

"Myths, Micro-practices, and Identity in *The American Civil Religious Meal Ritual: What's Cooking for Thanksgiving Now?*"

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In 2000, the British Indian filmmaker Gurinder Chadha wrote and directed the movie *What's Cooking?* about how four families from different ethnic backgrounds living in contemporary Los Angeles, CA attempted to express their complicated hyphenated American identities through their distinctive ways of preparing and celebrating a Thanksgiving dinner. It's a movie I use to illustrate eating and identity in a course I teach regularly, "The Rituals of Dinner." The film is almost literally a de-Norman-Rockwell-ization of American Thanksgiving celebrations, as the movie opens with an image of the iconic Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving painting "Freedom From Want" of three generations of a white upper middle-class family, presumably living in New England [Figure 1]. The view pans out till we see it's a turkey advertisement on the side of a metro bus driving down a very non-New England-y Los Angeles city street. The movie's opening scene shifts to an elementary school performance of the classic Thanksgiving story of New England pilgrims and Native Americans, notably played by an African American girl and Vietnamese American boy (Chakravarty, 2004). They turn out to be the youngest members of two of the four families portrayed in the movie, namely, a Jewish-American, African-American, Mexican American, and Vietnamese-American family each attempting to put their particular ethnic culinary stamp on the iconic turkey and sides, while at the same time negotiating a variety of family dramas and tensions over generational differences, class, gender, sexuality, marital fidelity, in-group loyalty. As Chakravarty puts it, "The film traces a trajectory from a superficial, all-too-easy fabrication of domestic cheerfulness to a more difficult but more profound and complex sense of community or kinship at the end." (2004)

Eventually all their stories converge together in what amounts to a parable of assimilation or acculturation of “American” cultural values.

Twenty years later, while much of this story of performing diaspora identities through American Thanksgiving civil religious meal rituals still resonates with me, the grandchild of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, I’m also struck by what’s missing from this story. Five books that I’ve read in the past year have profoundly reshaped how I think about the ways we do and could perform our “American” identities at meals in general, and at our Thanksgiving meals in particular. First there is the *Afroculinaria* food blogger Michael W. Twitty’s *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (2017), an account of the author’s “Southern Discomfort tour” to recover his culinary, family, and African roots, and their convergence with parts of American history that are often willfully erased. Secondly, in *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (2016), Elizabeth Pérez tells another story of African-American community-building culinary traditions, talk, and cooking preparations among practitioners of Santería in the South Side of Chicago, to “argue that the enshrinement of slavery in Black Atlantic religions [can] be interpreted as a critique of the “betrayal of abolition” in republican democracies throughout the African Diaspora, one that has also served to master the inequitable sociopolitical arrangements that are the living legacies of this betrayal.” In other words, the religious metaphors and symbolic practices of servitude, especially in the kitchen, to the *ilé* (deities) and to human elders higher in the Lucumí hierarchy, are actually de-colonizing strategies and tactics to resist the

power structures imposed upon them historically by the dominant white American culture.¹ Thirdly, in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer, a biology professor and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, interweaves her personal family stories, the history of state violence against and cultural subjugation of Native Americans, and stories about our symbiotic relationships with the other-than-human persons, especially plants and the natural world of which we're a part, who "gift" us with the sustenance we need and to whom we owe reciprocal care, in a collection of beautifully written and moving essays. Fourthly, in *Jewish Vegetarianism and Veganism: Studies and New Directions* (2019) edited by Jacob Ari Labendz and Shmuly Yanklovitz, Jewish contributors from a range of different religious and secular perspectives collectively advocate "alternative" ways of expressing contemporary Jewish identities through food choices beyond biblical and rabbinic traditions of keeping *kosher*, paying particular attention to the ethical treatment of animals. Finally, in *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* (2019), Jonathan Safran Foer, drawing analogies informed by his Jewish background as the grandson of Holocaust survivors, stresses the urgency of our environmental

¹ I cannot do justice to the complexity of her discussion in the space of this paper. However, here's a taste of her argument:

