Pilgrims provided a model of the good immigrant, imbued with religious conviction, a member of a Chosen People, striving to make a life in a new world. The inside spread of an 1887 *Life* magazine, showed a picture of the pilgrims superimposed over a picture of immigrants entering the country (Baker, 1989).

The success of these symbolic statements is dramatically stated in a piece of autobiographical fiction about a Russian immigrant girl in the early 1900s. It was written in 1903 by a Russian immigrant who had entered this country in 1892. She describes coming to America from Russia, full of hope and eagerness, being treated badly, feeling empty and lonely, distant from other Americans. She begins to read American history:

I found from the first pages that America started with a band of Courageous Pilgrims. They had left their native country as I had left mine . . . I saw how the Pilgrim Fathers came to a rocky desert country, surrounded by Indian savages on all sides. But undaunted, they pressed on—through danger—through famine, pestilence, and want—they pressed on. They did not ask the Indians for sympathy, for understanding [like she does]. I, when I encountered a few savage Indians scalpers, like the old witch of the sweat-shop, etc. . . I lost heart and said: “There is no America!” Then came a light—a great revelation! I saw America—a big idea—a deathless hope—a world still in the making. I saw that it was the glory of America that it was not yet finished. And I, the last comer, had her share to give, small or great, to the making of America, like those Pilgrims who came in the *Mayflower*. (Yeziarska, 1923/1989: 216–17)<sup>14</sup>

In other words, ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.

The story describes the enormous need and the trick of myth that seems to satisfy it, using an imagined past as a promise to the future, changing perceptions instead of the world. Like all myth, the power of the story of the Pilgrims and the First Thanksgiving is shown by its capacity to refute experience; it is validated not by lived experience, but by the recitation of the code—in schools, in speeches, in the “common sense” of the culture, and in the self-fulfilling enactment of ritual. Incorporating the myth by taking part in the ritual celebration made of each immigrant’s journey a reliving of this dreamtime.

The United States was not the only country faced with large immigration, but it was outstanding in the numbers and diversity of immigrants. For many immigrants,

the old community remained the locus of loyalty, and some fulfilled their dream and returned there to buy a house or land. For many, it remained only a dream, and their children learned English, were taught the national mythology, to worship the flag and to learn the story of the “First Thanksgiving.”

The process described by Hobsbawm in which the sentiments of attachment (not necessarily all positive, but usually intense) to a *real* face-to-face community, village, neighborhood, are transferred to the imagined community of the nation, took place throughout much of the world at about this same period, 1890–1914.

The “homeland” was the locus of a *real* community of human beings with real social relations with each other, not the imaginary community which creates some sort of bond between members of a population of tens—today even of hundreds—of millions. (Hobsbawm, 1987: 148)

In the United States, Thanksgiving was and is part of the process by which for the immigrant real social relations of village, neighborhood or extended kin-group were broken apart and reformed. A study of French-Canadian, working-class immigrants in Rhode Island comments that in their celebration of Thanksgiving in November 1939, the important factor was the “affirmation of family togetherness” and that:

This affirmation of family, in fact, may have accounted for the rapidity with which Catholic and Jewish ethnic households in twentieth-century America absorbed into their social calendar a holiday honoring a strange group of seventeenth-century Protestant zealots. (Gerstle, 1989: 191)

While the Pilgrims were among the early settlers of North America, they were neither the earliest nor the most typical. Jamestown, with its clear-cut commercial interests, is as early and as valid an ancestor as Plymouth. The Plymouth Colony itself lasted only two generations as an autonomous colony before becoming part of Massachusetts Bay Colony. As a site of mythic origins, Plymouth carries meanings precisely because it is unlike any other past or present American settlement. It was, and is, represented as a small homogeneous, egalitarian Christian community in which class differences were minimal, in which religion was central; a face-to-face community as a model of the national imagined community. It is a model which denies class domination, exploitation, racial and ethnic conflict and covers imperialism with the Pilgrims’ cloak.

## ★ CONCLUSION

Thanksgiving powerfully shapes a sense of nationality to the emotions of homecoming. The joys and tensions, pleasures and pains of family life are activated in the preparations and joined participation of the feast. The preparation of the Thanksgiving feast is a traditional responsibility of women, the carving of the turkey usually the prerogative of the man of the house. Women wash the dishes after the feast while men watch violent games on television. Gender roles and family hierarchy are reaffirmed. The media and all the schools emphasize the importance at Thanksgiving time of the need to be with the family, and it is this need that is projected onto the wider screen of nationality.



