

Christmas as Reflexive Commemoration

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Commemoration, the act of “remembering together” or invoking memory, occurs in a wide variety of practices ranging from the casual to the highly ritualized, from the incidental to the methodically deliberate, and from the individual to the multi-national. One premise is necessary to the central concept of remembering, however: there must be a referent of the memory—some noun, usually an event or person, to be called to mind by the commemorative discourse that is mobilized for the commemoration. Often there is one or more important abstractions that is really what is being “remembered” or honored, either explicitly or implicitly; commemorative discourse can sometimes promote national, ethnic, or religious identities or ideals such as patriotism without mentioning the specific battles, saints, signings of documents, etc., from which the commemoration derives its ostensible authority. Some more recently instituted commemorations may have entirely abstract referents—such as the contribution of working people to society—and random placement on calendar or map. However, in order to function effectively, a referent of commemorative discourse must be both sufficiently distinct from everyday life and sufficiently relevant to prompt mental, ideological, or emotional associations (ideally, all three).

In addition to the referents that provide the justification for commemorative practices, commemorative occasions may have a layer of self-referential commemoration. Practices that are repeated annually, in particular, with varying degrees of ritualization, will acquire emotional significance and become themselves the things remembered. Remembering, referring to, or invoking past instances of the same commemorative practice may be termed reflexive commemoration when it is sufficiently imbued with affective or ideological elevation, when it is ritualized and becomes important to the commemorative occasion, or when the external referent of the commemoration becomes subordinate in importance to the idea of the commemoration itself. There is probably a certain degree of reflexive commemoration to all holidays, and a kind of reflexive logic to all traditions, inasmuch as repetition is a necessary condition

of traditionality. However, the importance of reflexive commemoration will vary for each occasion and for each family or community commemorating it. Even within a family, individual personality may play a great role in how important the specific referent or meaning of a holiday is relative to the picnicking, game-playing, and chatting with family and friends for which the holiday provides a convenient excuse. These practices of social interaction are not directly related to the specifically commemorative aspect of most American holidays, but often become the primary meaning of the holiday, or of holidays in general, for those who engage in them. The chief characteristic of such a holiday can be seen not in the specific occasion but in its status as holiday. However, the one holiday season that generally has the most specific imagery and associations in American life is similar to the generic holiday in a sense, because it is sufficiently established in American culture as quintessential to be referred to by the generic label, “the holidays”—that is to say, Christmastime.

Of course, Christmas is not necessarily the most important holiday even for all of those Americans who celebrate it, which is by no means the total population. But there is far more cultural pressure behind Christmas than any other holiday in America today, so that when a song says “There’s no place like home for the holidays,” we know it does not include Independence Day or Easter even before we get to the line about the homemade pumpkin pie. The size and importance of the Christmas holiday would tend to exaggerate any characteristic of holidays in general, and it may be argued that what follows is simply a test case for reflexive commemoration at annual celebrations. However, I believe that there are additional layers of reflexivity distinguishing Christmas from most other commemorative occasions, deriving in large part from its history. This reflexivity is shared in large part, however, with Thanksgiving, which, although somewhat autonomous, tends to fall under the gravitational pull of what is generally the largest holiday, and serves as the beginning of a holiday season extending through New Year’s Day.

Many things can be said of both Christmas and Thanksgiving, and in fact the two were established in their places in American society during roughly the same time period, gaining widespread acceptance by the end of the Civil War. This, as James Carrier notes, is a “history . . . much shallower than is commonly assumed” for both holidays (69), though Penne L. Restad describes the regional popularity of both earlier, Thanksgiving in New England and Christmas most strongly in the South. Indeed, in order for Thanksgiving to become an accepted national holiday in what was only with difficulty

becoming a unified nation, the particularly New England referent of the Pilgrim heritage had to be downplayed somewhat, and the personal connections emphasized. Grover Cleveland called it “a reunion of families sanctified and chastened by tender memories and associations” (quoted from Carrier 69), and Sarah Hale, long-time advocate of a national Thanksgiving Day, incorporated the idea of holiday memories in her arguments for its official establishment in 1865: “Even sober-minded elderly folks catch glimpses of their own childhood’s happiness through the vista of past Thanksgivings, which make life more sweet, and their own soul more thankful for the good gifts God’s love has bestowed in our favored land” (quoted from Restad 102). Conceptualizing Thanksgiving as a time for remembering Thanksgivings makes the holiday more reflexive right from its establishment. Although the Pilgrim referent has survived in modern concepts of Thanksgiving, one informant for this research project, who mentioned Thanksgiving as her favorite holiday, notes that this referent is more significant in childhood, when one is taught the official holiday myth in schools; as one gets older, the family gathering that constitutes the celebration is the primary meaning of the holiday.

