

Decolonizing Thanksgiving Resources

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Decolonizing Thanksgiving: A Toolkit for Combatting Racism in Schools

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As a historian of race, culture, and identity, I'm constantly tackling tricky issues of racial representation in my teaching and research. Despite this, I've long dreaded the day that I would need to confront one of my kids' teachers about their Thanksgiving curriculum. Stereotypical and racist portrayals of Native peoples fill U.S. elementary schools each November as students encounter historically-inaccurate portrayals of Native peoples in arts & crafts, books and lessons about a shared Thanksgiving meal, and songs and plays with hand-crafted headdresses and vests. But these activities are problematic, because they depict Native peoples in an ahistorical way and perpetuate myths about colonial encounters. These representations of Native peoples are harmful because they compress all Native peoples into a single image of "the Native American at Thanksgiving." These depictions overlook the immense diversity of Native peoples in North America, while also turning contemporary Native peoples and identities into costumes to be worn.

By taking a decolonizing approach to teaching about Thanksgiving, teachers and families reject the myths of Thanksgiving and harmful stereotypes about Native peoples. Instead, teachers and families can de-romanticize this holiday, by engaging Native perspectives that recognize the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their contemporary presence in 21st-century America. With children's books like Sally Hunter's "[Four Seasons of Corn: A Winnebago Tradition](#)," educators can examine historical methods of subsistence and show how these traditions still exist today. Furthermore, teachers can examine the myths of Thanksgiving with students. [Older students can even analyze contemporary Native responses to Thanksgiving.](#)

Resources for Educators and Families to Teach about Thanksgiving & Native Peoples in a Socially Responsible Way

“Ten Ways to Make Your Thanksgiving about Social and Environmental Justice,” by Eve Bratman (2016). While some of her suggestions were specific to 2016, Bratman offers suggestions for individuals and families to change their holiday traditions to take action against racism, social injustice, and environmental degradation.

I want to make this Thanksgiving more deeply anti-racist, ecologically rooted, and anti-imperialist...Repeating the holiday with no acknowledgement of the intolerance in its history feels delusional at best, if not actively perpetuating oppression.

Teaching Tolerance, “Teaching Thanksgiving in a Socially Responsible Way,” by Amanda Morris (2015). Includes resources to “help educators [disrupt] the hegemonic Thanksgiving story,” as well as an explanation of how these depictions of Native people are harmful.

“Teaching about Thanksgiving in a socially responsible way means that educators accept the ethical obligation to provide students with accurate information and to reject traditions that sustain harmful stereotypes about indigenous peoples.

Montana Office of Public Instruction, “PreK-12 Social Studies Lesson Plans & Resources.” 100+ lessons and resources grouped by grade level (PreK-2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12) including lessons rethinking Thanksgiving and lessons considering Native culture and tradition, land use, historical inaccuracies in movies, etc.

Archaeology Education Clearing House, “Thanksgiving Teacher Resources.” Includes background reading for teachers, as well as videos, books, and activities for students.

TeachHeart.org, “Celebrate Indigenous Peoples’ Day in the Classroom with These Resources,” by Mickey Kudia (2015). A set of resources about challenging stereotypes about Native peoples, celebrating the accomplishments & culture of Native Americans, and teaching a more complex story of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas.

Border Crossers, “A Racial Justice Guide to Thanksgiving for Educators and Families.” A list of compiled resources for talking about Thanksgiving through “an anti-racist and racial justice lens,” including teaching resources & lesson plans, historical resources, and information on Native American Perspectives, Contributions and Celebrations.

“Lessons from Turtle Island: Native Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms,” by Guy W. Jones (Hunkpapa Lakota) and Sally Moomaw (2002). This book includes five cross-cultural themes — Children, Home, Families, Community, and the Environment — and includes ideas to “incorporate authentic learning experiences about Native Americans into your curriculum.”

Oyate, “Deconstructing the Myths of “The First Thanksgiving,” by Judy Dow (Abenaki) (2006). Counters 11 myths about Thanksgiving like “The Pilgrims and Indians became great friends.”

We offer these myths and facts to assist students, parents and teachers in thinking critically about this holiday, and deconstructing what we have been taught about the history of this continent and the world.

National Museum of the American Indian, “American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving.” A resource for teachers grades 4–8 providing context and lesson ideas around the following themes: 1) Environment: Understanding the Natural World, 2) Community: Group Identity in Culture, 3) Encounter: Effects on Cultures, and 4) Sharing: New Perspectives Year-Round.

Children’s Books about Native Peoples, Cultures, and Traditions

“Bowwow Powwow,” by Brenda J. Child (Red Lake Ojibwe). Story in English with companion retelling in Ojibwe.

When Uncle and Windy Girl and Itchy Boy attend a powwow, Windy watches the dancers and listens to the singers. She eats tasty food and joins family and friends around the campfire. Later, Windy falls asleep under the stars. Now Uncle’s stories inspire other visions in her head: a bowwow powwow, where all the dancers are dogs. In these magical scenes, Windy sees veterans in a Grand Entry, and a visiting drum group, and traditional dancers, grass dancers, and jingle-dress dancers — all with telltale ears and paws and tails. All celebrating in song and dance. All attesting to the wonder of the powwow.

