

Running to America

Luis J. Rodriguez (2005)

for Alfonso and Maria Estela Rodriguez, Migrants

They are night shadow violating borders,
fingers curled through chain-link fences,
hiding from infra-red eyes, dodging 30-30 bullets.
They leave familiar smells, warmth and sounds
as ancient as the trampled stones.

Running to America.

There is a woman in her finest border-crossing wear:
A purple blouse from an older sister,
a pair of worn shoes from a church bazaar,
a tattered coat from a former lover.

There is a child dressed in black,
fear sparkling from dark Indian eyes,
clinging to a headless Barbie doll.

And the men, some hardened, quiet,
others young and loud--you see something
like this in prisons. Soon they will cross
on their bellies, kissing black earth,

then run to America.

Strange voices whisper behind garbage cans,
beneath freeway passes, next to broken bottles.
The spatter of words, textured and multi-colored,
invoke demons.

They must run to America.

Their skin, color of earth, is a brand
for all the great ranchers, for the killing floors
on Soto Street and as slaughter
for the garment row. Still they come:
A hungry people have no country.

Readings for: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/sharing-family-stories-using-thanksgiving-break-build-family-connections>

Their tears are the grease of the bobbing machines
that rip into cloth
that make clothes
that keep you warm.

They have endured the sun's stranglehold,
el cortito, foundry heats and dark caves of mines,
swallowing men.

Still they come, wandering bravely
through the thickness of this strange land's maddening ambivalence.

Their cries are singed with fires of hope.
Their babies are born with a lion
in their hearts.

Who can confine them?
Who can tell them
which lines never to cross?

For the green rivers, for their looted gold,
escaping the blood of a land
that threatens to drown them,
they have come,

running to America.

What It's Like to be the Child of Immigrants

Michael Rain, [TED Talk](#), 2018

I remember one morning when I was in the third grade, my mom sent me to school with a Ghanaian staple dish called "fufu." Fufu is this white ball of starch made of cassava, and it's served with light soup, which is a dark orange color, and contains chicken and/or beef. It's a savory, flavorful dish that my mom thought would keep me warm on a cold day. When I got to lunch and I opened my thermos, releasing these new smells into the air, my friends did not react favorably.

"What's that?" one of them asked.

"It's fufu," I responded.

"Ew, that smells funny. What's a fufu?" they asked.

Their reaction made me lose my appetite. I begged my mother to never send me to school with fufu again. I asked her to make me sandwiches or chicken noodle soup or any of the other foods that my friends were eating. And this is one of the first times I began to notice the distinction between what was unique to my family and what was common for everyone else, what was Ghanaian and what was African and what was American.

I'm a first-generation American. Both of my parents are immigrants. In fact, my father, Gabriel, came to the US almost 50 years ago. He arrived in New York from a city called Kumasi in a northern region of Ghana, in West Africa. He came for school, earning his bachelor's degree in accounting and eventually became an accountant. My mother, Georgina, joined him years later. She had a love of fashion and worked in a sewing factory in lower Manhattan, until she saved up enough to open her own women's clothing store. I consider myself an American and an African and a Ghanaian. And there's millions of people around the world who are juggling these different classifications. They might be Jamaican-Canadians or Korean-Americans or Nigerian-Brits. But what makes our stories and experiences different is that we were born and raised in a country different than our parents, and this can cause us to be misunderstood when being viewed through a narrow lens.

I grew up in New York, which is home to the largest number of immigrants anywhere in the United States. And you would think growing up in a place like New York, it would be easy for a first-generation person to find their place. But all throughout my childhood, there were these moments that formed my understanding of the different worlds I belonged to.

When I was in the fifth grade, a student asked me if my family was refugees. I didn't know what that word meant. He explained to me that his parents told him that refugees are

people from Africa who come to the US to escape death, starvation and disease. So I asked my parents, and they laughed a bit, not because it was funny but because it was a generalization. And they assured me that they had enough to eat in Ghana and came to the US willingly.

These questions became more complex as I got older. Junior high school was the first time I went to school with a large number of black American students, and many of them couldn't understand why I sounded differently than they did or why my parents seemed different than theirs.

"Are you even black?" a student asked. I mean, I thought I was black. I thought my skin complexion settled that.

