

Bilbies, Gumnuts and Thanksgiving, or, the Commodified Religious Imagination in Australia and America

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It's time to push our own barrow, even if it's got a wobbly wheel. Australians are no longer afraid to stand up and wave their gumnuts. (David McLean, Corporate Cards)

How might commodity consumption, national identity, and religious belief and practice (or what I like to call the religious imagination) relate to each other? In order to investigate this problem I will consider the consumption of Australian and Americana at certain religious festivals, specifically Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas. I will compare practices in Australia and America, since there are interesting comparisons between the two places that illustrate some of their similarities and differences, not least in relation to their respectively central and peripheral roles in what Ernest Mandel (1975) and Fredric Jameson (1991), among others, call late capitalism.

Yet the sort of investigation needed has pushed me, accustomed as I am to relating and reacting to literature, to avail myself of some techniques more common to the social sciences. I have been, in other words, something of an amateur anthropologist or ethnographer — like many other cultural critics. So, I did three things: I sent out questionnaires to various people in the business of producing, distributing and selling confectionery at Easter, and to those who make and sell cards at Easter and Christmas; I interviewed, personally or by telephone, some of these people; I collected a significant range of cards (64 Easter cards, 419 Christmas cards and 6 catalogues). In contrast to various studies that have focused on the reciprocity of card giving (Johnson; Kunz and Woolcott), my interest is in the consumption of cards as images, particularly as objectified and material images that one can consume. My sample was relatively small: in order to test the secondary literature, I selected ten card manufacturers and distributors, four confectionery manufacturers, one toy manufacturer and interviewed four people in the business, ranging from card designers, through marketing executives, to sales people. My selection process made use of information available at the Australian Owned Companies Association (trade name Ausbuy) and in the advertisements in the Yellow Pages of the Sydney Telephone Directory: those who made some claim to represent Australian themes or claimed to be Australian owned or made were sent a short questionnaire. I also tried to ensure that multinationals, large Australian corporations and small operators were represented. A larger study would of course require a

larger sample pool. However, this study is in many respects a preliminary investigation.

Easter

In many respects Easter seems to be the least affected by commodification, although I need to avoid putting it that way since it gives the impression of a lament for the lost true religious meaning of these festivals — I have no apologetic agenda.

I begin with the cards: to my surprise I found a steady card industry associated with Easter. Peter Axton, of John Sands, informs me that sales of cards at Easter are on par with Father's Day. Father's Day has risen in sales importance in recent years, although it, and Easter, are outstripped by Mother's Day, Valentine's Day and Christmas. In fact, the Easter card catalogue from John Sands is grouped together with the Valentine's Day catalogue, cushioned only by a page devoted to the Chinese New Year and St. Patrick's Day.

The Easter cards I obtained (64 of them) and analysed feature the conventional motifs of eggs, flowers, young bears, ducks, sheep, butterflies and bunnies, often combined in the one card (40 in total). Also, there was a series of Garfield cards (6), older material from the nineteenth century (7) — such as those of Laura Seddon who produced her designs (so the back of the cards say) between 1865 and 1895 — or the conventional religious themes of Easter, specifically the death and resurrection of Christ (6). The religious cards are explicitly targeted at what is called the “ethnic” market, meaning groups from Italy, Greece, Latin America, Croatia, Serbia, and so on. All of these cards have stylised and haloed representations of Christ as shepherd (“the good shepherd” from John 10:9) and door-knocker (from Revelation 3:20¹). The assumptions about religion and ethnic identity are explicitly foregrounded in these Easter cards with the use of images from particular religious traditions, especially Orthodox and Catholic, and the use of various languages such as Greek, Spanish, Italian and so on.

My reason for focusing on such religious and ethnic cards is that they lead me in to what seems to be an area distinct from the religious/ethnic cards, but which turns out to be its dialectical opposite, namely, the Easter bilby. As even the most casual observer of popular culture will have noted, over the last few years there has been a concerted push to replace the Easter bunny with the Easter bilby, an endangered marsupial, also called the rabbit-eared or greater bandicoot, that looks something like a rabbit with a mouse's nose and long bushy tail. The campaign began in 1991 with the Adelaide-based Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation. Now “Easter bilby” is a trademark, cards with the bilby appear with increasing frequency (5 in my collection), a children's book called *The Bilbies' First Easter* is out and the confectionery sales of chocolate bilbies at Easter rise every year.

