

WHY I'M NOT THANKFUL FOR THANKSGIVING

[Note: The following article by Michael Dorris gives insights into the feelings of a parent of Indian children who himself is a scholar, a novelist, and a member of the Modoc tribe. These insights provide another view of holiday customs that often are viewed as innocuous and even celebratory. Thanksgiving for many is seen as a uni-dimensional historical experience rather than the encounter of richly diverse cultures. It is out of the failure to appreciate and value the richness of diversity that cultures and peoples become caricatures. This article is included in *Anthro. Notes* in the hope that greater sensitivity to other peoples and the cultures from which they come can enable teachers to engage their students in true multicultural appreciation.

--Dave Warren, Deputy Director,
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Native Americans have more than one thing *not* to be thankful about on Thanksgiving. Pilgrim Day, and its antecedent feast Halloween, represent the annual twin peaks of Indian stereotyping. From early October through the end of November, "cute little Indians" abound on greeting cards, advertising posters, in costumes and school projects. Like stock characters from a vaudeville repertoire, they dutifully march out of the folk-cultural attic (and right down Madison Avenue!) ughing and wah-wah-wahing, smeared with lipstick and rouged as if ready to attend a midnight showing of The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Decked out in an assortment of "Indian suits" composed of everything from old clothes to fringed paper bags, little trick-or-treaters and school pageant extras mindlessly sport and cavort in what Duane Bird Bear once aptly termed "cultural drag."

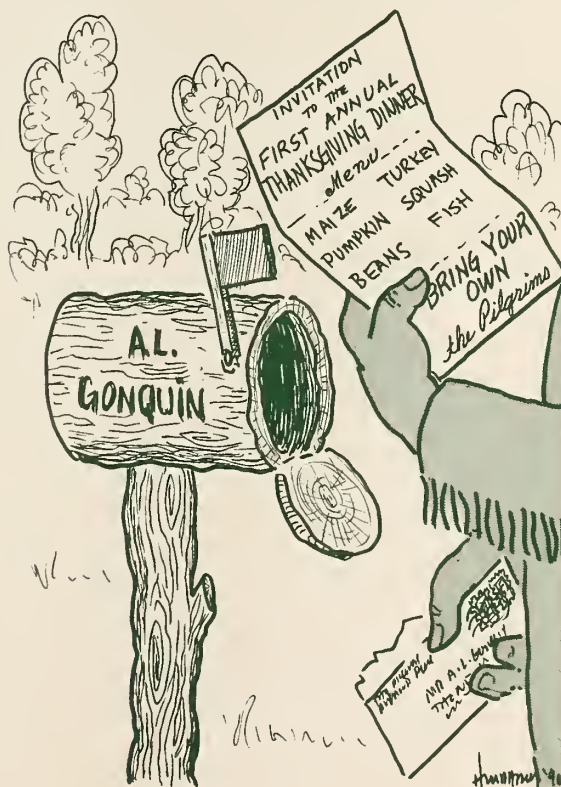
Considering that virtually none of the standard faesurrounding either Halloween or Thanksgiving contains an ounce of authenticity, historical accuracy, or cross-cultural perception, why is it so apparently ingrained? Is it necessary to the American psyche to perpetually exploit and debase its victims in order to justify its history? And

do Native Americans have to reconcile themselves to forever putting up with such exhibitions of puerile ethnocentrism?

Attitudes pertinent to "racial" or sex-role identity are among the most potentially hazardous, for these can easily be internalized--particularly by the "minority" child. Such internalized attitudes profoundly affect self-concept, behavior, aspiration, and confidence. They can inhibit a child before he or she has learned to define personal talents, limits or objectives, and tend to regularly become self-fulfilling prophecies. Young people who are informed that they are going to be underachievers do underachieve with painful regularity.

The progeny of each oppressed group are saddled with their own specialized set of debilitating--and to parents, infuriating--stereotypes. As the father of three Native American children, aged ten, six, and three, I am particularly attuned (but not resigned) to that huge store of folk Americana presuming to have to do with "Indian lore."

(continued on p. 6)



From the "One little, two little..." messages of nursery school, to the ersatz pageantry of boy scout/campfire girl mumbo jumbo, precious, ridiculous and irritating "Indians" are forever popping up.

Consider for a moment the underlying meanings of some of the supposedly innocuous linguistic standbys: "Indian givers" take back what they have sneakily bestowed in much the same way that "Indian summer" deceives the gullible flower bud. Unruly children are termed "wild Indians" and a local bank is named "Indian head" (would *you* open an account at a "Jew's hand," "Negro ear" or "Italian toe" branch?) Ordinary citizens rarely walk "Indian file" when about their business, yet countless athletic teams, when seeking emblems of savagery and blood thirstiness, see fit to title themselves "warriors," "braves," "redskins," and the like.