Rites of passage throughout the Black Atlantic world recode and revalorize the experience of enslavement as a type of metamorphosis, depicted as proceeding in distinct stages: the subject is caught with rope and cloth, transported to a new world, sold, violently stripped, clothed, renamed, sequestered, assaulted, and eventually transformed into a "sensible" laborer, for whom the master's wish is a command. The ceremonial analogues for these stages recode the seasoning once analyzed as inflicting cultural amnesia on slaves as the basis for their sensorimotor, affective, and cognitive engagement with remembered traditions. Even practitioners' spontaneous displays of resistance within the initiatory process recapitulate aspects of the collective past deemed imperative to relive. Such procedures have disseminated memories of enslavement in ritual performance far beyond practitioners of African descent (207-8).

situation by calling for a dramatic adjustment of our eating habits to eating no animal products two out three meals a day to positively impact climate change. Having read these books, I share vegan studies scholar Barbara McDonald's sentiment, "Once you know something, you can't not know it," (McDonald, 2000). In other words, I can no longer imagine wanting to participate in any sort of American Thanksgiving celebration of family, gratitude, and national heritage that ignores what I now know, what we now know.

As I watch *What's Cooking?* now, I have to ask: Where is the recognition of Native American stories and foodways that intersect with or contradict the traditional colonial American Thanksgiving narrative? And how about a more nuanced, complicated reckoning with the legacy of slavery and the formative role of African Americans in the making of American cuisine and American history? Shouldn't that too be part of the foundation myth we recount at our celebratory meal of American civil religion? After all, the history of how the regional New England celebrations of Thanksgiving became a national holiday points to the relentless efforts of the editor of the *Godey's Lady's Book*, Sarah Josepha Hale. One of her strongest arguments was that we needed a celebration of our shared American story of origins to help unite a nation deeply divided in a Civil War – a war over slavery. (Appelbaum, 1984). What about the micro-practices of elaborate cooking preparations for putting the Thanksgiving meal on contemporary tables: divvying dishes among guests and hosts for a potluck dinner, consulting "turkey hotlines" in the internet, accommodating all the different attendees' taste preferences, dietary restrictions, and food allergies, making responsible food choices under the shadow of the environmental climate crisis? For example, as a kosher carnivore who frequently makes Thanksgiving with vegetarian friends, I missed seeing a homemade tofu turkey as the centerpiece of any of *What's Cooking?*'s meals, though the vegetarian polenta made especially for the gay brother-in-law (and

sperm-donor to the lesbian couple) at the Jewish American family's dinner kind of serves the same purpose. Do today's Thanksgiving meal preparations and performances recognize our relationships with only our human co-habitants of our home and world?

In this paper I propose to raise these questions in an effort to re-think how contemporary Americans might reconstruct their ways of preparing and celebrating their Thanksgiving meals. The recent work on American food history, food ethics, and identity-construction I mentioned above inform my paper's call for re-telling and re-making the Thanksgiving story at our tables and in our kitchens, as do anecdotal examples of my own experiences as a participant-observer in making Thanksgiving meal rituals. I don't expect this paper to be exhaustive, but rather suggestive. Ultimately, I plan to develop what I'm sketching out here into a book-length project. Nevertheless, working with the premise that as an expression of American civic religion, Thanksgiving meals are "quasi-*religious* American foodways," to borrow the term Benjamin Zeller uses in reference to reference to vegetarianism and locavorism (2014), I will show that acknowledging the stories and foodways of African and Native Americans as a counterpoint to the "traditional" New England story of "The First Thanksgiving," and evoking the ethics of vegetarian, vegan, and sustainable eating at Thanksgiving accentuates three important religious dimensions of Thanksgiving meals. But by "religious," I mean specifically that Thanksgiving meals are or should be so according to Graham Harvey's understanding of religion, that they are: (1) *materially* expressed in everyday life; (2) concerned with "doing violence with impunity," and (3) about respecting relationships between human and non-human persons (2013).



