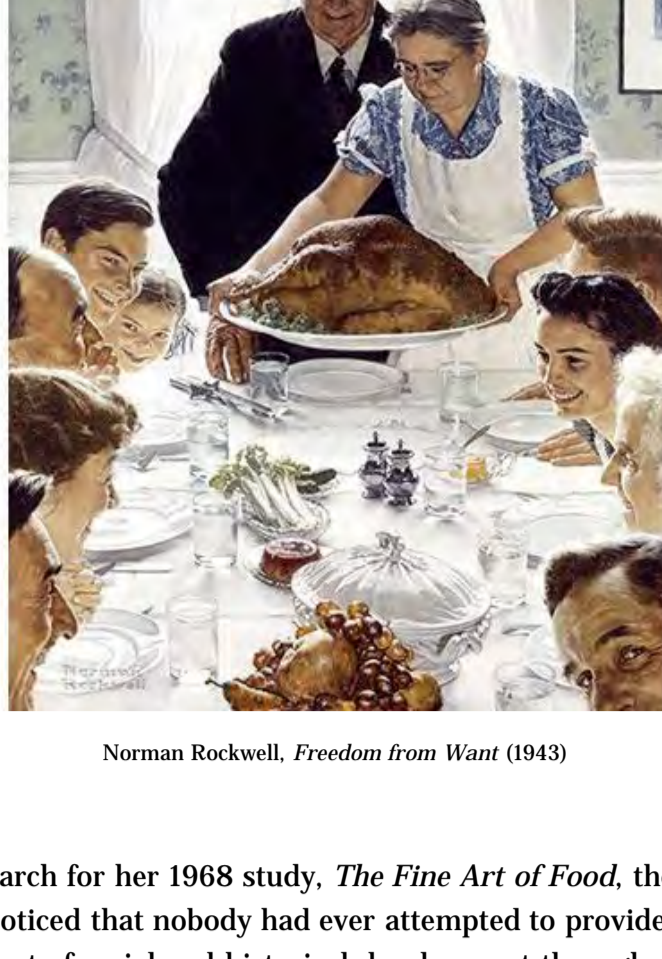


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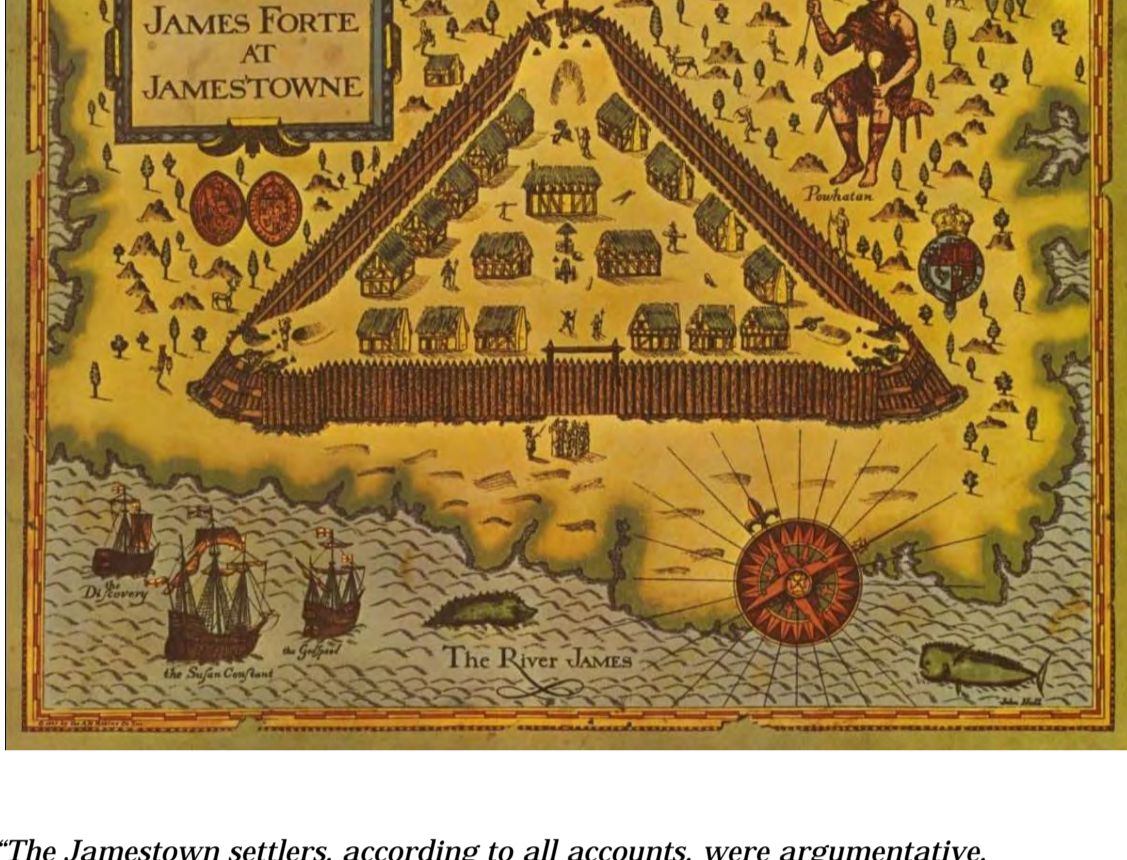
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
25 November 2021



Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want* (1943)

When doing research for her 1968 study, *The Fine Art of Food*, the British historian Reay Tannahill noticed that nobody had ever attempted to provide a broad “overview of food as a catalyst of social and historical development throughout the world and across the ages.” This led her to write *Food in History*, published in 1973. I was introduced to this book by my wife, and whenever Thanksgiving Day comes around, it has become a family ritual at the dining table to read from it a passage on the first European settlers in North America, not unlike reading a passage from the Bible on Christmas Eve or the Haggadah on Passover:

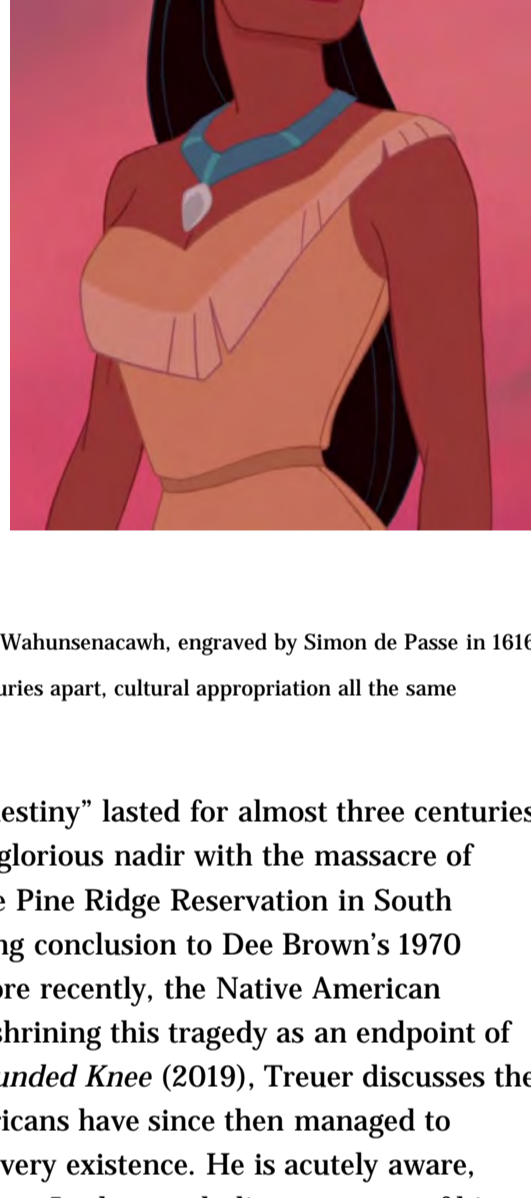
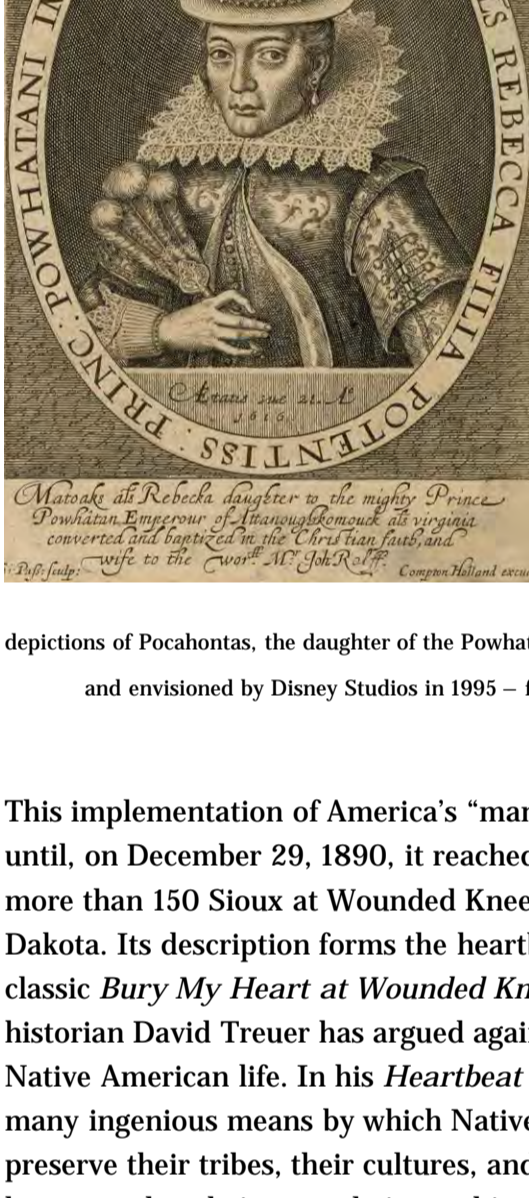


