

# TRUTHSGIVING

Why we Must Abolish Colonial Holidays that Perpetuate Dangerous Stereotypes and Whitewashed History



There are many colonial mythologies about Indigenous Peoples and the founding of the US and Canada. Thanksgiving is one of them, however, in the words of Wamsutta Frank James, Wampanoag, “the Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cape Cod four days before they had robbed the graves of my ancestors, and stolen their corn, wheat, and beans.” The truth is that real history has been whitewashed and that Thanksgiving perpetuates white supremacy and romanticized notions about Indigenous Peoples. To celebrate the current Thanksgiving mythology is to celebrate the theft of land through ethnic cleansing and enslavement. It is a lie that overlooks the genocide of Native American Indigenous Peoples and the enslavement of African Indigenous Peoples in order for settler-vigilantes and colonial militias to steal land and labor--the legacy of which is still felt today.

**THE TRUTH WILL NOT BE WHITEWASHED**

# THANKSGIVING PROMOTES WHITEWASHED HISTORY-- SO I ORGANIZED TRUTHSGIVING INSTEAD

*Sikowis, Plains-Cree/Saulteaux, George Gordon First Nation  
Great Plains Action Society  
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There are many settler colonial mythologies about Native Americans. These widely held but false beliefs are rooted in deeply entrenched discriminatory attitudes and behaviors that are perpetuated by institutionalized racism. One of the most celebrated mythologies is the holiday of Thanksgiving, which is believed, since 1621, to be a mutually sanctioned gathering of "Indians" and Pilgrims. The truth is far from the mythos of popular imagination. The real story is one

*The Truth Will Not Be Whitewashed, Sikowis*

where settler vigilantes unyieldingly pushed themselves into Native American homelands, and forced an uneasy gathering upon the locals.

In the words of Wamsutta Frank James, Wampanoag, "the Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cape Cod four days before they had robbed the graves of my ancestors, and stolen their corn, wheat, and beans." These words came from his 1970 Thanksgiving Day speech, which he wrote for the annual celebration of the landing of the Pilgrims held every year in Plymouth, Massachusetts. However, this speech was never presented; the organizers of the celebration reportedly asked to see his speech ahead of time, according to James' obituary in the Boston Globe, and allegedly asked him to rewrite it on the basis that his words were not aligned with the popular mythology. He instead declared Thanksgiving a National Day of Mourning.

Thanksgiving is the third in a line of problematic holidays of the fall season — holidays that may seem harmless, but that actually have a grave effect on the well-being of Native Americans. The other two

are Columbus Day and Halloween. From the second Monday of October to the fourth Thursday in November, Native Americans are hammered with a barrage of racially offensive, culturally appropriative, and historically inaccurate inculcations. The list is extensive – Columbus Day parades, statues, speeches, and sales; offensive Halloween costumes; Pilgrim and Indian paraphernalia; and of course, all the parties, events, and classroom activities that even our children are subject to. All of which is an attempt to hide the unpleasant truths about this country's real history.

Indigenous organizers are making headway on decolonizing Columbus Day by replacing it with Indigenous Peoples' Day, and are also exposing the truth about derogatory Halloween costumes that perpetuate dangerous colonial violence. However, Thanksgiving is so deeply cherished by American society that protests and alternative celebrations have made little impact.

It's past time to honor the Indigenous resistance, tell our story as it really happened, and undo romanticized notions of the holiday that have long suppressed our perspective. As an Indigenous decolonizer, I call this time of year the Season of Resistance. With Thanksgiving fast approaching, I ask you to please take the time to educate your peers about Thanksgiving's real history; to support Native people as they resist the narrative of the holiday; and to organize or host alternatives to this holiday.

An essential part of decolonizing Thanksgiving is to start educating our children with the authentic history of this country. A book that reexamines basic "truths" about Thanksgiving in an educational context is Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years. Considering that much of the Thanksgiving mythology is based on sharing food, it is ideal to discuss the importance of Indigenous first foods or food sovereignty with our children as well. The book Four Seasons of Corn: A Winnebago Tradition discusses the traditional process of growing and harvesting corn, de-commercializing what we eat, and promoting culturally appropriate foods and agricultural systems of North America. Decolonizing Thanksgiving: A Toolkit for Combatting Racism in Schools is a quick read where more resources are listed; it even has sample letters that can be sent to your children's school concerning problematic Thanksgiving activities.