So why should this be dialectically related to the “ethnic” Easter cards? Expansionist religions like Christianity work by taking over and appropriating the

symbols and practices of a whole range of non-Christian belief systems. It is nothing new to point to the egg and bunny of Easter as fertility symbols and then make connections with resurrection from the dead. That the bilby campaign should happen initially with Easter — although it has now expanded beyond that — signals to me that the issues that arise around the Easter bilby are also religious ones with a distinct “ethnic” cast.

In the various bits of material I have about the Easter bilby — Ausbuy promotional literature, magazine articles, a response to my questionnaire from Jozzies Toys — the connection is invariably made with the bilby as a vulnerable, if not endangered, species and the rapacious rabbit. “Like some kind of nasty, sci-fi alien, the rabbit has disguised its true monstrous self under a fluffy, twinkle-nosed exterior” (Scott-Norman: 17; see also Roberts). Human assistance is regarded as necessary for the survival of the bilby, and, if one cannot be involved directly in a conservation program directed at the bilby, the next best thing to do is to buy a chocolate one for Easter and eat it, avoiding an analogous relation with the live version.

However, it is not only the rabbit that threatens the bilby, both semiotically and in terms of habitat: foxes and feral cats eat them, while imported and foreign farming practices reduce their natural food sources. “The interest is in helping preservation of the Bilby; at least we are assisting an Australian native animal to fight back against introduced species” (John Shellard, *Pink Lady Chocolates*). The argument that Australians — both people and animals — need to resist foreign invaders is made in all of the responses and promotional material I gathered. However, beneath this is an ideological connection with national pride, made explicit in the following: “Easter is becoming more and more a time to take great pride that we have our own ‘Easter Bilby’. We don’t need to follow another country’s Easter Bunny lead, especially as bunnies in Australia’s wilds have devastated the environment — so why celebrate this!” (Rae Anderson, *Jozzies Toys*). All of the associations are here between religion, nationalism and environmental concerns: rabbits, foxes and cats are “introduced species” and “aliens” who have devastated the country in the same way as British settlement and colonial rule; the colonial master has been an alien in bunny’s clothing; the bilby is “endangered,” like Australian self-esteem; Australians no longer need to follow the lead of another country. And all of these themes are tied up with the reappropriation of a religious festival, although now in terms of national pride, recovery from extinction and fighting back against the colonial overlord (in bunny’s clothing) rather than fertility itself. Elsewhere, such as the USA, the Easter bunny is a symbol of community (see Caplow and Williamson); the bilby has become an oppositional symbol in Australia.

Christmas

If the consumption of chocolate bilbies at Easter is related to religion, nationalism and environmental concerns, then what of Christmas? Christmas is in

many respects a logical focus for investigations of the intersection between popular culture and religion, since Christmas “is the *pièce de résistance* of the American (if not also the Western) calendrical celebratory cycle” (Samuelson 1982:xi). With my discussion of Christmas I move into the American material, in part because the literature is more voluminous.

I want to begin with something that emerged in my discussion of the Easter cards, namely the separation of sacred and secular in the cards themselves. This is not to be confused with the related but separate distinction of sacred and pagan/folk (winter festival practices etc.) dimensions of Christmas. Here I am less interested in the history of Christmas in the ancient and feudal periods: my focus is on the period of the rise of capitalism. Hence “secular” refers specifically to the process of secularisation set in train by the growth of capitalism and the gradual removal of religion as a central item in the discourse of power. “Secularisation” is then a process of focussing on this world, on this age (*saeculum*).