## *The Invention of Thanksgiving*

The meanings of this national identity are part of every schoolchild's education, and to children the cycle of the year and their curriculum, in which year after year the October celebration and discussion of Columbus and his "discovery" is followed by November and the Pilgrims, lends an aura of naturalness and inevitability—the essence of mythic experience—to the invasion and colonization of North America. At Halloween, pumpkins are a mysterious note, but the chaotic disorder of the Halloween ritual is followed and put into order as the pumpkins become symbols of harvest and simplicity and Native America domesticated by the Pilgrim Thanksgiving.

In relegating the learning of the mythic elements of Thanksgiving symbols and their story to children, there is a particularly American synthesis of innocence and cynicism. At one level, everyone believes in equality, justice, including racial justice, harmony—including racial harmony—friendly Indians and trusting Pilgrims. At another level, these are beliefs for children. An adult knows that the real world is harsh, each for oneself, dog eat dog, except for moments in the life of the family, except for interactions with people like ourselves.

Inclusion and exclusion are essential elements of national identities. For the United States, the fact that the nation was built on the land of prior occupants has always been a contradictory empowerment to the sense of moral righteousness. Only God's mysterious plan clears the conscience of a chosen people, assuring them that those whom they conquer and have conquered were destined by their unrighteousness, their savagery, to be sacrificed. In the odd contradictions of mythic thought, recent immigrants may ritually become Americans, and their children will eventually be considered "native-born Americans", but Native Americans, the earliest immigrants to the continent, are excluded from this imagined community. As America has continued its imperialistic civilizing mission within and beyond the borders of the United States, the construct of "natives" as non-humans has incorporated many others. People such as the Mexicans suddenly became "natives" after losing their territory. The people of the Philippines, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and, perhaps Iraq, have also in turn been transformed into "native others" to be consumed if they rebuffed the civilizing mission.

The Pilgrim image is foregrounded when refugees are granted or denied asylum, allegedly on the basis of whether they search for freedom or merely economic survival. Russians, therefore, may be feasted, while Haitians are sacrificed. The color line plays a part, though it is not absolute, but people of color—Filipinos, Mexicans, Haitians, Guatemalans—are more likely to share the symbolic and actual fate of Native Americans.

African Americans seem to be defined as a different other. In the 1870s and 1880s, popular magazines included a number of images of African Americans in their Thanksgiving illustrations. These pictures showed them serving dinner to a white family, eating a sparse dinner or stealing turkeys (Baker, 1989). They are not full guests at the dinner table, but neither are they the main course.

As the quincentenary approached, debates over the meanings of Thanksgiving were assigned to the current division between multiculturalist and hegemonic conservative,<sup>15</sup> and now, as in the past, the conflict over meanings is inseparable from conflicts over power, political and economic as well as symbolic. Ruth Elson concluded her study of 19th-century textbooks with the statement that in presenting a unified society "only the social ideals of the more conservative members of the society were offered the Nineteenth-century child" (1964: 341). James Loewen, who is

studying current American history textbooks, finds little improvement in this century and makes a plea, quoting an early Massachusetts colonist, who argued that, “our forefathers, though wise, pious, and sincere, were nevertheless, in respect to Christian charity, under a cloud; and, in history, truth should be held sacred, at whatever cost” (1991: 14).

Education is on the front lines today, and it is, indeed, difficult for a teacher, reasonably well read in current revisionist histories, to recite the conventional, traditional story.<sup>16</sup> There is more awareness today that Native Americans have not vanished, and there is disillusionment with the concept of the melting-pot or assimilation. The tremendous number of recent non-white immigrants challenges the national identity as Christian, white, Pilgrim. The future of Thanksgiving is hard to predict, contrive or control, but, like the Australian’s dreamtime, if the present is transformed, there will be changes in the past, and a new form of the “First Thanksgiving” will emerge.

## NOTES

I am grateful to James Baker, Director of Museum Operations at Plimouth Plantation, for his generosity in sharing his knowledge and library. For comments and suggestions I thank Anne-Marie Cantwell, Françoise Dussart, Brian Ferguson, Zoë Graves, Russell Handsman and Thomas Patterson.