Figure 1

How do I propose we do this? I take a cue from Elisabeth Pérez’s observation in *Religion in the Kitchen*, that “all religions rely on a secret recipe of micro practices to coalesce and endure.” (2016). By micro practices, she refers to food preparation and its accompanying casual talk, “kitchen talk,” that constitutes the construction and performance of Black Atlantic religious identity in the specific diasporic Afro-Caribbean community of Cuban Santería (Lucumí)

practitioners in contemporary Chicago. In her concluding chapter, she suggests these are important tactics and strategies of religious identity-building more generally. These kinds of practices are all too often overlooked by scholars of religion in favor of the “macro-practices” of rites of passage, and other more formal and self-consciously intentional ritual practices. Since Perez focuses on the ways food preparation and kitchen talk shape affective relationships with both other human members of the community and the deities mostly of West African origin (that is, other-than-human persons) for whom they’re cooking, what she says about them is not only consistent with Harvey’s definition of religion, but also particularly pertinent to the tactics and strategies of food preparation and cooking for the quasi-religious American foodways of Thanksgiving celebrations, to inculcate American civil religious identities.

In what follows, I will discuss a number of micro practices involving the preparation and serving of food, as well as stories and practices drawn from my Jewish family traditions, and others’ African American, Native American, New England regional, and the sustainable food movement’s family and communal traditions, to “cook up” new ways to construct and perform more just, sustainable, and ethical American identities at Thanksgiving time, 20 years after *What’s Cooking?* first sparked the idea. So, I will be both speaking about what some people are already doing and proposing some new or borrowed traditions for Thanksgiving meals.

Any celebratory Thanksgiving meal get-together will need both a diversity of foods and a diversity of stories reflecting the diversity of the people and cultures of America, and which respects the biodiversity of the other-than-human persons with whom we share this land. Though not everyone may be in person (especially under pandemic restrictions) in the social make-up of the meal participants, we can nevertheless acknowledge those who are not there in person in our choice of representative foods and the words we speak formally and informally at

the table. Still, my personal preference is to “say” as much as possible with the food itself, and let that prompt the words that allow us to specify more precisely what we want them to mean. To say things with the foods themselves and with the words we say about them is what I call “culinary midrash.” *Midrash* is the Jewish term in Hebrew “for the process of continuous interpretation and application of inherited texts and traditions to address new historical and cultural circumstances, as well as for specific texts that collect these interpretations.” (Brumberg-Kraus, 2019, p.7) Meals can be “culinary midrash” when they are a “mode of affect and cognition performed by integrating fusions of flavor or taste preferences (sensory interpretations)” with verbal interpretations of inherited or adopted foods and stories about them. (Brumberg-Kraus, 2019, p.8) Thanksgiving meals can be, and indeed are already functioning as culinary midrash in the diverse ways Americans celebrate this civil religious meal ritual of gratitude, by the choices of foods they prepare and eat, by the ways they choose (or choose not to) tell the iconic “traditional” story of the so-called “First Thanksgiving” in Massachusetts, and with whom they choose to share their meal.

A Diversity of Foods

Mary Douglas has taught us that a multiplication of dishes typically marks a meal as celebratory and extraordinary in comparison with other more regular ones in any culture’s system of meals. (1972). This is especially true of harvest festivals like Thanksgiving intended to celebrate abundance. (Brumberg-Kraus, 2012)

Potlucks

But perhaps the best way to assure a diversity of dishes reflecting the culinary preferences of the participants and their impulse to share with one another, as well as abundance, is through the potluck. Nearly all the celebratory meals I have with friends and family, whether the weekly Shabbat dinners with our COVID-safe pod of friends, to our Religion department summer alum picnic, to Thanksgiving dinner, are potlucks. Granted that doesn't always work for guests who don't cook or don't have access to kitchens (though wine and beer are always welcome). But on the plus side, potlucks tend to be inherently more inclusive of dietary differences. Vegan, gluten-free, kosher, halal, omnivore, etc. guests can make sure that they bring at least one dish they can eat, and knowing who's coming generally encourages all the participants bringing food to be proactively aware, respectful, and inclusive of their fellow guests' dietary requirements. (Erbentraut, 2016) Moreover, it encourages self-conscious gifting of food specifically geared to others' tastes, often eliciting expressions of gratitude: "You made that for me?" At our Thanksgiving meals with vegetarian friends, there is usually both a kosher meat turkey we'll have roasted and stuffed (reserving some stuffing cooked separately untainted with meat) and a homemade tofu turkey. Our vegetarian hosts usually make the latter, but I've been asked to do it on occasion as well, which I did with pleasure. Obviously, the serving of a tofu turkey at a mostly vegetarian meal is consistent with efforts to reduce global warming by restricting meat consumption, let's say, to one of three meals per day as Jonathan Safran Foer calls for (2019), though our immediate concern was being inclusive.