# TRUTHSGIVING

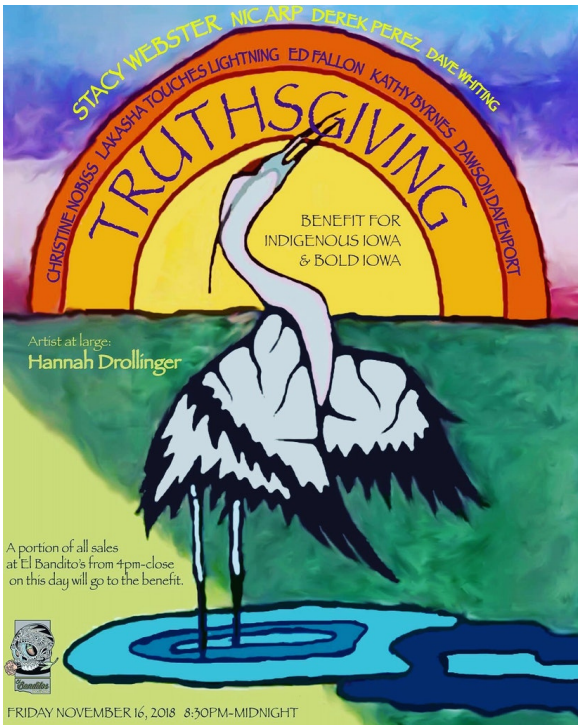


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Other important Thanksgiving decolonization tactics include participating in Indigenous-led events. In 1970, the National Day of Mourning was instituted by James, the United American Indians of New England, and the local Wampanoag community as a resistance to Thanksgiving. This alternative holiday is held at Plymouth Rock and has occurred annually for almost 50 years. The National Day of

Mourning also coincides with an event on the other side of the country that takes place on Alcatraz Island (an important Native American site). Unthanksgiving Day, also known as The Indigenous Peoples Sunrise Ceremony, is a large cultural event that has been held annually since 1975 and commemorates the Alcatraz-Red Power Movement occupation of 1969. There are, in fact, many anti-Thanksgiving events that occur around the country each year — one of which I have co-organized, called Truthsgiving.







*This year, Great Plains Action Society is celebrating Truthsgiving at the Englert Theater in Iowa City, plus we are giving talks at the University of Omaha, Western Iowa Tech Community College and even IMT Insurance. We are proud that Seven Directions of Service in North Carolina is also hosting an event!*

In order to honor the achievements and contributions of Native Americans to the United States, in 2009, a resolution was signed to recognize the day after Thanksgiving as Native American Heritage Day. It seems like a step in the right direction, but it's more of a redirection around the real issue, which is that Thanksgiving needs a complete overhaul, in the same way Columbus Day is slowly being revised as Indigenous Peoples' Day. To celebrate the current Thanksgiving mythology is to celebrate the act of land expansion through ethnic cleansing and slavery – most of which happened at the point of a gun. It is masked recognition that this country was founded on the actions of generations of Europeans who depended on the joint violence of genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of African people to conquer this land, the legacy of which is still felt today.

Generations of American values are responsible for institutionalizing the Thanksgiving mythology, but ultimately, change can occur as individuals awaken to the reality that their Thanksgiving meals celebrate a violent, whitewashed history, and begin the process of truth-telling, healing, and reconciliation.

# TRUTHSGIVING AND MUTUAL AID REVOLUTION

Ronnie James, Indigenous Organizer

Des Moines Mutual Aid and Great Plains Action Society

*Truthsgiving must be enacted through truth telling and mutual aid to discourage colonized ideas about the thanksgiving mythology*

Mutual Aid as an organizational strategy is as old as humanity. Historically, before capitalism destroyed much of what made us thrive, the way we existed was only possible through cooperation and thinking of the “whole”. It was not possible to act in the American cliché of the “rugged individualist” because each of us was needed for our skills to look after and advance our communities.

In this modern world, where the basic resources for survival are commodified and held captive, Mutual Aid is now not only a survival tactic to the marginalized, it is also a revolutionary act.

In Des Moines, Iowa, the multiple self-identified Mutual Aid groups provide hot food, propane for heat, legal and physical defense for our houseless relatives, organize a free grocery distribution, maintain a bail fund that is funded entirely by community donations to keep our loved ones out of jail, especially crucial during a pandemic. They maintain a rent assistance program to keep families in their homes.