My emphasis on the sacred/secular distinction follows that of James Barnett’s central study, *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture*, particularly his reading of a balance between the two dimensions. This also applies to other areas of Christmas, such as gift-giving, which remains quite sharply separated from the religious associations of the festival, the feeble attempts by the Christian churches to link the gift-extravaganza with God’s gift of Christ only reinforcing the separation. In regard to the usage of Australian themes in Christmas cards this separation is particularly marked: those with Australian themes in them are not those that relate in any direct way with the religious dimensions of Christmas. As Peter Axton of John Sands put it, the religious side of Christmas is kept separate from the other elements — one doesn’t tamper with religion. So, none of John Sands Australian cards have religious motifs. Similarly David Mclean from Corporate Cards, a business that sells top-range cards to corporate clients alone, told me that he has very few cards with religious themes for sale, not one of which has Australian. Of the cards 419 I collected, the religious ones (26 different types) stay with traditional representations: wise men coming to see Jesus (6), Mary with the child (5), biblical texts (5), the stable scene with Mary, Joseph and child (4), shepherds with angels or star (3), Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem (1) or to Egypt (1), and the Christ child on his own (1). By contrast, Australian cards (78 different types) include Australian animals or flora (33), an Australianised Santa Claus and iconic animals (mainly koalas and kangaroos, but also wombats and galahs) (20), Australian landscapes (14), Christmas trees and gifts and the same animals (9), the animals singing carols (2). Many of these cards evoke stereotypical summer holiday activities (32 of the 78). In some cases the presence of multiple religious faiths in multinational corporations has led paradoxically to a removal of any religious reference whatsoever, but the predominant tendency is to avoid mixing religious and secular signifiers.

Even Roland Harvey and Richard Galbraith — two names associated very closely with Australian in their cards — seem to steer clear of linking Australian

and religion, although Richard Galbraith has a new card to which I will return later. Thus, Roland Harvey, who lists as one of his obsessions “the search for the TRUE AUSTRALIAN CHRISTMAS,” limits his Australiana to Australian animals, especially the koala, or Santa Claus in various Australian landscapes, doing things like camping, fishing, swimming, boating, surfing and feasting. He also produces what he calls an Advent Calendar based on a gum tree as a Christmas tree, but religious themes are absent. Richard Galbraith, who is a Christian, feels that many Australians are not interested in religious themes. So he produces cards with “warm and open hearted themes”: gifts, Christmas trees, family, people visiting, Christmas. His smiling characters have been described as essentially happy and thus beneficial, and he feels that they express the basic Christian virtues of being generous, happy and open-hearted.

The opposition I have been tracing between sacred and secular themes in Christmas cards overlaps with, although it is not identical to, an opposition noted by American studies of Christmas in the USA. I am speaking of the contrast between hedonism and care, between festivity, gluttony, the consumption of alcohol and self-indulgence on the one hand, and communal values like love, generosity and charity on the other (see Belk 1989). Care is more often regarded as a religious virtue, although not restricted to religion, and it is manifested in self-denial for the benefit of the marginalised and poor other (see Hirschman and La Barbera).

Materialistic and hedonistic drives are rarely espoused as religious virtues (indeed to do so is regarded as sacrilege). Yet I want to argue that there is a symbiotic relation between the two that may be traced back in an archaeological fashion. Let me return to Christmas cards, which first appeared in the 1840s in England, after the rise in the practice of sending of seasonal greetings in the late 18th century (see Buday’s detailed although analytically thin study). The sending of Christmas cards became popular after 1860, with themes such as family feasts, birds, snow and holly, flowers, children, religious scenes, and also Santa Claus. By 1880 the Christmas card was a major feature of Christmas, some 14 million letters and packages passing through the London post in 1882. In Australia Robert Sands, son of John Sands, published the first Australian Christmas cards in 1881 after a competition for designs and captions in the *Daily Telegraph*. The nearly 700 entries were displayed in the Art Gallery of NSW. The winning entry, so the story goes, was “Little Girl Offering a Christmas Pudding to Swagsman,” while others included “Australian Christmas in car, with attendant native birds and animals.”²² What is striking about the description of the first range of cards is that all of the 38 cards might be described as Australiana (including “Australian natives spearing cattle”!), while none have religious themes. In fact a major aim of these cards seems to have been the sending cards “home” to England — even today Australiana dominates the overseas range of major Christmas card manufacturers. It is interesting that not only did the first Australian Christmas cards have Australian themes but they also became popular at a time when the groundswell for some sort of independence from England gained



A reconstructed first Australian Christmas card published by Mr. Robert Sands for Christmas 1881.

momentum. It was in this period that the term “gumnut nationalism” was coined, although the most common association is with the children’s books of May Gibbs, such as *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*, in the first half of the twentieth century.