Serving a diverse "feast of history" at a Thanksgiving potluck dinner offers non-verbal ways, or at least cues, to re-tell "the American Thanksgiving" story of our mixed New England

Native American and Puritan culinary heritage, expanded upon with new dishes or variations on the standards from the cuisines brought to North America originally by Black African slaves and other immigrant groups over the centuries. The “standard” components such as turkey; the “three sisters:” corn (maize), beans, and squash; cranberries; and tree nuts like acorns and walnuts are originally Native American foods indigenous to the New England region. Indeed, the authors of a Thanksgiving cookbook and history published by Plymouth Plantation describe a Wampanoag autumn *sobaheg* (“stew”) in which the recipe for the modern version they share consists of all these ingredients except the cranberries: beans, corn grits, acorn or other winter squash, walnuts or chestnuts, and while venison is the meat specified here, turkey, goose, duck fish and shellfish are suggested as alternatives. These are foods that would have been eaten by Native Americans and colonists in 17th century Massachusetts. (Curtin et al., 2005: 24-5). Only “fowl” generally and deer specifically are mentioned in the incidental account of a harvest celebration of ninety Wampanoag people and White Plymouth colonists in Edward Winslow’s 1621 letter that subsequent generations of Americans have come to view as a description of “the first Thanksgiving,” though scholarly consensus says it was not. Winslow wrote,

Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. The four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their great king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always as plentiful as it was at this

time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you [his friend in England to whom Winslow was writing] partakers of our plenty. (quoted in Curtin et al., 2005)

Turkey per se is not specified. And the modern authors are careful to point out that while the Wampanoags ate and eat cranberries (first mentioned in writing by RI local hero Roger Williams in 1643 by their Narragansett name *sasemineash*) and squash, the iconic cranberry sauce is a later development when sugar became more available, as is pumpkin pie. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the importance of the “Three Sisters:” corn, beans, and squash to Native American diets and agriculture in a beautiful essay on the topic (2005) even beyond New England, though they are featured in garden part of the US National Park Service Roger Williams Memorial in my hometown of Providence, RI. I make a point of using local sugar pumpkins in a pumpkin pie or flan, sometimes cornbread stuffing, and some kind of bean dish (even if it’s the classic green beans in cream of mushroom casserole with crispy canned onion rings on top that both my wife and my Ashkenazic Jewish grandmothers used to make) in my Thanksgiving meals to honor these native foods. Lately I’ve been making stuffing with wild rice, which is central to the culinary cultures of the Native Americans of the northern Midwest and southern Canada, particularly of the Anishinaabe people in the lake regions near the Minnesota/Canada border. (Milgroom, 2020), and lately under threat from climate change and a point of contention between the native growers and those who want to use the lake region for recreation. (Cusick, 2020). Though it’s not New England food, wild rice’s resonance as symbol of broader Native American cultural history and survival and as a climate-change endangered species is part of the Thanksgiving story I want to tell. Moreover, in contrast to cornbread turkey stuffing which usually has dairy ingredients, and so conflicts with the Jewish kosher dietary rules I observe to

separate milk from meat, wild rice stuffings are usually dairy-less, and so works both as a kosher stuffing for turkey and as a vegan side for the vegan participants in our meals. In other words, it's a food that checks off many of the social identity boxes I wish to respect. Finally, I make a gesture to the New England regional heritage in my choice of drinks of for Thanksgiving dinner. Ever since learning from a visit to Plimouth plantation that the English settlers usually drank hard cider, ale, and wine instead of water because it was safer, hard ciders, many of which are brewed locally, and which my wife prefers to beer, have become staples at our celebratory meal. That and the Plymouth MA Mayflower Brewery Thanksgiving Ale, available seasonally only for about a month or so each year before Thanksgiving, which I try to find and drink for Thanksgiving. These drinks symbolize for me the white colonial New England regional and old European culinary traditions that are also part of our American heritage.