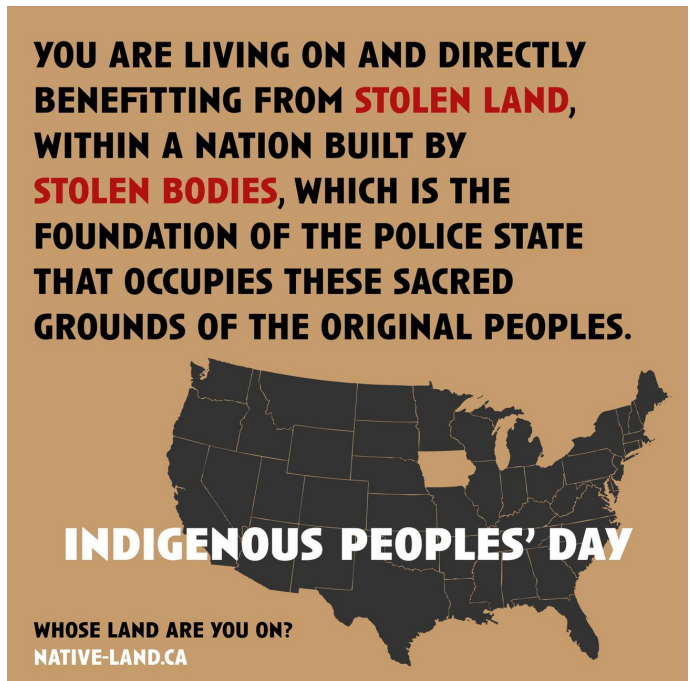
There are many charities that do similar work, but Mutual Aid is not charity. It operates on the main principle that those that are affected by an issue needs to have a say in the solution. This cannot be effective with a hierarchical leadership model, it necessitates horizontal organizing. This allows all those involved to pivot the operation as the situation demands without waiting for permission from leadership. This model also requires the participation of all those affected, so it builds relationships and solidarity between people from all the varied backgrounds that make up our communities.

The term Mutual Aid was popularized by the 19th century naturalist and anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin. In his collection of essays entitled “Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution” he described, as a response to the theories of Darwin, how in both the natural world and pre-capitalist human world, that it was in fact cooperation amongst

species and communities that had allowed human and animal evolution to thrive. He documented this with his training as a natural scientist and his study of Indigenous societies. Kropotkin concludes that competition actually slows down and hinders evolution, rather than creates innovation as the popular theories would lead us to believe. The perpetual conflict that is a competitive society can only benefit the few at the expense of the many.

Mutual Aid is a fundamental part of Anarchist organizing in that it helps communities to solve the problems that the state has failed to solve, or has created itself. This is an important part of liberation, a society that can control its own trajectories through cooperation and consensus is actually replacing the state and all the real and implied violence necessary to maintain it. It is especially important now when capitalist states are failing most of us during the Covid-19 pandemic. The beautiful news is that Mutual Aid groups, whether self-identified as such or not, are being created in so many places that previously did not have them.

It is the dream of the revolutionary in this period that all of the lessons that we are learning at the current time will prove to us that the way the world was prior to this year was too violent and too fragile for the people as a whole to want to return to. There is too much at stake to “return to normal”, a normal that is relatively new to this world. The possibilities of where we go from here are endless, and many of us are proving new possibilities right now.



*Words by Ronnie James, Graphic by Des Moines BLM*

## NOVEMBER IS NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH-- BUT IT SEEMS LIKE MORE OF AN AFFRONT THAN AN HONOR

*By, Jessica Engelking, Anishinaabe, Great Plains Action Society*

November is Native American Heritage month, but it seems like more of an affront than honor. Like making Black History Month the shortest month of the year, choosing to celebrate Natives during the same month that contains one of the most harmful settler-colonial myths is insulting. What started as a day to honor Native peoples in the early 1900's grew into a full-blown month in the 1990's. But there are no perks or fanfare. Even worse, in 2019, the President decided to proclaim November, "National American Heritage And Founders Month," essentially glorifying our genocide in a month intended to honor us. This proclamation negates any attempt at celebrating Indigenous Peoples as not that much of an effort was made, judging by the website the government has set up for this occasion. It's not great that it calls Indigenous Peoples 'first Americans' as this term implies that they are part of the building of the nation state when they were in fact genocided in order to do so. It's also problematic as the site is through the National Parks Service, with whom Indigenous people share a dark history.