Carrier’s comment about the unacknowledged shallowness of the history of these holidays fits within a trend in the scholarly literature on the modern Anglo-American Christmas emphasizing its discontinuity with the past. The argument of J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue in *The Making of the Modern Christmas*, an example of such interpretations, is that an earlier version of the festival, which centered around riotous merrymaking rather than sentimental family togetherness, dwindled in the eighteenth century, to be reconstructed in a radically different form by the Victorian middle classes through the nostalgic yearnings for an imagined traditional past on the part of such propagandists as Charles Dickens and Washington Irving. Golby and Purdue describe the modern Christmas as “a symbiosis of an idealized past with the preoccupations of the Victorians themselves... so extensively refurbished and reinterpreted that it amounts to an invented tradition” (44). Both Miller and Restad find this approach valuable, though not sufficient to account for the complexity of relationships between Christmas practices over time and the needs of the societies they serve. Miller is more inclined to emphasize the parallels between modern and ancient celebratory practices; interestingly, he sees the sociological function of the post-Victorian Christmas celebration as similar to the role played by the initial invention of Christmas for the Romans in the fourth century, a period somewhat analogous to the industrial age in the rapid changes taking place in society. A family-centered midwinter celebration helps such a society deal with the threat of these

changes by solidifying the family as an “objectification of sociality” (32). Restad focuses on the history of Christmas in America in particular, where, as has been noted, there was considerable variation in the degree of continuity with the older European forms of the holiday, depending on the level of anti-Christmas Puritan influence and the adaptations undergone in areas where immigrants with differing traditions came into contact with each other. According to Restad, the emergence of Christmas as a national holiday may be seen in its early stages in the 1830s, with the domestication of the holiday (in both national and familial senses) established by the 1880s. Restad describes the American reinvention of Christmas this way: “They culled a pastiche of customs and rituals from the past, originated modern traditions, and placed upon the entire holiday a meaning and order fit for their own times” (105). Despite whatever degree of organic development there may have been across this transition between pre- and post-industrial versions of the holiday, it is clear that Christmas underwent a profound shift in content and meaning to become the holiday we know today: a family celebration, taking place chiefly in the home, focusing on children, and replacing, in some measure, the Christian doctrine with "warm but sentimental humanitarianism" as its spiritual significance (Golby and Purdue 80).

To investigate the ways in which these phenomena are realized in ordinary people’s experiences and concepts of Christmas, I interviewed nine informants, plus one more by e-mail, all associated with the Indiana University Latter-Day Saint Student Association, of which I am also a member.¹ Most of these informants are students at the university, but two are single young adults working full time in Bloomington, and one is a mother of teenage children whom I know through the young adult choir for which she is the pianist. As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, all may be assumed to value the birth of Christ as the referent of the Christmas celebration. However, all participate in the wider American tradition of celebrating Christmas in various ways both secular and religious, depending primarily on family background. Though some specific practices and rhetoric play a part in Mormon Christmases, in many ways the experiences of this community are probably not atypical. The LDS Church promotes the celebration of Christmas during the Sundays leading up to Christmas, as well as through special programs that may be scheduled any time in the first few weeks of December, but does not hold services on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, which leaves the center of the holiday celebration to the jurisdiction of the family, where holiday practices are carried out away from immediate institutional influence.