Ethnic Cultural Variations on “American standards”

It's not enough simply to adopt Native American and colonial New England foods as we imagine “the Indians and the Pilgrims” to have prepared, eaten, and drunk them 400 years ago on the native lands taken over by the Massachusetts Bay colonists to tell “the American origin story.” Taking a cue from the movie *What's Cooking?*, I see the cultural variations people use to cook turkeys to their specific Mexican, Vietnamese, Jewish, southern African American, cosmopolitan, and vegetarian tastes, as well as the sides like pot stickers and tortillas and desserts like dulce de leche to accompany the mains as important ways we tell the story that we are a nation of immigrants with our Thanksgiving foods. So for example, the cookbook of “Thanksgiving Recipes and History from Pilgrims to Pumpkin Pie” published by the Plimouth Plantation no less (Curtin and Oliver, 2005), suggests alongside “traditional” and “modern”

turkey recipes “Roast Turkey with Indian Spiced Yogurt Marinade” and “Pavo Rellenos con Moros/ Cuban Stuffed Turkey;” alternatives to turkey like “Pernil: Puerto Rican Roast Pork Shoulder,” “Tourtiere: French Canadian Pork Pie,” and with a nod to the meat of “the first Thanksgiving, a “Marinated Roast Venison Tenderloin” from an Appalachian Virginian woman’s recipe whose family serves it on Thanksgiving with a dish from her husband’s Italian American heritage: *minestra maritata*, a.k.a., “Italian Wedding Soup.” And in their chapter “A World of Stuffing,” in addition to “Time-honored Tradition Bread Stuffing” from a 19th century American cookbook recipe or “Bells’ Stuffing” flavored with Bell’s Seasoning, invented in Newton, MA in 1867, the authors serve us “Portuguese Linguica Stuffing,” “Chinese American Rice Dressing,” “Southern Corn Bread Dressing,” and a Lebanese “Roz Bilahmi: Rice and Meat Stuffing.” It’s the same sort of pattern with the other Thanksgiving dishes in the cookbook. The message is obvious: American cooking to celebrate Thanksgiving is a mixture of “time-honored” traditional foods with origins in New England colonial and Native American cuisines, foods associated with other regions of the US, and finally, foods marked clearly as coming from immigrants from outside the US. I suppose there’s a subtle message about the cultural power relations and dominance implicit in the same order of first “New England, then other US regional, and “ethnic” types of dishes in each chapter – not surprising from a publication of the New England-centric Plimouth Plantation.

Another particularly striking example of how “traditional American” Thanksgiving foods are adapted to the cultural tastes of particular ethnic groups in America occurred in 2013, when a once in 20,000 years calendrical convergence of Thanksgiving and the Jewish holiday of Chanukah occurred, resulting in gastronomic fusion of flavors to celebrate what got named “Thanksgivvukah.” Some recipes suggested in Christine Byrne’s *Buzzfeed* post (2013) were

potato latkes served with applesauce flavored with cranberries, turkey “brined” in sweet Manischewitz wine, a “mashup of noodle kugel and sweet potato pie” with bourbon, brussel sprouts flavored with pastrami, challah stuffing (we added pumpkin puree and cranberries to our challah that week), and for dessert, pecan pie *rugelakh* and rye pumpkin pie with caraway seeds. I can’t say I tried all of these – I like symbolic foods, but I like my celebratory foods to taste good, too! But it’s clear that the idea was to take certain iconically Jewish foods, that is, Eastern European Ashkenazic and deli foods with Yiddish names, and some Jewish holiday foods like challah and latkes, and fuse them with iconically “American” foods: e.g., pumpkin, cranberry, turkey, sweet potatoes, and bourbon. My wife and I got into the spirit of things by dressing up for an analogous photo-op fusion: Hasidic American Gothic:



Figure 2

Any adaptation of others’ cultural traditions (including one’s own group’s “others”) as I’ve discussed here, even if the goal is to somehow make them one’s own, runs the risk of becoming an exploitative expression of cultural appropriation. This is especially the case with

most iconically “American” Thanksgiving foods whose origins are Native American. And the colonial exploitation of Native Americans and their cultures is so much a reality of our American history, as much our American “Original Sin” as the exploitation of Black slaves brought by force to the New World from Africa. So, I turn to Sean Sherman, “the Sioux Chef”, the outspoken advocate for Native American culinary traditions for guidance navigating these shoals. In a 2018 *Time Magazine* essay “The Thanksgiving Tale Is a Harmful Lie. As a Native American, I’ve Found a Better Way to Celebrate,” Sherman says,