But there is another feature of the history of Christmas cards — their origin in the 1840s — that I want to pursue a little further. It seems that both Santa Claus (at least in his contemporary manifestation) and Christmas festivities are also of relatively recent date. In his older incarnation Santa Claus is Saint Nicholas, a distinctly melancholy figure, wearing the browns of earth and winter on his tall and angular frame. The modern Santa Claus is usually traced through three New Yorkers — Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore and Thomas Nast (see Jones; Rosenfeld). In a book of 1809 — the satire Diedrich Knickerbocker’s *History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* — Irving speaks of a Saint Nicholas who brings gifts to children while riding over tree tops, all the while puffing on a pipe. According to Jones, the Dutch influence in New York with Saint Nicholas is important here (although see the challenge to this by de Groöt, who stresses English influences, and by Renterghem who argues for a shamanistic

background). In 1822 Moore's "A Visit from Saint Nicholas," written for children, the "right jolly old elf" appears with twinkling eyes, "cheeks like roses, nose like a cherry," white beard, "and a little round belly, that shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly." And in the 1860s the illustrator Nast depicted Santa Claus largely in terms of Moore's description. The final step to the overweight and distinctly hedonist Santa, blue-eyed with crinkles, heavily mustacheoed, and dressed in red came with a Coca-Cola advertising campaign in the 1920s. Designed by Haddon Sundblom as display pieces for Coca-Cola outlets, they set the final piece in place of the modern Santa. In the light of this development I am in fundamental agreement with Eric Wolf's suggestion that Santa Claus is a collective representation of commodity fetishism, a "self-conscious creation of individuals engaged in creating a new American culture" whose mythical status is crucial (see also Lévi-Strauss on Santa Claus as myth and rite of passage).

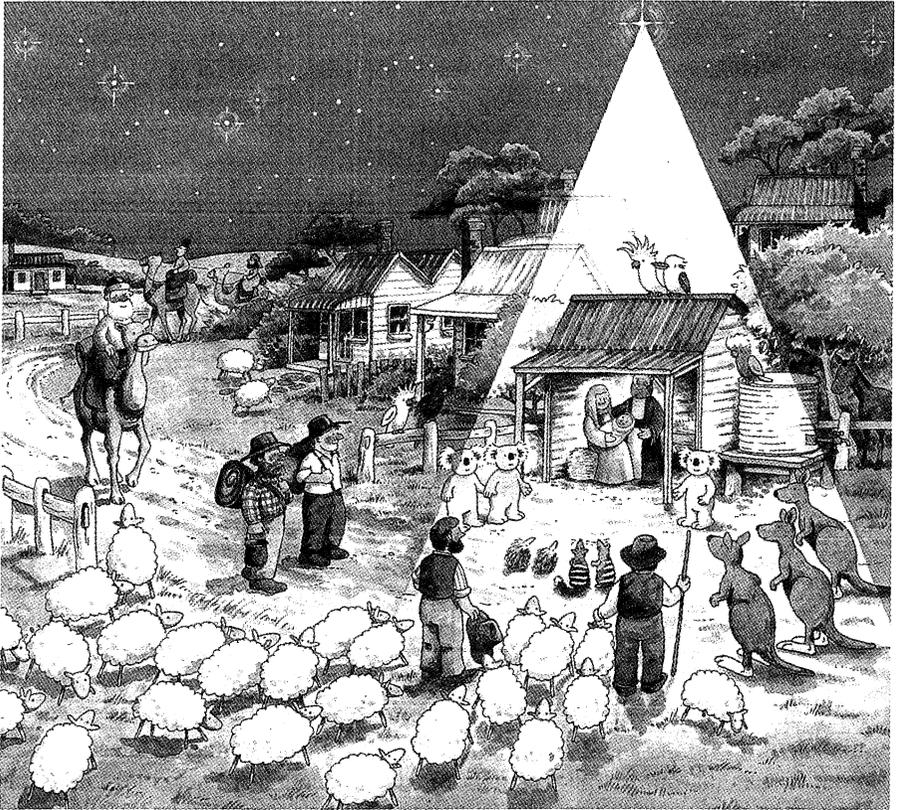
Christmas festivities also arose over a similar period, although they were later than both cards and Santa Claus. "The schmaltzy Victorian Christmas didn't come into vogue until 1860. Before that, there was not much of Christmas as we know it today. We can't document wreaths until the mid-nineteenth century. Floor trees didn't appear until 1860 — and then they were rare [even though the Christmas tree itself as a public item has been traced back to various sources, including the greenery at the Roman Saturnalia and the European Yule log]. Glass ornaments also came on the scene in 1860" (Violet Riegel, curator at Winterthur Museum, Delaware, quoted by Stapleton). It was only in the 1930s that most American homes had Christmas trees; yet now the Christmas tree business in the USA is a thriving industry, to the extent of attracting tree theft rings (see Davis; Wells). Prior to these developments, in America at least, Puritans, Quakers, Baptists and Presbyterians made little of Christmas, while Lutherans, Moravians, Anglicans and Roman Catholics focused on the religious festival. In a comparative study of Bulgaria, Finland, Germany and Ireland, Guenther Lueschen has argued that the process of secularisation has had the effect of moving Christmas away from its basis in organised religion to become increasingly a family — and, I would add, a commercial — ritual. The gradual increase in American homes of items associated with Christmas reinforces such an observation.