Family is in fact the most important theme emerging in the interviews. Most informants named being with family when asked about the most important parts of the Christmas celebration. One notable exception was Nicole, who identified shopping for and giving gifts as most important. However, family clearly emerged as a central part of the holiday experience in a negative way when she described the holidays as an emotional, stressful period of negotiating time between divorced parents and respective extended families. Nicole did not think of her Christmas celebration as traditional because of this division in the family, which suggests that family togetherness is more important than specific practices in defining what is a traditional Christmas. This may be said of the other informants as well: though the word “parts” in the question was ambiguous, most tended to name abstract concepts rather than concrete details, or at least name the abstractions first.

This emphasis on family should not surprise us. Not only is family the widely-acknowledged center of the post-Victorian Christmas celebration in general, but Mormons in particular elevate the family both with unique doctrine about its religious significance and widespread cultural practices that enshrine the traditional family as an ideal. Focusing on family as the core of the holiday does not, in itself, constitute reflexive commemoration, since all commemorative discourse is at some level about the identity and cohesion of the group of people doing the commemorating, whether it is a national or local community or a community of people related to each other. It is the explicitness and abstractness with which this realm of meaning, relatively tangential to the external referent of the celebration, is articulated that is noteworthy, and though it may be to some extent a product of the interview context, it is borne out in much of the conventional wisdom about Christmas in American society.²

“Family” was also what Rachel and Rebecca answered when asked the meaning of traditions created or passed down in their families, in a kind of circular economy of signification. For Rachel’s family, at least, many of these traditions would seem to have to do with family identity as well as family togetherness. Her large extended family of Dutch and Norwegian heritage maintains a number of traditions from both regions, such as eating lutefisk (a dish made of cod cured by soaking in lye) with dinner on Christmas Eve. Although this traditional Norwegian food is not associated with Christmas in particular, her family does not eat it, or engage in any other traditions associated with their European heritage in particular, during the rest of the year. Christmas is thus implicitly set up to a certain extent as a commemoration of that heritage and its relevance

for the family today, and eating lutefisk as a concrete index of it. This interpretation, at least, would explain why so many of the family (including Rachel) eat the lutefisk, although only a few members of the family seem to actually like it. (In fact, some of Rachel's generation evolved what might be called a secondary layer of tradition as teenagers, adapting the tradition of lutefisk to their own more Americanized palates: all would take their token bite at the same time, on the count of three, to get it over with.) However, this view of the tradition is not uncontested, and does not seem to be shared by Rachel herself. There have been proposals to drop the lutefisk from the menu, which have met with some resistance in the family because of its traditional nature, but Rachel says it would be all right to dispense with the lutefisk as long as the family still has dinner together. "Our traditions have changed as we've grown older," she says, referring simultaneously to games with cousins that she has outgrown, "but the overall framework is the same." Jamie has a similar attitude toward Christmas dinner, which in his family has ceased to consist of the traditional turkey or ham because it "gets old." He identifies the practice of having Christmas dinner together as a family as important, but the menu is irrelevant.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Kristine's family, which celebrates the holiday with three very large meals over the course of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, all of which have specific foods that must be served at them. The first and probably most important of these is a Swedish smörgåsbord, which, like Rachel's family's Norwegian dinner, is usually the one occasion in the year for eating certain Swedish foods, though Kristine identifies cost as a likely factor in this. Swedish decorations, including sheaves of wheat, little Swedish elves, and Swedish flags on the Christmas tree, also play a part in the holiday. When I asked Kristine if Christmas stood for her Swedish heritage in her mind, she said she would be more likely to reverse the direction of association and say that Swedish things make her think of Christmas. This can hardly mean that her Swedish heritage is entirely suppressed the rest of the year; I've previously heard her talk about it in various casual settings with unrelated contexts. What it is more likely to mean is that she would hesitate to limit the meaning of Christmas to the Swedish heritage her family expresses at that time because Christmas has multiple dimensions of signification.

Christmas is a primary site of commemoration in our society that is available to collect a variety of meanings both closely and tangentially related to its publicly acknowledged cores of meaning. Daniel Miller notes the syncretistic "ability of Christmas to appropriate, that is to secure its identity almost irrespective of the content of the rites

which take place in its name” in regard to adaptations of the holiday on a broad social scale (24); at the level of the individual family, this openness is certainly constrained to a great extent by a cultural sense of what “belongs” and what does not, but the availability is still there, a function, in part, of society’s agreement to set time and resources aside for the purpose of celebrating at this time. Christmas gives any principle both fuller expression than is possible in the workaday world of the rest of the year and, potentially, connections to the other meanings that converge there. For example, Kristine reports that she also thinks of the LDS Church when she thinks of Sweden, because her grandparents were converted to it there, and thus that religion, Sweden, and Christmas all have some kind of hazy but logically congenial links in her mind.