People may not realize it, but what every person in this country shares, and the very [history of this nation](#), has been in front of us the whole time. Most of our Thanksgiving recipes are made with indigenous foods: turkey, corn, beans, pumpkins, maple, wild rice and the like. We should embrace this...No matter where you are in North America, you are on indigenous land. And so on this [holiday](#), and any day really, I urge people to explore a deeper connection to what are called “American” foods by understanding true Native-American histories, and begin using what grows naturally around us, and to [support](#) Native-American growers. There is no need to make Thanksgiving about a false past. It is so much better when it celebrates the beauty of the present.”

In other words, don’t avoid the Native foods that have become a part of our present, but acknowledge explicitly where they came from, and the true history, even though painful, of how they came to become “our” foods and part of “our” story.

A Diversity of Stories: “From Degradation to Praise”

Therefore, in order for the foods to “speak” clearly and mean what we want them to say about our families, chosen communities, immigrant and regional heritages, and American history that we’re celebrating at our Thanksgiving, the words we say, formally and informally, about the foods we serve, are as important as the foods themselves. My model for this is the Passover seder, the scripted “feast of history” from my Jewish tradition, both in the plot dynamic and in the ritual practice of eating and reading. The Jewish Passover Haggadah characterizes the foundation story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt to freedom as a story that “begins with degradation and ends with praise” (*mat-hil big’nut um’sayyem b’shevach*), from the humiliation of slavery and violent oppression to the praiseworthy elevating experience of liberation. Not an erasure of the bitter past, but a narrative of the whole process of redemption, from its painful beginnings to the promise of a better world, which for most of Jewish collective diasporic history has been as much aspirational as it has been our actual reality. I think this is likewise an appropriate plot line for the stories our foods and words about them to re-tell the American Thanksgiving foundation myth. Such stories of collective trauma can have a therapeutic function, as Masha Gessen has recently suggested, especially when they can be re-told in an intentional, ritualized setting (2020). Or as I argued what Michael Twitty has done in his book *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South*, links the stories

of dramatic violent disruptions from land, family, freedom to stories of repair and reconciliation, through recovered memories, especially food memories (2020).

Eating and Reading

Likewise, from my Jewish tradition, I suggest the rituals for celebrating holidays by *eating and reading*, not only in the Passover seder, but also the liturgies for the Tu Bishvat (New Year for the Trees) seder meal, and the other blessings and readings over foods to mark holiday meals as different from ordinary meals, and to differentiate one from another, as models for “scripting” or “talking points” for Thanksgiving meals. That’s something that’s already a part of my own family’s Thanksgiving practice. We have read excerpts from a speech JFK gave on what we are thankful for, several weeks before he was assassinated on November 22, 1963, from a yellowed newspaper clipping attached to black construction paper posted on a cabinet in the informal eating area (as opposed to the dining room) in the home I grew up in Cincinnati, OH, as long as I can remember.² My New England-born mother made sure that we had Xeroxed copies of those words attached to sheets with the hymn “We Gather Together” and the song “Over the River and Through the Woods” once we grew up and moved out of the house, so that we’d continue that family tradition with our new families. We’ve dropped these songs, though we still keep the song sheets, and still recite the short JFK speech excerpt at our Thanksgiving meals.

² Today we give our thanks, most of all, for the ideals of honor and faith we inherit from our forefathers—for the decency of purpose, steadfastness of resolve and strength of will, for the courage and the humility, which they possessed and which we must seek every day to emulate. As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them. (Kennedy, 1963)