On another level, children wearing "Indian suits," playing "cowboys and Indians" (or, in the case of organizations like the Y-Indian Guides, Y-Indian Maidens and Y-Indian Princesses, simply "Indians"), or scratching their fingers with pocket knives (the better to cement a friendship) are encouraged to shriek, ululate, speak in staccato and ungrammatical utterances (or, conversely, in sickening flowery metaphor) --thus presumably emulating "Indians." With depressing predictability, my children have been variously invited to "dress up and dance," portray Squanto (Pocahantas is waiting in the wings: my daughter is only three), and "tell a myth."

Not surprisingly they have at times evidenced some unwillingness to identify, and thus cast their lot, with the "Indians" which bombard them on every front. My younger son has lately taken to commenting "Look at the Indians!" when he comes across Richard Montalban, Jeff Chandler, or the improbable Joey Bishop in a vintage TV western. Society is teaching him that "Indians" exist only in an ethnographic frieze, decorative and slightly titillatingly menacing. They invariably wear feathers, never crack a smile (though an occasional leer is permissible under certain conditions), and think about little besides the good old days. Quite naturally it does not occur to

my son that he and these curious and exotic creatures are expected to present a common front--until one of his first grade classmates, garbed in the favorite costume of Halloween (ah, the permutations of burlap!) or smarting from an ecology commercial, asks him how to shoot a bow, skin a hamster, or endure a scrape without a tear. The society image is at this time too demanding and too limiting a model.

As a parent, what does one do? All efficacy is lost if one is perceived and categorized by school officials as a hypersensitive crank, reacting with horror to every "I-is-for-Indian" picture book. To be effective one must appear to be super-reasonable, drawing sympathetic teachers and vice-principals into an alliance of the enlightened to beat back the attacks of the flat-earthers. In such a pose one may find oneself engaged in an apparently persuasive discussion with a school librarian regarding a book titled something like *Vicious Red Men of the Plains* ("Why, it's set here for 20 years and nobody ever noticed that it portrayed all Indi...uh Native Americans, as homicidal maniacs!"), while at the same time observing in silence a poster on the wall about "Contributions of the Indians (heavy on corn and canoes, short on astronomy and medicine).

Priorities must be set. One might elect to let the infrequent coloring book page pass uncontested in favor of mounting the battlements against the visitation of a travelling Indianophile group proposing a "playlet" on "Indians of New Hampshire." These possibly well-intentioned theatricals, routinely headed by someone called "Princess Snowflake" or "Chief Bob," are among the more objectionable learning aids and should be avoided at all costs. It must somehow be communicated to educators that *no* information about Native peoples is truly preferable to a reiteration of the same old stereotypes, particularly in the early grades. A year ago this month my older son brought home a program printed by his school; on the second page was an illustration of the "first Thanksgiving," with a caption which read in part: "They served pumpkins and turkeys and corn and squash. The Indians had never seen such a feast!" On the

(continued on p. 15)

("Thanksgiving" continued from p. 6)

contrary! The *Pilgrims* had literally never seen "such a feast," since all foods mentioned are exclusively indigenous to the Americas and had been provided, or so legend has it, *by* the local tribe.

Thanksgiving could be a time for appreciating Native American peoples as they were and as they are, not as either the Pilgrims or their descendant bureaucrats might wish them to be. If there *was* really a Plymouth Thanksgiving dinner with Native Americans in attendance as either guests or hosts, then the event was rare indeed. Pilgrims generally considered Indians to be devils in disguise, and treated them as such. And if those hypothetical Indians participating in that hypothetical feast thought that all was well and were thankful in the expectation of a peaceful future, they were sadly mistaken. In the ensuing months and years they would die from European diseases, suffer the theft of their lands and property and the near eradication of their religion and their language, and be driven to the brink of extinction. Thanksgiving, like much of American history, is complex, multi-faceted, and will not bear too close a scrutiny without revealing a less than heroic aspect. Knowing the truth about Thanksgiving, both its proud and its shameful motivations and history, might well benefit contemporary children. But the glib retelling of an ethnocentric and self-serving falsehood does no one any good.

Parents' major responsibility, of course, resides in the home. From the earliest possible age, children must be made aware that many people are wrong-headed about not only Native Americans, but about cultural pluralism in general. Children must be encouraged to articulate any questions they might have about "other" people, and "minority" children must be given ways in which to insulate themselves from real or implied insults, epithets, slights or negative stereotypes. "Survival humor" must be developed and positive models must consciously and unconsciously, be available and obvious. Sadly, children must learn *not* to trust uncritically.

Protecting children from racism 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. No one gains by allowing an inequitable and discriminatory status quo to persist. It's worth being a pain in the neck about.

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[This article was excerpted from *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, vol. 9, no. 7, 1978.]