However, the ability of Christmas to serve as a convenient time to bring out traditions with a variety of meanings has another side, as we have seen: matters of significance can become localized to Christmas, and their relevance contained and limited to some extent. The other side of the second operation, the connections that can be created between the various associations of Christmas, lies in the tension between competing signifiers for the same space of signification. Kristine says that her mother, who is not of Swedish ancestry, had to fight hard to include the third of the large meals, a traditional turkey dinner, in the family’s celebration, but that since it was important to her, she prevailed. This phenomenon of negotiating traditions as families are blended will be familiar to most Americans, where tradition is only partly defined by the larger society and marriages between people from disparate communities are fairly common; many of my informants mentioned either the changes in tradition that have taken place in their own families or the changes they anticipate as their family dynamics change, an active issue for people at this age. In the case of Kristine’s family, we see one possible outcome: the multiplication of the holiday to accommodate all traditions. It is interesting in this light to note a dilemma some American families experienced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century: should they hang up stockings, or have a Christmas tree to put presents under? (Restad 116). Most today probably take the co-existence of both customs for granted, though one hears frequent enough complaints about the burden of the celebration in time and money. A self-conscious or self-referential mode of signification can lead to excess, in ways perhaps not unlike some post-modern fiction.³

The more important lessons from this phenomenon concern the importance of re-creating the past and the immediate invention of tradition, both of which can be seen as related to reflexive commemoration, but which obviously have potential for conflict

between them. Eric Hobsbawm's concept of an 'invented tradition' is usually used to designate traditions shared by a larger society, for which an imaginary continuity with the past may be fabricated and passed off as true on some group of people by other people. It is in this sense that the concept has been used to describe the Christmas traditions which have become established in the last two hundred years as symbols of Christmas: Christmas trees, stockings, lights, candy canes, presents. People will sometimes try to make explicit some "meaning" for these traditions, either in terms of origin or symbolic connection to the religious narrative of Christmas, with greater or lesser degrees of imagination or historicity. However, I would contend that the primary significance for these practices in most people's minds is simply the connection with Christmas, in abstract form or in memories of their own past celebrations. These traditions tended to be taken as given in the interviews I conducted, and thus were not always specifically mentioned. Some mentioned things that their families did not do that they associated with Christmas, such as making gingerbread houses or having popcorn around a fire, but although these elements might be seen as "traditional," there did not seem to be a feeling that the holiday was not traditional without them. Individual families have a large variety of traditional and idiosyncratic material to choose among in crafting their own traditions, and the choices involved can be a way of expressing and shaping personal attitudes toward the holiday, beliefs about its meaning, and relationships to family and society.

This process of customizing the practices of commemoration consists of selection among existing family traditions, i.e. practices which already have an "organic" continuity in time; borrowing and adaptation from existing traditions of other families or society at large, i.e. grafting in a tradition; and innovations that exhibit some degree of "pure" invention. The last two of these three are intriguing because they would seem to bear some equivalence on a personal level to the invention of tradition as it is seen in society as a whole. However, because these traditions are invented by the same individuals who use them, no fiction of continuity with the past can be maintained. The practices thus instituted are not strictly speaking "traditions" yet, but proto-traditions, practices which are intended to become traditions in the future. Yet my informants often speak of them as traditions, sometimes distinguishing them with the slightly oxymoronic phrase "new traditions," and they can be valued as much as old traditions. Carla describes a tradition of hanging candy canes on the tree, to be consumed and replaced as the season progresses, which her husband instituted one year on his own initiative; she doesn't know of any particular origin for it, but she thinks it very important because he was raised in

orphanages, and had no access to family traditions until the age of fourteen. This relatively ‘invented’ tradition of his own allows him to have a part in the creation of the holiday that would otherwise be dominated by her family’s traditions. Other informants speak of traditions that they would like to institute, to change, to drop, or to continue: Rachel, who is soon to have her first child, would like to get picture books about Christ to read with her family; she says she will try to blend this new tradition in with older traditions she has inherited.

