

My First Encounter with Turkey

“You can’t live in Canada and not celebrate Thanksgiving, you know?”

When I first arrived in Canada, a friend invited me to her family's Thanksgiving dinner. As the roasted turkey came to the centre of the table, my friend suggested, "I think Rainy should try it first. She never had it before!" My face burned as the table turned to stare at me. Although the turkey's flavour was lost, I said, "It's so good! I wish I had it before." I praised the turkey because I recognized that food symbolizes group affiliation (Gerber & Folta, 2022). I wanted to gain acceptance by aligning my eating behaviour with the group. By validating the group's view of Turkey, I tried to reduce my perceived otherness and avoid being an "ungrateful" newcomer. The dinner table reinforced an implicit standard: those who eat turkey and celebrate Thanksgiving are "real" Canadians. Turkey turned into a symbol of national identity from which I would be excluded if I said no to it (Monterrosa et al., 2020). My compliance with "appropriate" eating behaviours fits me into a white, settler understanding of Canadian identity. The experience illustrates that minority groups can feel pressured to mask their experience and adopt the customs and attitudes of the dominant culture (Gerber & Folta, 2022).

But what is Turkey, really?

Although it seems like turkey was just a part of a harmless gratitude celebration, Thanksgiving itself is a colonial narrative. The myth of a harmonious feast shared by the Pilgrim settlers and the Wampanoag people hides the centuries of genocide, land dispossession, and cultural destruction inflicted upon Indigenous people. Not only did the Pilgrims rob Wampanoag graves upon their arrival, but they also forced Wampanoag people to behave according to their standards through coercion to start the great epidemic (James & Munro, 2021). Thanksgiving was never peaceful. When Puritans declared the first Thanksgiving, it was to celebrate the massacre of Pequot men, women and children (James & Munro, 2021). People in power used Thanksgiving to reinforce whiteness as the default identity and frame European settlers as the benevolent protagonists.

The history of Thanksgiving added a layer to the sociocultural pressure I felt when consuming the turkey. Since power structure influences food choices, turkey should be seen as a symbol of colonialism, not abundance, gratitude, or community (Monterrosa et al., 2020). I felt ashamed by unintentionally participating in a narrative that neglects Indigenous trauma and the ongoing systemic discrimination against the community. The "Canadian identity" I was pressured to adopt was not a neutral, natural identity. It was one built on a white-centric historical narrative that marginalizes Indigenous peoples. I realized that I was invited to assimilate into a colonial identity, one that defined who belonged and whose stories to silence (Reddy & van Dam, 2020).

From Thanksgiving to Truthgiving

My encounter with turkey reveals the complex interplay between food, cultural identity and colonialism. I moved from performative assimilation to recognizing the colonial roots of Thanksgiving. My new understanding of Thanksgiving leads to a critical question: How can I participate in gratitude and community gathering without being a part of a harmful narrative?

While there is not a single correct answer to the question, I decided to practice Truthgiving by bringing a whole steamed fish to the table. In Chinese, fish (鱼) is a homophone for surplus (余). The dish represents wishes for prosperity and abundance in the coming year. The steamed whole fish is a direct connection to my own heritage (Lin et al., 2020). Through bringing my own cultural dish to the table, I wish to create an opportunity to share with my friends not just a dish, but the concept of "Truthgiving." As a group, we can acknowledge the land we are on and honour how history shapes our shared present. I want to move from a passive and inherited tradition to an active engagement with history. Truthgiving is a way for me to honour the kindness of others while acknowledging the history of the land.

By choosing the fish, I aim to opt out of the colonial narrative symbolized by the turkey. I refuse to perform an assimilation that requires me to celebrate a history built on the pain of Indigenous peoples. Instead of a passive consumer of the dominant culture's symbols, I became a creator of my own identity through food choices (Wright et al., 2021). The fish on my plate is a way for me to hold gratitude for my community, take pride in my Chinese heritage, and support Indigenous sovereignty.