“The Jamestown settlers, according to all accounts, were argumentative, incompetent and ignorant, work-shy, ill-equipped with tools and materials and over-conscious of their dignity. The land was rich in game, the waters alive with fish, the woods full of edible berries, but if it had not been for the generosity of the Indians they would have starved.”



postcard published by The Jamestown Amusement & Vending Co. (1907)

Talk about making mistakes! Those hapless Christian settlers were devout and obedient to *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall*, as issued by their governor Sir Thomas Dale in 1610. Nonetheless did the Powhatan Indians’ benevolence toward the strangers when they arrived in 1607 mark the beginning of the systematic eradication of North America’s Indigenous peoples.



depictions of Pocahontas, the daughter of the Powhatan chief Wahunsenacawh, engraved by Simon de Passe in 1616 and envisioned by Disney Studios in 1995 – four centuries apart, cultural appropriation all the same

This implementation of America’s “manifest destiny” lasted for almost three centuries until, on December 29, 1890, it reached its inglorious nadir with the massacre of more than 150 Sioux at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Its description forms the heartbreaking conclusion to Dee Brown’s 1970 classic *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. More recently, the Native American historian David Treuer has argued against enshrining this tragedy as an endpoint of the Native American life. In his *Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* (2019), Treuer discusses the many ingenious means by which Native Americans have since then managed to preserve their tribes, their cultures, and their very existence. He is acutely aware, however, that their struggle is anything but over. In the concluding passages of his moving book, Treuer makes reference to Walter Benjamin’s famous *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (published posthumously in 1942). In the sixth thesis, Benjamin admonishes us that “in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it ... Only *that* historian will have the gift of fanning the spark in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy as he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”

This is but one of the many urgently needed counternarratives to the often self-congratulatory project of our so-called Western civilization. Slavery, colonialism, antisemitism, xenophobia, in general, and, perhaps most fundamentally ingrained within society itself, misogyny, are some of the others.



recasting Norman Rockwell for modern America: Hank Willis Thomas and Emily Shur, *Freedom from Want* (2018)

Considering the increasing attention these issues have gained in recent years, I remember my incredulity in 2018 as I read about the fate of the fanatical young missionary John Allen Chau who—against all warnings—insisted on going to meet the hunter-gatherers living on North Sentinel, a small island the size of Manhattan some seven hundred miles to the east of India’s mainland in the Adaman Sea. The tribe counts among the very last indigenous peoples to have successfully managed to avoid all contact with the outside world. Having said this, some of its ancestors were kidnapped in the late nineteenth century by a naval police officer of the British Empire, then the ruling colonial power. The officer “kept” the natives in a prison, only to watch the adults sicken and die. He consequently aborted his failed “experiment” and magnanimously returned the children to the island. This hardly uplifting incident, undoubtedly held in the Sentinelese tribe’s collective memory, led some of its members to kill the good Christian Chau when he arrived on their island a century later.



a Sentinal tribesman aiming his bow and arrow at an Indian coast guard helicopter in 2004

Wasn’t this, for once, a self-defense valid beyond any legal sophistry—unlike, for example, the one recently claimed by Kyle Rittenhouse? I was puzzled, therefore, not by the actions of the tribesmen, but by the manner in which even the usually so well-meaning *New York Times* reported on it: “Maybe the islanders were traumatized by that original kidnapping. Maybe they feared foreign disease. No one has ever figured out exactly why they are so hostile to outsiders.” Is this question really so unanswerable? Or to put it differently: can they really be blamed? Perhaps we should ask the Native Americans. The fact that, as of today, some of the tribal groups descending from the Algonquian-speaking people that welcomed the Jamestown settlers are still fighting the U.S. government’s bureaucracy to gain congressional “recognition” as tribes, provides further proof of the relevance of Benjamin’s warning: the enemy has not ceased to be victorious ...