However, not all new traditions are domesticated easily. Rachel also mentions a tradition instituted by her father about five years ago of singing “Happy Birthday” to Jesus, which she thinks is “a little sacrilegious.” As with her own proposed picture-book tradition, this is clearly an attempt to link the commemoration more explicitly to its religious referent, but differing perceptions of the nature of the connection between practice and referent give it this contested status within the family. Rachel says, “We all go along with it, but . . . what else can we do?” This boundary-testing innovation might perhaps be described as an “infelicity” among celebratory practices, adapting J. L. Austin’s term for linguistic performatives: it does succeed in having some continuity in time, probably due to the father’s authority within the home to some extent, but lacks the widespread sense of validity and meaning necessary to make it effective, and certainly does not seem to affirm family unity, as healthy traditions are supposed to do.

In light of the conscious approach that people take toward determining what practices will constitute their celebrations, and the range of possibilities in terms of continuity with the past, it may make more sense to speak of the crafting of tradition, rather than invention of tradition, for this local, personal phenomenon. The crafting of tradition is a complex activity that requires attention to explicit and (more importantly) implicit authority, as well as non-hierarchical relationships, between individuals within a family structure in order to preserve the continuity of a constantly changing social unit. Rachel notes (via e-mail) the importance of deference to older members of the extended family, who ultimately make the decision about what traditions to observe because “they are the ones who might be most affected by eliminating/changing traditions since they’ve done them longer than the rest of us”; the role of the other members of the family she describes as “[giving] our two bits.” On the other hand, disruptions of the family may prompt unusual solutions to maintain family cohesion. Nick describes a tradition instituted by himself and his siblings in their early twenties, after a divorce that threatened to separate the family into factions, of gathering together to celebrate before

Christmas without including their parents. Although each of the siblings may later celebrate Christmas itself with one of the parents, Nick reports that the gathering with siblings feels more festive than the actual holiday, despite their defiance of tradition by eating foods such as pizza or sushi, a concrete embodiment in practice of the defiance of parental authority involved in taking the celebration into their own hands.

The crafting of tradition is also constrained by media images of what constitutes a proper Christmas, but people can sometimes use the products of the mass media to create family traditions. This wealth of texts in popular culture associated with Christmas, constituting distinct genres in literature, film, and music, is one of the greatest distinctions between Christmas and other holidays. Despite recent Hollywood attempts to capitalize on the Fourth of July such as *Independence Day* and *The Patriot*, few people would probably reserve watching them for the time around the holiday; a story for Halloween and Valentine's Day would be indistinguishable from the established genres of horror and romance; and although many make spending Easter with family a priority, no one croons "I'll Be Home for Easter" sentimentally beforehand. There is the 1948 film and song *Easter Parade*, to be sure, and perhaps a few cartoons about the Easter Bunny, but nowhere near the quantity of material that exists for the Christmas season. Christmas songs and narratives include many insignificant productions, no doubt, but also a goodly number of enduring classics that win the endorsement of society for their vision of what Christmas is. Moreover, a number of these texts, most notably the secular ones, explicitly or implicitly enjoin the audience to celebrate Christmas, or to celebrate it in a particular way. These texts participate in a rhetoric of Christmas that conditions our perception of the holiday. Restad, for instance, claims that Christmas films have "simplified... the complex issues of Christmas materialism and Christmas spirit" (164), repeatedly revolving around the same basic opposition throughout the twentieth century.