1. Although I have found no other author who suggests this symbolism, there is a cartoonist who graphically showed a Pilgrim family grouped around a table, poised to eat an American Indian, served on a platter with an apple in his mouth, and already missing several body parts. The caption says: “For history let’s say it was a turkey”. This cartoon was drawn to my attention by Eric Wolf when I presented a version of this paper at the American Ethnological Society annual meeting, Spring 1991. It was created by Shawn Kepri and published in the late 1970s in *Velvet*.
2. There is, of course, variation around this menu. For some onions, for others turnips are traditional, and for newly arrived immigrants frequently some of their original dishes join the American national feast.
3. James Baker is Director of Museum Operations at Plimouth Plantation. He is an expert on Plymouth, Pilgrims and Thanksgiving, and “publishes” his findings by teaching them to the actors who portray the Pilgrims at the Plantation. He is engaged in continuing research for his book *The Image of the Pilgrim*.
4. I am indebted to Russell Handsman of the American Indian Archaeological Institute for pointing out the likelihood that our Thanksgiving can be traced back to the Pilgrims’ appropriation of an Algonkian ceremony.
5. This was clearly a work of years of perusing documents in the Connecticut Historical Society, and Reverend Love received an honorary PhD the following year from his alma mater, Hamilton College. When I first consulted this book in 1989 in the Rutgers University Library, many of its pages were still uncut.
6. New Amsterdam followed the Dutch custom of combining fasting, prayer and thanksgiving on specially appointed days, fasting in the morning and feasting in the evening (Love, 1895: 168). There was less of a tendency towards a harvest-time celebration since, as Love suggests, it was a town more involved with trade than with agriculture (1895: 163). Yet, as he points out, the similar expectation of fast and thanksgiving led easily to a recognition of shared customs.
7. Sara Hale, editor of the Godey’s *Lady’s Book*, a best-selling magazine of the 19th century, is credited by several sources (see, for example: Appelbaum, 1984; Hatch, 1978; Steinberg, 1981) with influencing state governors in the 1850s, and even President Lincoln in 1863, to set the last Thursday in November as Thanksgiving. The tendency for this day to be chosen was clearly already present.
8. Thanks to Carolyn Freeman Travers, Plimouth Plantation, for recognizing this quotation.
9. The turkey may be contrasted to another bird symbol, the bald eagle—sky-born vs earth-bound, high-flying predator rather than ground-dwelling vegetarian, as hawk stands to dove. This contrast was expressed by Benjamin Franklin, who favored the turkey over the bald eagle for our national symbol:

For my part, I wish the bald eagle had not been chosen representative of our country; he is a bird of bad moral character.... The turkey is a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America. (Franklin, 1784)

10. A particularly clear analysis of these relations in this period can be found in Steinberg (1989: 173–200).
11. The Reverend William De Loss Love’s study of Thanksgiving provides an example of New England’s bid for cultural hegemony. He was born in 1851 in New Haven, attended Hamilton College and Andover Theological Seminary. He was ordained as a Congregational minister in 1878, was involved in commercial and railroad enterprises in Boston, and served as pastor of Hartford’s Congregational church from 1885 to 1910. He wrote two other books on the colonial period and was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution and the Connecticut Historical Society. His father, also a Congregational minister, had been a well-known abolition-

## The Invention of Thanksgiving

ist, who entered Atlanta with General Grant and preached a sermon there. While Love clearly documents the fact that there was no first Thanksgiving, the major message of his book was to demonstrate the moral and historical primacy of New England. Certainly his book was never popular, but it was part of the effort to spread the hegemonic myth in which Plymouth stands as the birthplace of the nation.

12. A menu of the first Forefathers' Day dinner is extant. It was held in December of 1769 and it was meant to emphasize simplicity, "all appearance of luxury & extravagance being avoided, in imitation of our worthy ancestors whose memory we shall ever respect" (Myers, 1972: 297). Neither pumpkins nor turkeys were served.
13. Hobsbawm regards schools as the second important means of making Americans, noting that "the educational system was transformed into a machine for political socialization by such devices as the worship of the American flag . . ." (1983b: 280).
14. Again, I am grateful to Russell Handsman for pointing out this remarkable piece of writing.
15. See, for example, a historian, David Hackett Fischer, in an Op-Ed *New York Times* article, dated 28 November (Thanksgiving Day) 1991. Writing from, appropriately, Massachusetts, in defense against unnamed and unknown enemies:

Thanksgiving is under attack again. Multiculturalists have demanded that Pilgrim pageants be banished from elementary school. Apostles of political correctness grimly insist that Thanksgiving be declared a Day of National Mourning for Native Americans. (p. A27)

16. In November 1989, I visited two schools in New Jersey the week before Thanksgiving to see how it was taught. One was a parochial school and the other was a public school for gifted children. In each I was sent to the classroom of the most progressive teacher—the first, a native of Cape Cod, has researched the actual food that was eaten at the "First Thanksgiving" but, in teaching spelling, taught the words: turkey, sweet potatoes, squash, pumpkin pie, etc. She had taught the children about the Indians helping the Pilgrims, and the later battles as being due to the resistance of Indians to their lands being seized. The school was decorated with turkeys, each feather bearing a prayer. The second school was not decorated. 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". Clearly, in some places, traditions are changing!

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