All of this — the development of Santa Claus, cards and Christmas celebrations — makes little related sense unless it is connected with the rising importance of Christmas in rapidly spreading capitalism. Over the later 19th but especially in the early to mid 20th century, Christmas has become a crucial feature of the viability of capitalism. The frenzy of consumption around Christmas has grown to the point where, on US figures, the four weeks from Thanksgiving to Christmas account for 40 percent of all goods sold annually, and this is in a country that consumes approximately 70 percent of the world's resources (figures from Horsley: ix). Yet, these observations are not new: already in 1929 Scroggs argued for the economic significance of Christmas. I would suggest that the present form of capitalism would

struggle to survive if the Christmas season suddenly disappeared. The very conjunction of hedonism and care, sacred and secular that characterises Christmas in late capitalism is a product of the spread of capitalism itself (as is witnessed in the popularity of Christmas and the strength of capitalism in largely non-Christian Japan [see Plath]). Before 1850 such a festival was not possible: the plethora of items associated with the celebration of Christmas — I have considered cards, Santa Claus and family festivities — did not exist in their present form before that date. So it seems as though Georg Lukács's observation about the rise of the bourgeoisie and the consolidation of capitalism may well be correct. Lukács (172-183) suggested that the 1848 revolutions in Europe constituted the moment when the bourgeoisie openly and violently asserted its position of dominance over that other class produced by capitalism — the working class. At that moment the middle class began to forget its origins and vigorously pursued the expansion of its own dominance and the economic system that had put it there. One of the items of that expansion seems to have been Christmas itself, with its cards, its festivities and its Santa Claus (see further Belk 1987). In places such as Brazil, with its more recent rise of a large middle class and despite its long Catholic (although imported) heritage, Christmas inevitably signifies North American consumption, assisting the generation of what Tauxe (1993) calls "commodity hunger."

If Christmas is understood as the inseparable conjunction of religious celebration and festival of consumption, what does this mean for Australiana and Americana (since I have moved to American material in my discussion)? Here I would like to invoke Guy Debord's suggestion in *Society of the Spectacle* that the ultimate reification is the image itself, particularly the photographic image. What is meant here is that in the (photographic) image the complex interactions of human beings with each other and with the animate and inanimate world around them are objectified in a thing, in a photograph, in a material image. More specifically, all of the relations between photographer and what is photographed have a material existence in the image. (For Marx, reification is the turning of human relations into relations between things, and the relations between objects into social relations. Commodification is then the economic equivalent of this philosophical term.) What this means is that images themselves are consumed just as much as the objects of consumption: in fact images become the primary commodities and the ultimate act of consumption is the consumption of the image of consumption itself.