The important thing for my argument is that these texts keep Christmas before us as an idea, and as an ideal. While many Christmas songs are religious and refer primarily to the Christmas narrative, the secular songs, nearly all Christmas films, and probably most Christmas stories are about the holiday itself and activities associated with its celebration in some way, or at least use these as props for the telling of a story. When we watch Christmas movies, we watch people commemorate Christmas. This reification of Christmas allows for a variety of self-conscious attitudes to be articulated, which will frequently result in a nostalgic, sentimental image of Christmas such as Golby and Purdue see as involved in the Victorian reinvention of Christmas. It might be expected

that an invented tradition would muster a more active body of rhetoric, and, in fact, many writers in the ‘invented tradition’ school see Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* as heavily implicated in, if not solely responsible for, the creation of the modern Christmas. The importance of these images of Christmas to the experience of commemorating the holiday may be difficult to measure, but when watching people commemorate Christmas becomes a traditional part of the Christmas celebration, when people seek out the rhetoric of Christmas in order to commemorate, we have reflexive modes of commemoration.

Restad notes that “the annual rewindings and rerunnings of Christmas programs themselves [become] a nostalgic ritual for many Americans,” and indeed the simple fact of the long life of television Christmas specials is evidence in favor of the ritualization of these texts (164). However, the extent to which texts about Christmas entered into the experience of holiday commemoration for my informants varied and was sometimes ambiguous, sometimes interestingly layered. Although several people mentioned specific movies as family favorites or memories associated with the holiday from childhood, no one mentioned them before I asked specifically, suggesting either that they have a secondary importance or perhaps that they seem less worth mentioning or defining as part of the celebration when compared to rituals like meals, gift-giving, or acting out the Nativity story. Movie-watching is usually not formalized on any specific day, but generally happens sometime during the Christmas season (in contrast to the aforementioned more significant rituals, which usually have a specific time slot), even for Gina, who called *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* a family tradition. Lisa, however, reports (via e-mail) that her family watches a film version of *A Christmas Carol* every Christmas Eve. (She says that none of the various adaptations is quite the same to them as their favorite, the 1951 film with Alistair Simms, but the tradition seems to be defined simply in terms of the Ur-text, rather than the text actually watched.)

In general, however, informants considered Christmas movies in incidental or intermediate circles, more or less removed from the ritual core of the holiday. Jamie identifies *Jack Frost* as “maybe a tradition”; the cartoon version of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* could with greater certainty be considered part of the celebration, he says, but only as an afterthought. Anne says that a number of children’s animated Christmas specials “signal the celebration,” but relegates them to the Christmas season, rather than Christmas itself. When asked to elaborate on this distinction, she identified “Christmas itself” as extending from roughly December 23 to December 26. Christmas began, she said, when her family distributed baked sweets—specifically “orange rolls”—to

neighbors and other friends in the days before the twenty-fifth. In contrast to the conscious focus on others that she says marks “Christmas itself,” the Christmas season more generally begins in the beginning of December and is reflected in insitutional structures of various kinds, including the music, images, and objects that pervade commercial establishments after Thanksgiving. It is interesting to note that the true holiday is thus set off by an active family ritual, as opposed to the perception of images.

While most people did mention a few Christmas movies as personal or family favorites, experience with written Christmas stories was much rarer, and almost exclusively in the context of reading aloud with family. This is a relatively recent tradition in Gina’s family, whereas in Anne’s, Christmas-oriented stories replaced other fiction seasonally as part of a regular weekly custom of reading aloud; in both cases, the exact stories might vary from one time to another. However, Anne’s husband’s family has a tradition of reading Dr. Seuss’s *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* on Christmas Eve—a practice which Anne found too secular for this particular evening, coming from a family in which the Bible narrative was the focus of the Christmas Eve celebration. (The difference between reading *the* Christmas story and reading *a* Christmas story in light of reflexive commemoration need hardly be pointed out.)

Dr. Seuss’s story is worth pausing over in light of its popularity in its multiple forms. Lisa says she “keeps returning to” the cartoon, and reports that it has become a “cult movie” in her Alberta hometown—a somewhat separate phenomenon from the repetition of Christmas rituals, but worth noting as evidence of the easily ritualized nature of the text. The status Jamie accords the cartoon version of the story among other Christmas films has already been noted; his perception of its meaning is that good, associated with celebrating around the world, would not succumb—to what was left implicit, but we can easily fill in the ideas associated with the solitary, crabby, non-celebrating Grinch with his undersized heart in Seuss’s narrative. Gina, in a follow-up e-mail asking about this text specifically, expresses affection for the story in both book and cartoon forms, articulating the materialistic/anti-materialistic dichotomy that forms the story’s explicit theme: “it is nice to have the message centered around the spirit of Christmas and coming together with glad hearts and if you must then by all means sing in a circle - and not around the fact that there were no gifts under the missing tree.” We might note in these comments the importance of the abstract concept of Christmas as celebration, and of the idea of community—physical or imaginary, but in either case non-specific—as reflective of the flexibility which plays an important part of the story’s