I asked my father about it, and he shared his own confusion over the significance of that when he first came to the US. He explained to me that, when he was in Ghana, everyone was black, so he never thought about it. But in the US, it's a thing.

But he would say, "But you're African. Remember that." And he would emphasize this, even though many Africans in the continent would only consider me to be just an American.

These misconceptions and complex cultural issues are not just the inquiries of children. Adults don't know who immigrants are. If we look at current trends, if I asked you: What's the fastest-growing immigrant demographic in the United States, who would you think it was? Nine out of 10 people tell me it's Latinos, but it's actually African immigrants. How about in academics? What's the most educated immigrant demographic? A lot of people presume it to be Asians, but it's actually African immigrants. Even in matters of policy, did you know that three out of the eight countries in the so-called "travel ban" are African countries? A lot of people assume those targeted Muslims only live in the Middle East, but a lot of those banned people are Africans. So on these issues of education and policy and religion, a lot of things we presume about immigrants are incorrect. Even if we look at something like workplace diversity and inclusion, if I asked you what gender-ethnicity combination is least likely to be promoted to senior managerial positions, who would you think it was? The answer is not Africans this time.

And it's not black women or men, and it's not Latin women or men. It's Asian women who are least likely to be promoted.

Capturing these stories and issues is part of my work as a digital storyteller that uses tech to make it easier for people to find these stories. This year, I launched an online gallery of portraits and firsthand accounts for a project called Enodi. The goal of Enodi is to highlight first-generation immigrants just like me who carry this kinship for the countries we grew up in, for the countries of origin and for this concept called "blackness." I created this space

to be a cyberhome for many of us who are misunderstood in our different home countries. There are millions of Enodis who use hyphens to connect their countries of origin with their various homes in the US or Canada or Britain or Germany. In fact, many people you might know are Enodi. Actors Issa Rae and Idris Elba are Enodi. Colin Powell, former Attorney General Eric Holder, former President of the United States, Barack Obama, are all the children of African or Caribbean immigrants. But how much do you know about us? This complicated navigation is not just the experience of first-generation folks.

We're so intertwined in the lives and culture of people in North America and Europe, that you might be surprised how critical we are to your histories and future. So, engage us in conversation; discover who immigrants actually are, and see us apart from characterizations or limited media narratives or even who we might appear to be. We're walking melting pots of culture, and if something in that pot smells new or different to you -- don't turn up your nose. Ask us to share. Thank you.

The Thanksgiving Tale We Tell Is a Harmful Lie. As a Native American, I've Found a Better Way to Celebrate the Holiday.

By Sean Sherman, *Time*, 2018

Every November, I get asked an unfortunate, loaded question: “You’re a Native American—what do you eat on Thanksgiving?” My answer spans my lifetime.

I was born and raised on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in the 1970s and am a member of the Oglala Lakota Sioux Tribe. Growing up, I went to a very small country school on the reservation, in the poorest county in the United States. Our school had predominantly Native students, but we were still taught what everybody was about Thanksgiving: It represented a time when “pilgrims and Indians” celebrated together, and it was about being thankful. Only later would we find out that it was a lie.

But as I was taught this story, my family gathered on Thanksgiving at my grandparent’s ranch, where we held a huge feast of very typical recipes, most of them straight out of a circa-’60s Betty Crocker cookbook. I remember the mingling smells of dishes cooking throughout the day as our moms and aunts crowded every kitchen surface preparing for the large offering. We had the staples, like roasted turkey; mashed potatoes and milk gravy; sweet potatoes with marshmallows; green bean casserole with onion crisps; brand-name stuffing; canned cranberry sauce; an assortment of cold pasta salads, Jello molds, cookies, deviled eggs; and 1950s-style glass platters filled with canned California black olives, pickles and piles of veggies. On occasion, we had Lakota dishes like Taniga (intestine soup) and wojape (chokecherry sauce).

Those are good memories. Though once my grandparents passed away, my family never celebrated holidays like that again, gathered in one place on the reservation. In the years since, my perspective on Thanksgiving has changed—at first from a sense of bitterness surrounding the real history of those lies we tell, of the actual stories we should honor and mourn, and then with a renewed hope for what our celebrations could be, if we simply changed our focus.