In the full text of his 1963 Thanksgiving proclamation, JFK alludes not only to the mythic New England “first Thanksgiving” but also to its subsequent history of presidential proclamations making it a national day of celebration. While perhaps Abraham Lincoln’s proclamation in 1863 “in the midst of America's tragic civil war, of the last Thursday of November 1863 as a day to renew our gratitude for America's ‘fruitful fields,’” is the most well-known, it’s Kennedy’s quotation of George Washington’s 1789 proclamation that has particular resonance today and for my paper, beseeching God to “to pardon our national and other transgressions” on this day (Kennedy, 1963). Though Washington, Lincoln, and Kennedy go on to suggest by seeking forgiveness and giving thanks, the Almighty will reward us with prosperity in a kind of gospel of capitalism and economic empire, I still like the idea of seeking pardon for our national and other transgressions. Today that would be especially our “original sins” of the violent enslavement of Black Africans and the attempted genocide of Native Americans – the national legacy of racism -- the parts of the traditional American Thanksgiving story many of us usually omit. I might add to that a third original sin, our reckless and greedy exploitation of our environment and natural resources contributing to the global climate crisis.

So, alongside the words and songs that tell the very partial and literally “whitewashed” story of “The First Thanksgiving,” we need to add the other stories, the stories of the “Othered” Americans, for a diversity of stories in words, not just the hegemonic one, that parallels the diversity of stories in food that make up the table of the chosen community of immigrants and natives of the America I wish to celebrate at Thanksgiving. Let works like Michael Twitty’s *Cooking Gene* or his tongue-in-cheek piece, “How to Survive Black Thanksgiving as Non-Black Guest” (2015); the Ebony Magazine debate “Should Black People celebrate Thanksgiving?” (Newkirk and Freeman, 2015); Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*; Sean Sherman –

The Sioux Chef's – now almost annual reflections on Thanksgiving (2018; Kendrick, 2020; Anderson, 2020); Philip DeLoria's "Massacres, myths, and the making of the great November holiday" (2019) be the Bible and midrash from which we draw short quotations to make a Thanksgiving "seder" telling newer, truer stories of our diverse and collective American journeys from "degradation to praise." The more voices, the better, as it says in the Jewish Passover Haggadah, "the more you expand upon the story, the more praiseworthy you are"! And taking a page out of contemporary Jewish celebrations of Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for the Trees on which one recites verses praising tree fruits and then eats them, or of environmentalist-themed Passover Haggadot like Ellen Bernstein's *Promise of The Land* (2020), we should include "verses" from contemporary environmentalist literature to include the story of environmental degradation and the climate crisis and especially its impact on the foods we eat, and words of gratitude for the plants, animals, and other natural resources, or better, our other-than-human "kin" that gift themselves (e.g., from Foer, 2019; Kimmerer, 2015, or the writings of Wendell Berry). Finally, let there be less scripted, improvised ritual talk in words of gratitude, to reflect, respect, and express the diversity of the personalities of the participants at one's Thanksgiving table, like going around the table asking each one there "What are you thankful for?" and/or "If you could invite anyone else who's not physically present at our table, living or dead, real or fictional, who would it be and why?" These are all customs my family has practiced at Thanksgiving or other harvest celebrations, as I'm sure many others do as well. And of course, rituals of gratitude also include toasts and blessings, some scripted, like the Jewish prayer the *Shehechyanu* ("... who kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this day") and blessings for specific foods like bread and wine (as we do at our table), or others more improvised, as is characteristic of Protestant American table blessings. Nor in the interest of inclusiveness must

these blessings necessarily reference deities, provided they somehow acknowledge and evoke feelings of gratitude.

As I said at the outset of these paper, my account of how we might better express our identities, tell our stories, and express our gratitude for the communities of human and other - than-human persons we're a part of through the quintessential American civic religious celebration of Thanksgiving is in no way meant to be exhaustive. I am sure there are many things you my readers could add. And I have hardly touched on the particularly difficult circumstances we will have found ourselves this year with the spike in Covid-19 cases, and consequent restrictions on travel and with whom we can socialize for Thanksgiving. There's a whole new range of pandemic rituals for socializing when we have to be socially distant from those we love and care for, most of them involving Zoom. I've already had a lot of practice this past year moving our family and friend meal celebrations from in-person to partially and wholly virtual events. We've ended up paying more attention to the micro-rituals of shared preparations, distant but parallel in time, exchanging recipe ideas, song playlists, and readings. Memories have to carry a lot of the weight of connecting across time and space. Even as we cook and eat in our smaller pods, we remember the experiences and feelings of tasting, smelling, hearing, touching, and seeing the foods and company, giving these sensual moments of the present depth and added meaning.

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