If I extend this to Australiana and Americana, then what are being consumed here are complex sets of images about what an American or an Australian Christmas might be like. Hence my focus on cards a little earlier, since cards, like photographs, are primarily in the business of selling images as commodities. That the search for the traditions of an Australian or American Christmas is a construction hardly needs to be said any more these days, although the surest signal of such construction underway is the perpetual search for the "true meaning" of Christmas. The types of food chosen, the necessity of Christmas trees, with gifts and gatherings, the sending



Christmas Card by Richard Galbraith, used with permission.

of Christmas cards and the return of Santa Claus, the stocking up of various types of alcohol, the erection of Christmas lights in North America or the search for an “authentic” Australian Christmas — all of these things are more about constructing consumable images of Christmas and its traditions than anything else.

However, while many of these items overlap, the ability of a North American Christmas to evoke “traditional” images is much stronger — snow, holly, poinsettias, pine cones, wreaths, candles, Twelfth Night celebrations, tenebrae church services, puddings and so on. Apart from a small movement for Christmas in July, the images of a distinctly Australian Christmas trade heavily, as in the cards, on images of summer, holidays, landscape, beach, Christmas day barbecues, and leisure in general (I will return to the implications of this below). All of this remains on the side of hedonism, to recall my earlier distinction between hedonism and care at Christmas. When Australiana can move over from the hedonist side of Christmas to that of religion and care, then the images produced are even more powerful, as in Richard Galbraith’s “Australian Nativity” card, or World Vision’s Aboriginal nativity scene.



Come Let us Adore Him, by Dianne Tchumut. Used with permission.

Here the connection of Australiana with what are felt to be older religious traditions, and then the transfer of tradition from the latter to the former, can be quite powerful. Still, in each case it is the consumption and production of an overall image of Christmas with a national signifier, through the use of all the particular images, that is at issue.³

Yet this means that the nationalist terms evoked by Australian and American themes at Christmas — pride, independence, autonomy, tradition — are primarily about the production and consumption of images of America and Australia, and utopian images at that (witness the journal *Americana*, which publishes short pieces and many images of what are supposed to be distinctly and historically American practices and items ranging through from historical cake recipes through to New Deal photography). Indeed, it would seem that the production of national identity as such is necessarily tied up with commodification and consumption, of which Australiana and Americana at Christmas are but particular examples.

Thanksgiving

I have been moving toward the conclusion that consumption, in my case the consumption of images of Easter and Christmas, functions as an active force in the

construction of religious festival, culture, tradition and nation. I want to make one more major move in my argument by turning to consider Thanksgiving, a festival generally perceived as peculiarly North American, especially in the USA (although Canada does have a smaller Thanksgiving a month earlier).

Thanksgiving, it would seem to an outsider who has “gatecrashed” Thanksgiving on one or two occasions, is a highly traditional North American festival, having sprung up *ex nihilo* during the first autumn after the arrival of European settlers. This mutual celebration of indigenous and settler people has apparently suffered little in the way of commodification, except perhaps on the periphery, since it began in 1621. Yet the signal of an active construction of Thanksgiving Day rituals may be found in the repeated desire in the literature — especially educational kits for schools — to seek out the authentic Thanksgiving, mostly in prior indigenous festivals but also in harvest festivals from Europe (see, for example, Travers). This signals an awareness of the constructedness of Thanksgiving Day despite the widespread assumption of universal practice and ideology — that all Americans, wherever they are, celebrate Thanksgiving with “turkey and all the rest.”