success in contemporary American society. As Thomas Burns notes, “the Grinch story suggests that the Christmas celebration *may* involve Christian religious belief but it need not do so to remain meaningful” (200). The pure, ineffable, non-material core of meaning, the “little bit more” than the material externals of the celebration, is never specified, but left as an empty, if transcendent, site of signification. Gina suggests that this empty site can be filled with more substantive material, saying that with this story “we can teach the kids at a early age to believe in more than someone in a red suit. And grow from there.” However, in the text itself, “belief” seems to be directed at Christmas itself as a practice: it is important to note that after temporarily purging away the material trappings of the celebration to assert the non-material core of meaning, Dr. Seuss ultimately restores them to enable the Grinch to participate in the festival in a very material way by carving the roast beast.

Carla articulated a version of this dilemma in response to the question of what the most important parts of the Christmas celebration were. She began by saying that she thought it possible to create the feeling of Christmas without anything else, from memories and family togetherness, but after thinking about it, she admitted that nothing would be the same if any part of the celebration she usually creates were left out. For Carla, and many others among my LDS informants, reading the Bible story can serve as a core to fall back on (though even here her insistence on the King James Version might be seen in part as a function of the urge to recreate past Christmases), but the Christmas of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* has no such anchoring in anything external to Christmas itself as abstract concept. Although at one level it raises the distinction between practice as vehicle and meaning as referent, I believe the tendency of the work as a whole is to allow the referent to fold back into the celebration.

In noting the Grinch as an image of the Christmas-hater, we might be led to think of his Victorian predecessor, Ebenezer Scrooge. Burns attributes the success of Seuss’s story in part to the blending together of elements from *A Christmas Carol* with another popular (one might say, canonical) Christmas story, Clement C. Moore’s *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. Given the historical importance of *A Christmas Carol*, as attested in the secondary literature on Christmas and in the numerous film adaptations of the story, it is perhaps surprising not to find it occupying a more central role in people’s experience with Christmas rhetoric: no one besides Lisa, whose family tradition has already been noted, seemed to find it a personally significant text, and when asked about it via e-mail, Gina replied that she “really didn’t get into [the] movie,” adding that “it has been done

and redone to death.” Carla, in fact, articulated the contradiction: when asked about Christmas stories, she mentioned *A Christmas Carol* as something everybody kind of knows but few people really read anymore, and then added “Maybe we should!”, indicating a perception of canonicity within the Christmas tradition. However, she decided a minute later that it was less important because for her, although *A Christmas Carol* is a good story “it can’t hold a candle to the family stories.”

Carla’s Christmas traditions include the strongest example of a more direct kind of reflexive commemoration which is a little harder to pin down: the repetition of actual Christmas celebrations in the form of sharing personal memories. She was the only one of my informants to mention, without prompting, a family practice of hearing about her parents’ past Christmases embedded in the Christmas Eve ritual she experienced as a child. This practice was localized to the time slot following the Nativity play she and her siblings presented on Christmas Eve, and Carla’s own memories of the fire-lit ambiance are evoked by her recollection of these reminiscences. She says she thinks the sharing was originally spontaneous, but was “so much fun that it stuck” and became a regular part of their celebration.