To put things in perspective, November is the one month of the year that is dedicated to honoring Native Peoples, yet we are so far from acknowledging that this November CNN had the audacity to refer to us as "something else" in a survey despite Indigenous voters and electoral efforts being crucial to swing the election.

While the settler-colonial holiday of Thanksgiving is problematic every year, this year it is especially crucial that we rethink Thanksgiving. Some jokes have been made about how this Thanksgiving, occurring during a pandemic year, bears similarity to the original in its disease spreading nature. But far from funny, this year has been deadly for many native communities hit disproportionately hard by COVID-19. And the bringing of disease to Native people is hardly a thing of the past. In Minnesota for instance, despite other restrictions and regulations, pipeline construction has been given the go-ahead and thousands of workers are going to be brought in near reservations.



Despite all the horribleness of having to deal with combatting the settler-colonial lies, Indigenous Peoples, such as Great Plains Action Society, are working to uplift the truth. Truthsgiving events include not just celebration, but mutual aid and frontline support. According to the website, "Truthsgiving is about doing the Truth...to create a new Truth, a Truth that shapes a better future." The same should be true for Native American Heritage Month but Indigenous Peoples are still fighting to be recognized legitimately in a month that is being whitewashed by Thanksgiving, National American Heritage And Founders Month and shallow acknowledgement by a white supremacist government.



# SOME FACTS ABOUT "THANKSGIVING"

*Trisha Etringer, Ho-Chunk Nation*

*Vote Mob and Great Plains Action Society*

- Plymouth Rock is within the original homelands of the Patuxet, a Band of the Wampanoag Tribal Confederation, which was largely wiped out by leptospirosis in the early 1600's—a disease brought over by immune, disease-ridden rats and humans from Europe. For this reason, later settler invaders succeeded in establishing a foothold in New England where they stole remaining food stores and forced an uneasy gathering on remaining Indigenous Peoples in the area, now known as Thanksgiving.
- Known as the last of the Patuxets, Tisquantum, or "Squanto", was captured and sold into slavery in the early 1600's. He was then sold to an English merchant that taught him English. When Tisquantum returned to his homelands in 1619 he found that his people no longer existed due to the disease that had wiped them out during his absence.
- Sarah Josepha Hale, aka, #nonprofitkaren (1788-1879), pushed for Thanksgiving to become a nationally recognized holiday in order to unite Americans during The Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln supported Sarah's proposal and proclaimed Thanksgiving to be a U.S. recognized Holiday. Months later, he stood by and allowed U.S.'s largest mass execution of thirty-eight plus 2 Dakota men. There is a run and ride every year to honor and remember the Dakota 38 + 2.
- In 1939, President Hoover moved Thanksgiving a week earlier than it's original date to allow for more Christmas shopping in order to boost the economy. This is how the Macy's parade and Black Friday came to be.

# TAKE THE PLEDGE TO ABOLISH THANKSGIVING



## TRUTHSGIVING.ORG

**STEP 1: Educate Yourself** - What do you know about Native American Indigenous Peoples past and present, and about Indigenous resistance to Thanksgiving? See the list of resources at [truthsgiving.org](https://truthsgiving.org) to get you started.

**STEP 2: Educate Others** - Tell at least three people what you've learned and encourage them to take the pledge to discuss the truth at their thanksgiving event.

**STEP 3: Give Back** - Tell the truth at your thanksgiving gathering or abolish it in your own life and celebrate Truthsgiving by giving back to your community during this day or hosting an event that celebrates Indigenous resistance and honors historical truth.

**#TRUTHSGIVING #TRUTHSGIVING2020**  
**#NATIONALDAYOFMOURNING #ABOLISHTHANKSGIVING**  
**#WAMPANOAG #NOTYOURMASCOT**

Truthsgiving is growing and we hope that you will also join the fight to abolish Thanksgiving mythologies and create better ideologies and practices in its place. If your organization would like to join us, please let us know!

If you have photos with your "Truth Will Not Be Whitewashed" hoodie or your "Truth" mask, please send those our way and we will put them in our gallery at ***Truthsgiving.org***. We also welcome testimonials and writing for our blog about why you think Thanksgiving needs an overhaul.

**Email all pictures, writing and inquiries to**  
***sikowis@greatplainsaction.org***

### References

Jessica Engleking's Writing at [truthsgiving.org/blog](https://truthsgiving.org/blog)  
Sikowis's Writing on Bustle at [bit.ly/organizetruthsgiving](https://bit.ly/organizetruthsgiving)



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