The argument that follows is indebted to a thorough and thoughtful study by Melanie Wallendorf and Eric Arnould, entitled “‘We Gather Together’: Consumption Rituals of Thanksgiving Day.” From a widespread sample, participant observation and analysis, depth interviews, photographs, and the careful collocation of data over many years, the authors conclude that consumption is built into the very structures of Thanksgiving Day. The festival treats consumption as “negotiated abundance,” an abundance that is embodied in a large quantity of plain food, mostly baked, boiled and mashed — stuffed turkey, mashed potato loaded with butter, stuffed olives, sweet potato pie, fruit or flavoured custard pies topped with whipped cream, ice cream or meringue, and so on — of which everyone eats more than their fill. Activities such as forgiving forgetfulness (there is so much to prepare), mealtime hush, taking a walk, plain clothes, and earlier fasting are all consequences of abundance. Consumption serves to negotiate the stress on inclusion, particularly in terms of life-cycle changes, the viewing of family photographs, storytelling, pets and strays. Wallendorf and Arnould also track the widespread but rarely perceived variations in practice and ideology, in terms of region, class, age, gender, and history. Finally, Thanksgiving Day food preparation continually seeks to efface and disguise brand names and the use of manufactured goods, despite the awareness that they are used. It would seem that here there is a desire for households to reappropriate the production process still contained in earlier phases of capitalism within the household but later surrendered to manufacturers in the separation of production and consumption.

Wallendorf and Arnould conclude that Thanksgiving Day “illustrates how Americans use ritual consumption to construct culture” (29). It is a “collective ritual that celebrates material abundance through feasting” (13). Participants “construct a model of social life” through their recollection of past meanings, the negotiation of future meanings, and the collection of present meanings of abundance. The authors

feel that the day signals the meanings people attach to material surplus and satisfaction, which is mostly associated with the ideal household form. This is exhibited most strongly in effacing the commodity status of the products used, a sort of “decommodification” and reclamation of household production. Yet the paradox here (and now I am moving beyond Wallendorf and Arnould) is that this is enacted by means of consumption itself, the celebration of material plenty and a culture of enduring abundance.

The reason for this paradox, I would suggest, is that there is a use of earlier patterns of capitalism (the first settlers arrived as the vanguard of a newly emergent capitalism), with its stress on individual and household work and entrepreneurial skills — all of which is characteristic of classical capitalism. Classical capitalism is then used to overturn, even if temporarily, the practices of later capitalism. Such a paradox — the overturning of capitalism in the name of capitalism — is peculiarly American in that it was the USA that was eventually to emerge as the leading capitalist nation. All of this is done with a romanticist valorisation of these earlier practices of classical capitalism — a time now reconstructed as a simpler era of small business, family cohesion and authentic human interaction before it was all destroyed by the multinationals.⁴

Thanksgiving, in its roots, its structures, its ideology and practice, is then a festival of “ritual consumption,” something that would not be possible without the assumptions of capitalism and something that perpetuates, and thereby assists in the cultural construction of, the deepest held ideological assumptions of capitalism.

Conclusion

I have, then, arrived at a point similar to my argument about Christmas, namely, that these festivals are inconceivable without the commodity culture of capitalism, that they perform rituals of consumption, of material goods and images, that are crucial for the survival of capitalism. This also means that the consumption of Australiana and Americana at all three festivals — Easter, Christmas and Thanksgiving — is an exercise in both image consumption and the creation of a national image.

But I want to conclude by developing a passing suggestion of Wallendorf and Arnould that makes use of Freud. I am intrigued by it, since it provides at least one possible reason that goes beyond recourse to essentialism, geography and origins (these three are often related) for the difference between Australian and American festive celebrations. Indeed, the use of psychological categories to interpret seasons such as Christmas is by no means new, a whole series of psychological analyses of Christmas and its elements having been produced from the 1920s to the 1970s (see Samuelson: xviii-xxiii; the interest has waned in more recent years). These studies variously invoke categories of father-son rivalry, sibling rivalry, birth, *kinderzegen* (everything to do with children — lovers, marriage, conception, unborn children,

and birth), repression of infantile wishes, psychosexual development, transference (especially with Santa Claus), the opposition of love and aggression, or eros and thanatos, and the attempted resolution of such family and social tensions.