Nicole also reports that her mother and grandmother tend to tell stories of their holiday memories on Christmas Eve, and reproduced for me one particular story from her mother’s childhood that gets retold almost every year; interestingly, she uses the first person plural pronoun in describing this retelling, casting this as a collective activity. It seems that at some level she feels a certain sense of ownership of this story, and in telling it she slipped into a more stylized mode of discourse than the rest of the conversation, including strategic changes in volume and speed as well as constructed dialogue (see Tannen on the preferability of this term to “reported speech”). Such stylized speech patterns are a key feature of commemorative discourse, a term proposed by John McDowell to describe modes of speech which depart from the straightforward purpose of informative discourse. The retelling is not necessarily a conscious part of the celebration, typically being prompted, Nicole says, by driving by the location at which the event it relates originally occurred, but she seems to enjoy the repetition. In contrast, she is annoyed by her grandmother’s stories, which are also the same every year but which her grandmother forgets she has told before. Though this might be explainable simply in terms of content (she says the stories are short and have no point), perhaps it also indicates that at some level the participants must recognize the commemorative nature of

the discourse, rather than attempt to give information, in order for reflexive commemoration to be effective.

Most informants, however, reported somewhat more casual, contingent mobilization of holiday memories. The overall sense I get is simply that holiday stories tend to come up around the holidays by natural processes of mental association, as other stories tend to come up through association in other situations. Talking about past Christmases can contribute to the holiday mood, but is not usually necessary to celebrating Christmas. One exception to this is Kristine, who reports (via e-mail) that “even though [reminiscing] isn't formalized, it *always* happens”; one Christmas when she was away from her family, she recalls that “I *had* to verbally remember Christmas, to make the present Christmas more ‘real’--to give it validity and a place in my life.” She attributes this in part to her family’s tendency to reminisce at all seasons of the year, but also in large measure to the desire for those members of the family still at home to compensate for the absence of the siblings who have married and begun celebrating with their own families; in her family of twelve children an almost never-realized ideal of a Christmas with all the siblings at home persists in the imagination. For other informants, especially those such as Gina from relatively large families, this gathering of dispersed family members on holidays may prompt forms of sharing, recording, and re-living family memories that are valued highly, but not necessarily focused on the holiday as a prominent theme.

It seems, then, that reflexive commemoration is relatively sporadic as a discrete, developed practice, at least among this community. Especially in regard to the displacement of the religious referent, the evidence for reflexivity must be moderate at most. All my informants have a genuine religious experience of Christmas as a commemoration of the birth of Christ (which a different set of interview questions would have shed more light on), even if, as for Nicole, it is separated somewhat from other aspects of the holiday by the fact that she is the only Mormon in a religiously diverse family. There is some tension between religious and secular aspects of the celebration evident in the comments that emerged repeatedly acknowledging a lack of connection between some Christmas practice and the birth of Christ. Lisa’s comment on the function of her family’s tradition of watching *A Christmas Carol* is an illuminating example: “it's not that it gets us thinking about Christ, it's more a tradition.” Tradition is thus placed in opposition to the commemorative referent, with some sense of a lesser degree of justification, as we may infer from the fact that Lisa goes on to defend the movie by

saying “But, it does have a good message.” Thinking about Christ, the referent of the commemoration, and by extension any “good message,” are assumed to be primary, but “tradition” stands in as a reason—not as good a reason, perhaps, but an effective reason—for doing things without any ideological basis other than the practice itself. The ways in which various informants reconciled the tension between these two sides of Christmas celebration varied, including allowing secular traditions with a sense of their lesser importance, crafting family traditions to be more Christ-centered, and focusing on giving, service, or family love, which may be seen, perhaps, as a shared territory with some overlap between secular and religious dimensions.

In general, these strategies seem to be effective ways to create a holiday that can be appropriately elevated with sentimental abstraction, despite the perils of creating gaps between ideal and actual Christmas celebrations. This sense of Christmas as an object worthy of commemoration in itself may be seen in the enthusiasm with which many of my informants agreed to talk about Christmas. Gina, in fact, endorses the view expressed by some forms of Christmas rhetoric that Christmas should be kept all year long, and a number of other people reported playing or singing Christmas music during the rest of the year. Although the commemoration of Christmas as Christmas may not often be taken to the level of ritualization that its most important component parts are, a sense of reflexive commemoration hovers around its celebration.

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¹ Some names have been changed.

³ See David Lewis, "The Constructedness of Texts: Picture Books and the Metafictive," in *Only Connect* (Eds. Sheila Egoff et al., New York: Oxford UP, 1996) for excess as a characteristic of post-modern, self-aware texts.