It was the Wampanoag in 1621 who helped the first wave of Puritans arriving on our shores, showing them how to plant crops, forage for wild foods and basically survive. The first official mention of a “Thanksgiving” celebration occurs in 1637, after the colonists brutally massacre an entire Pequot village, then subsequently celebrate their barbaric victory. Years later, President Washington first tried to start a holiday of Thanksgiving in 1789, but this has nothing to do with “Indians and settlers, instead it’s intended to be a public day of “thanksgiving and prayer.” (That the phrase “Merciless Savage Indians” is

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written into the Declaration of Independence says everything we need to know about how the founders of America viewed the Indigenous Peoples of this land.) It wasn't until the writer Sarah Josepha Hale persuaded President Lincoln that the Thanksgiving holiday was needed and could help heal the divided nation that it was made official in 1863. But even that was not the story we are all taught today. The inspiration for that was far more exclusionist.

According to the 2009 book, *Thanksgiving: The Biography of an American Holiday* by James Baker, who was a researcher at Plimoth Plantation, this changed during the Progressive Era (1890–1920), when the United States became a global power rife with industrialization and urbanization. It saw a rise in nationalism, as European immigrants poured into the country, and the Protestant Americans who'd massacred indigenous people feared being displaced. Colonial ideology became the identity of what it was to be truly "American," and they began implementing teachings to clearly define "Americanism" for the new immigrants. One of these was the sanitized story of Thanksgiving — which fabricated a peaceful depiction between the colonizers and the tribes and neglected to mention the amount of death, destruction and land-grabbing that occurs against the first peoples, setting the tone for the next 200 years. By 1920, writes Baker, the story of "pilgrims and Indians" became a story every American school child was taught, even in Native schools.

But our families lived something different. My great grandfather helped fight off General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn, alongside other Lakota and Cheyenne, not even 100 years before my birth. I think about my great grandfather's lifetime, being born in the 1850s—toward the end of the genocides that began in the 1600s across America, and stretching into the subtler but still damaging years of assimilation efforts we have endured since. He saw escalating conflicts between Lakota life as he knew it and the ever-emerging immigrants from the east. He witnessed the disappearance of the bison, the loss of the sacred Black Hills, the many broken promises made by the U.S., along with atrocities like the Sand Creek and Wounded Knee Massacres. He saw his children attend the boarding schools where they had their hair forcibly cut and were punished for speaking their languages. I wonder what he thought about the Thanksgiving story.

But I do not wonder about this: Thanksgiving really has nothing to do with Native Americans, and everything to do with an old (but not the oldest) guard conjuring a lie of the first peoples welcoming the settlers to bolster their false authority over what makes a "real" American. (Remember, only in 1924 were Native Americans allowed to become citizens of the United States — and it took decades more for all states to permit us to vote.) It is a story of supposed unity, drained of the bloodshed, and built for the sake of division.

Many of my indigenous brothers and sisters refuse to celebrate Thanksgiving, protesting the whitewashing of the horrors our ancestors went through, and I don't blame them. But I have not abandoned the holiday. I have just changed how I practice it.

The thing is, we do not need the poisonous "pilgrims and Indians" narrative. We do not need that illusion of past unity to actually unite people today. Instead, we can focus simply on values that apply to everybody: togetherness, generosity and gratitude. And we can make the day about what everybody wants to talk and think about anyway: the food.

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.

For years, especially as the head of a company that focuses on indigenous foods, I have explored Native foods. It has given me—and can give all of us—a deeper understanding of the land we stand on. It's exciting to reconnect with the nature around us. We Americans spend hours outdoors collecting foods like chanterelles, morels, ramps, wild ginger, chokecherries, wild plums, crab apples, cactus fruit, paw paws, manzanita berries, cattails, maple, wild rice (not the black stuff from California, which is a modified and completely different version of the true wild rice growing around the Great Lakes region), cedar, rosehips, hickory, acorns and walnuts. We can work with Native growers producing heirloom beans, squash and pumpkins, and Native corn varieties, all coming in many shapes, sizes and colors. We can have our feasts include dishes like cedar-braised rabbit, sunchokes with sumac, pine-stewed venison, smoked turkey with chestnuts, true wild rice with foraged mushrooms, native squash with maple, smoked salmon and wild teas.

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.