However, Wallendorf's and Arnould's suggestion attempts a combination of psychological and social categories. They raise the possibility of a social dimension to Freud's oral, anal and genital stages of development:

Thanksgiving Day is the cultural equivalent in the ritual calendar of Freud's oral stage of development in an individual's life. Epigenetically, Thanksgiving Day as oral stage must precede rituals that occur later in the American ritual calendar. Greed and retentiveness are culturally negotiated at Christmas, as is hedonic sexual fulfillment on New Year's Eve. In this way, the ritual calendar annually takes the culture through oral, anal, and genital stages of development before completing the holiday season and returning culture to the everyday world of adult instrumentality. (Wallendorf and Arnould: 20)

Later they connect these stages with the celebration of the various aspects of materialism: Christmas is a dialectic of generosity and retentiveness, while New Year's dialectic is one of adult hedonism and moral restraint. Thanksgiving's celebration of abundance and consumption sets the sequence on its path. When it is understood that the holiday season in the United States begins with Thanksgiving, runs through to Christmas and ends with New Year, even if people work in the interstices and take summer vacation in July, then there is an internal logic to the sequence that provides a ritual dimension to perpetual demand for consumption in capitalism (that Freud's findings relate primarily to capitalism needs to be argued in another place). The liminality of this period is reinforced by the argument that the period from Thanksgiving to New Year is a period of anxiety and depression for many people in the USA (so Catell and Etzioni).

Yet in Australia there is a fundamentally different pattern to the holiday season: for most the summer holidays begin with Christmas, incorporate New year mid-stream and then peter out at some point between the first and last week of January. There is no ritual closure to this, no formal end of the holiday season. Further it begins at the wrong point, with the retentive celebration of Christmas and the demand for generosity. Christmas, however, is also the feast of surfeit in Australia, the time of heaviest alcohol and food consumption, after which the vows to diet and cut down on drinking are made. With such an incomplete cycle, the confusion of the oral and the anal, and the absence of a ritual end to the holiday season, there may well be found one source of the difference between Australian and American practices in these festivals of consumption.

Notes

1. Rev 3:20: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." This passage, and the image

on the cards, notes the first communion for new communicants, traditionally held at Easter for Orthodox and Catholic churches, at which one publicly professes faith — opening the door to Christ — and partakes of communion — eating with Christ.

2. The full list is: 1) Little girl offering Christmas pudding to swagsman; 2) five Christmas subjects, surrounded by birds and flowers; 3) bushman's hotel, with Cobb's coach arriving; 4) Australian natives spearing cattle; 5) pair of wrens, grasses, and reeds; 6) butterflies, tassel grass, &c; 7) native fuchsia, wattle, and butterfly; 8) bunches of lillipilli berries; 9) the Dunbar Gap, South Head, Sydney; 10) Sydney heads, from West manly; 11) South head, from Clontarf heights; 12) Port Jackson, from Neutral Bay; 13) Sydney, from Watson's Bay reserve; 14) The Devil's Staircase, near Bondi, Sydney; 15) spray of fringed violet, graphic monochrome of South Head; 16) spray of Christmas bush, graphic monochrome of Sydney harbour; 17) spray of wattle, graphic monochrome of Sydney harbour; 18) spray of tea tree, graphic monochrome of Nepean River; 19) spray of desert pea, children gathering waratah, ornamental background; 20) spray of waratah, children in orangery, ornamental background; 21) spray of native flowers, children fishing from a wharf, ornamental background; 22) spray of native rose, children rowing canvas dinghies, ornamental background; 23) Australian Christmas in car, with attendant native birds and animals; 24) flock of sheep surrounded by festoons of fruits and flowers; 25) group of native companions, "a meeting of old colonists"; 26) white cockatoos on gum tree; 27) moonlight view, rustic border; 28) Sydney heads; 29) group of kangaroos, rustic border; 30) Cockatoo Island, from Berry's Bay; 31) View on Lane Cove; 32) North Shore, from Cockatoo Island; 33) Long Cove, Parramatta River; 34) the Brothers, Gladsville, Parramatta River; 35) cockatoo, from Onion Point; 36) mouth of the Hawkesbury River; 38) near Wiseman's Ferry, Hawkesbury River.

3. Another model that has been used to interpret the unwritten rules of Christmas gift giving is that of a language; see Caplow 1984.

4. Stephen Papson (1986) makes a similar argument regarding Hallmark greeting cards, seeing this decline in the move from personalised messages to prepared verse, from artisanal to mechanised production, authorship to anonymity and printshop to corporation.

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