“We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga,” by Traci Sorell (Cherokee). Includes a glossary and the complete Cherokee syllabary.

The word otsaliheliga (oh-jah-LEE-hay-lee-gah) is used by members of the Cherokee Nation to express gratitude. Beginning in the fall with the new year and ending in summer, follow a full Cherokee year of celebrations and experiences.

“The First Strawberries” by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki).

From an award-winning Native American storyteller comes this captivating re-telling of a Cherokee legend, which explains how strawberries came to be. Long ago, the first man and

woman quarreled. The woman left in anger, but the Sun sent tempting berries to Earth to slow the wife's retreat.

“Four Seasons of Corn: A Winnebago Tradition,” by Sally M. Hunter (Ojibwe), Grades 4–6.

The process of growing and harvesting corn takes all four seasons and is an integral part to the Hochunk food culture. The corn cycle begins in the spring when the family travels to their country farm to plow the soil. Hunter's book details preparing the earth, planting corn seeds, harvesting them in the fall, and then driving the crop back to St. Paul to blanch, dry and store it... [The book] explains the importance of the Winnebago food tradition, adding Hochunk words and related stories. The story is told through the lens of Hunter's family, including her grandson Russell, a student, athlete and heartfelt participant in Winnebago tradition.

“Rabbit Goes Duck Hunting: A Traditional Cherokee Legend” by Deborah L. Duvall

Ji-Stu, the Cherokee trickster rabbit, wakes early one morning and decides to visit his old friend Otter, who lives up the river. Along the way, he sees a huge wood duck sitting on the water and instantly recognizes the Chief of All the Wood Ducks, who is surrounded by hundreds of smaller ducks...

“Clambake: A Wampanoag Tradition,” by Russell M. Peters (Wampanoag), Grades 4–6.

Steven Peters, a twelve-year-old Wampanoag Indian in Massachusetts, learns from his grandfather how to prepare a clambake in the tradition of his people.

“The Sacred Harvest: Ojibway Wild Rice Gathering,” by Gordon Regguinti (Ojibwe), Grades 4–6.

In this unique series, Native American authors examine their cultural traditions, from Navajo rug weaving in the Southwest to wild rice gathering in northern Minnesota. Each book describes these customs as they are seen through the eyes of the participants and discusses how Native American people maintain their cultural identities in contemporary society.

“Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message,” by Jake Swamp (Mohawk), all grades.

“Giving Thanks” is a special children's version of the Thanksgiving Address, a message of gratitude that originated with the Native people of upstate New York and Canada and that is still spoken at ceremonial gatherings held by the Iroquois, or Six Nations.

“Ininatig's Gift of Sugar: Traditional Native Sugarmaking,” by Laura Waterman Wittstock (Seneca), Grades 4–6.

Describes how Indians have relied on the sugar maple tree for food and tells how an Anishinabe Indian in Minnesota continues his people's traditions by teaching students to tap the trees and make maple sugar.

“First Fire: A Cherokee Folktale” by Nancy Kelly Allen

Why are ravens black? Why do screech owl eyes look red in light? How did we get fire? You'll find the answers to those questions in this retelling of a Cherokee pourquoi folktale. The earth was

cold and dark but the animals could see fire coming from the tree on the island. They tried to fly or swim to the island to bring back the fire heat and light.

****Many of these books are recommended by Oyate.****

Lists of Children's Books about Native Peoples, Cultures, & Traditions

[Indian Country Today, "Beyond the So-Called First Thanksgiving: 5 Children's Books," by Debbie Reese \(2013\).](#)

There are a multitude of works by Native writers who tell stories from their experience and history. While Thanksgiving is a good time to grab people's attention about Wampanoag-European interactions, it does not need to frame the story. These books give a far more nuanced, and accurate, account of Indigenous Peoples. They will set children and adults alike straight on what really happened around the time of the so-called First Thanksgiving, and what Native life is like today.

[List: The Conscious Kid, #WEARESTILLHERE: **Contemporary Indigenous Reads by Indigenous Authors \(2018\).](#)**

These picture and board books are from a book list we did in partnership with @dreese_nambe (Nambé Pueblo, American Indians in Children's Literature) and Brooklyn Children's Museum (@bcmkids). The featured titles all take place in present day.

[List: American Indians in Children's Literature \(AICL\), "Best Books by or about American Indians and First Nations?"](#) For more reading suggestions for children's books by Native peoples and about Native peoples, this site "provides critical perspectives and analysis of indigenous peoples in children's and young adult books, the school curriculum, popular culture, and society." The page includes "links to book reviews, Native media, and more."

Please feel free to share your own suggestions in the comments below. Thanks for taking on this important work of changing how we teach about Native peoples and Thanksgiving in our schools and homes!